

French Possessions in Land of White Elephants



ANAMITE SOLDIER IN HEAVY MARCHING KIT.

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SAIGON, Cochinchina, Dec. 4.—(Special Correspondence of The Bee.)—These notes are written in Saigon, the capital of Cochinchina, at the tail end of the French possessions in Asia. It is west of Siam, far below Anam and Tonquin, and hotter than Java, on the edge of the equator. Today the thermometer was 100 in the shade and tonight the warm, moist air of the tropics wraps around one like a sweat robe. I am on the French mail steamer lying at anchor, and I might as well be in a Turkish bath, for the perspiration stands out in white drops on the back of my freckled, sunburned hands, and my collar is wet with the heat. I have left the colonial empire of John Bull on the Straits of Malacca, have shaken the dust of the Dutch islands from my feet and am now in the chief city of the French colonial possessions in Asia.

Cochinchina is the smallest of the French colonies of Farther India. It is only about as big as West Virginia, almost three times as large as Massachusetts and it has a population of 1,500,000. Still it is the most prosperous of the French possessions out here and the center of French influence. Just back of it is Cambodia, which is as big as Ohio, and north of it is Anam, larger than Cambodia and Cochinchina put together, and still farther north the province of Tonquin, which, with the protected state of Laos, is bigger than all France. Altogether the French have here over 350,000 square miles, which is 150,000 square miles more than their possessions in Europe. Their country is one of the richest of the far east. It is inhabited by 22,000,000 people, among whom are some of the wildest and least known people of the world. Those along the coast are a kind of cross between the Chinese and the Malays, and at all the large cities there are thousands of pure Chinese.

Metropolis of French Asia.

You can easily see that the French rule Saigon. There are French signs over the stores, French buildings in the business parts of the town and French people everywhere. A dozen natty French girls, dressed in Parisian style, with parasols in their hands, met us at the landing. The customs officers were French and there were scores of well-dressed officials and merchants on the wharf dressed in white duck with white helmets, who spoke to us in French as we went on shore. The natives here talk pigeon French and altogether there is French everywhere.

I like Saigon. It is a beautiful city, as well built as any of its size in the tropics. It is situated on the river Saigon, a branch of the Donai, about forty miles from the sea. It is not far from the great Mekong river, which rises in the Chinese empire and flows more than 1,000 miles south between French Indo-China and Siam until it enters Cambodia and then flows on in a mighty stream to the China sea. There are canals here which connect the Saigon river with the Mekong. The country is flat and it is cut up by waterways. The Saigon river is as wide as the Mississippi at St. Louis and deep enough for the largest steamers. We had no trouble in making our way from the ocean up to the city. Near the sea the land is so low that the farm houses are built on poles, but it rises a little as you go up, and the river takes

you through plains as rich as those of the Nile valley. The river is lined with thickets of palm trees. There are coconut groves here and there and back of these vast fields of rice and other crops.

Our first signs of European occupation were great white oil tanks on the left banks as we came up the stream and a little later we could see the masts of the shipping in front of Saigon. The red spires of a great cathedral stood out against the sky and a half hour later we were winding our way through craft of all kinds into the heart of the city.

Forest City of the Tropics.

Landing on the wharf I took a stroll. Saigon has some of the aspects of a French interior town. You can easily see that a western nation has the place in hand. The streets are wide and so well macadamized that the red earth upon them is as hard as iron and as smooth as a floor. Trees have been planted along the roadways and this French capital is more like a forest than our national capital at Washington. It is so hidden in trees that as you come up the river you can see only the red-tiled roofs of the houses and the rose-colored spires of the cathedrals shining out of the green. The trees are tropical, making the town look like a botanical garden. Some have leaves like enormous fans, which whisper to you as you walk the streets, some bear coconuts and some the great masses of blossoms of the brightest colors. One is the flamboyant or torch tree, such as you see on the Amazon and in parts of the Philippines. It is as tall as the biggest oak and it blazes with satiny flowers of fire. There are trees equally large with flowers of blue, and many slender betel palms with fan-like branches jutting out of their tops.

The houses are of the brightest of stucco, red, pink, yellow and blue, with roofs of red tile. There are public improvements everywhere. Here a great bridge crosses the Saigon river, there a steel structure spans a canal. Along the wharves are dry docks big enough to float the largest of our modern men-of-war. There are telegraphs and telephones, and the principal streets are lighted by French electric arc lights. The government buildings are fine and the marine hospital would be a credit to any port. I spent some time in the zoological and botanical garden, which is said to be surpassed only by that of Java. It is beautifully kept and the tigers are fresh, being caught from the jungles near by.

Saigon has French stores filled with French goods. There are many French soldiers and officers on the streets and native soldiers in French uniforms. The telegraph lines reach to all parts of Cochinchina and the colony is connected with Singapore and Hong Kong by cable. The postal system has been extended to all parts of the country and there are subsidized mail steamers which take you into the interior. There is a bi-weekly newspaper and also a native journal. Altogether the town has in the neighborhood of 40,000 people, of whom about 2,000 are French.

Cochin Chinese.

I find the natives very interesting. They seem to be a cross between the Chinese and the Malay tribes of Farther India. Every crowd is a succotash of races. There are many short, ugly women, with yellow skins and jet black hair, who remind you of the girls of Siam. They wear jackets and pantaloons, some have chemises which fall almost to the feet. Other women dress like those of Burmah and others wear sarongs like the Javanese. Some men wear Chinese costumes, some Javanese and some a mixture.

There are half-naked children everywhere and of every shade from yellow to brown. The babies wear no clothing, and they are carried about on the hips of their mothers sitting astride. The women and little girls wear collars or hoops of silver, gold or brass about their necks, and many young women have their fingers covered with rings. I have counted as many as five on one finger. It is the custom to put gold and silver bracelets and anklets on the children. I saw a girl of 4 years the other day who was dressed in three gold anklets, two gold bracelets and ten finger rings. She wore nothing else.

A curious contrast between Cochinchina and China proper is the absence of the pig-



STREET SCENE IN SAIGON, CAPITAL OF COCHIN-CHINA.

tail. The Anamites and Cambodians do not shave their heads, and it is the same with the Cochinchinese. Members of both sexes wear the hair long, putting it up in a knot on the back of the head and in the case of the men binding a cloth about the head to keep it in place. The women plaster it down with oil. The most common hat among the lower classes is a conical one of straw, either snow white or oiled to a rich yellow.

Every one chews the betel nut, and this increases the natural ugliness of the people. The teeth of many are jet black and their lips swollen and colored with betel saliva. Every one is chewing, and the prettiest of the peasant girls carry quids in their cheeks. The betel nut is mixed with lime and tobacco before being chewed. The making of this lime is one of the industries of Saigon; it comes from shells which are burned in great kilns.

In Stores and Markets.

Saigon is the half-way station between the Chinese and East Indian worlds. You are here on the threshold of India, and you find many of the characters and customs of that country. Much of the business is done in bazaar-like cells similar to those of Calcutta and Bombay, and in them dark-faced Hindoos or Klings squat with their goods piled about them, calling out to the foreigner: "Sahib, please buy!" The market is like a great bazaar, in which the people sit in cells surrounded by their merchandise. Outside the market houses are money changers and many jewelry stores, for the people put most of their savings into jewelry. Indeed, bracelets and anklets are the banks of the people.

The chief money changers are Klings as black as the ace of spades. They sit behind tables with piles of gold, silver and copper before them. The silver is in the French coinage and the denominations are \$1, 20 cents, 10 cents and 5 cents, while the copper coins are cents and fifth cents, each coin having a hole through it, so that it can be strung upon strings.

I spent some time going through the markets. Many of the dealers are girls in black clothes, each with a collar of silver or brass about her neck and rings on her ankles and wrists. Many of the women were sewing, and outside the Chinese cobblers were squatting on the stones mending shoes. In the meat market I saw a score of Chinese butchers selling pork and beef by the pound. They were bare to the waist and their fat yellow backs were spotted with white drops of perspiration. Some of them wore bracelets of jade, silver and gold.

A few miles from Saigon is the native town of Cholon, which is about twice as

large as Saigon itself. The two are connected by a steam tramway, which has trains every few minutes. The round trip is eight miles and the first-class fare is equal to 9 cents, American.

Leaving the city you ride for miles through a vast Chinese graveyard. The country is peppered with tombs and mounds and the road cuts its way through the graves. It takes about twenty minutes to go from one place to the other, the train landing you in the heart of Cholon.

I took a walk through the city. It is much like a Chinese town, the more important of the business houses being run by Chinese. The most of the goods is Chinese, and I looked in vain for anything valuable of native manufacture. The porcelain seemed to be from Canton, as were also the silks. I saw French watches and clocks in some of the stores and among the dry goods pieces from England, Germany and France. I looked in vain for anything American, and I doubt whether this trade is worked at all by our people. Still the French have in Farther India over 22,000,000 souls and the market should be worthy of study. There is a good chance for electrical machinery, especially electric light plants. In Cholon I found half a dozen large steam rice mills, all lighted by electricity.

Granary of Asia.

Cochinchina is one of the granaries of Asia and the same can be said of Anam, Tonquin and Cambodia. The soil is rich and vast quantities of rice are exported. Rice is the foundation of the wealth of the people. It is Saigon's chief export, enough going out every year to give a pound of rice to every man, woman and child in the world. Notwithstanding this, I am told that less than two-fifths of the rice land is used. Cochinchina has something like 1,700,000 acres in rice and 5,000,000 acres of rice lands are available. The French say that they hope to make the country the bread basket for China and Japan and they are rapidly succeeding, although at present the best of the rice mills are owned by Chinese rather than Frenchmen.

Indeed, the French are now doing much to develop their colonies. They are trying to extend the railroads of Tonquin into China and claim the southern part of the Chinese empire as their sphere of influence. One of the proposed roads will connect Tonquin with Canton and another will go into the rich province of Yunnan.

They have a big empire to develop in their own territory. Tonquin has rich mines of copper, iron, tin, zinc, silver and lead, as well as some of the richest coal deposits of South Asia. It ships something like 100,000 tons of coal annually to Hong Kong and it is now planning the development of its copper deposits. The Tonquinese people are stronger and more intelligent than the Cochinchinese. They are more mixed with the Chinese proper and they have more pure Chinese among them.

French Governor General.

It is in Tonquin that the French governor general of Indo-China resides. He has his capital at Hanoi, on the Songkol, or Red river, about 110 miles from its mouth. The town has more than 100,000 people, of whom less than 1,000 are Europeans and about 1,500 Chinese. The remainder are Anamites. Hanoi has steamship connection with Hong Kong, and steamers run on up the Red river as far as the boundary of Yunpan, China.

Notwithstanding its small European population the town is a lively one. It has French newspapers, a race course, a public band and a club. It has several large government offices and also the barracks, a hospital and the residence of the governor general. The Red river is about a mile in width at that point and the districts near the river look not unlike Saigon. Many new streets have been laid out and them the city has been drained and made planted with trees; they are lighted by sanitary.

electricity and most of the streets are drained.

Hanoi is the headquarters of the military, the governor having 24,000 troops under his command, stationed in different parts of the country and in the other states of French China. The greater part of the troops are natives, although there are European regiments of infantry marines, batteries of European artillery and others. There is also a native militia of 10,000 men.

The governor general at present is Paul Doumer. He has his cabinet and so many subordinate officials that it is said that nearly every Frenchman in Tonquin is an officer or a soldier. The governor general has more power in French China than in British India. He is commander of the local forces and of the vessels of war attached to his station. He can if he wishes declare his colony in a state of siege and can try military men by court-martial. He is above the local courts and has absolute authority over the colony.

French Kingdom of Anam.

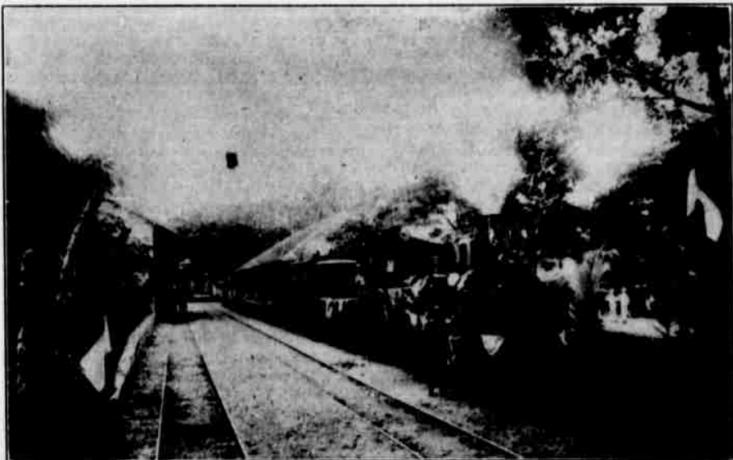
Just below Tonquin is the kingdom of Anam, which is also under the protection of the governor general. The king, a young man of about 25, refers in most things to Hanoi for instruction and is dependent upon the French, although he nominally governs 20,000,000 people.

His capital is Hue, on the Hue river, some distance back from the coast. The city has walls about it and is said to look much like one of the fortified towns of Europe of the seventeenth century. It is divided into two parts, the city and suburbs. The city stands on a square island formed on three sides by the river and on the other by a canal. It has fortifications about it, built by the French, and within the fortifications the government officials live. Here are the courts of justice, the observatory, the library, the mandarin's college and the palace of the council of state. Further back in the city, inside another wall, are the palaces of the king and his harem. These palaces are somewhat like those of Peking, being covered with yellow tiles. Only the king has a right to a yellow roof, the nobles being restricted to red. The suburbs and that part of the city devoted to the common people are mean, the buildings being small and dilapidated. The population of the city, altogether, is estimated at 100,000, of whom 800 are Chinese. The only Europeans are the French resident governor, his staff and a guard of 300 French soldiers. France has held this province since 1883.

French Want Siam.

From what the French officials here say I can see they are looking at Siam with greedy eyes. Along in the '90s they took possession of some of the Laos states at the north of that country. I am told they would like to swallow up the whole of it, for it is exceedingly rich. They have also the province of Cambodia, which lies between Cochinchina and Siam, being easily reached from here by the Mekong river. The people of Cambodia are much like the Siamese and they were in the past far superior to any others of southern Asia. The ruins of the ancient city of Angkor are almost equal to those of Java or East India. The Cambodians are Buddhists, like the Siamese. They believe in polygamy and every rich man has numerous wives.

The country is governed by a king under the protection of the French and who governs as they direct. The capital is in the heart of the kingdom on the Mekong river. It is just about as large as Saigon, but through the influence of the French it is far advanced for an Asiatic town. A part of the king's palace is in European style and there are steam workshops adjoining it superintended by French engineers. The French have charge of the treasury, the customs and the public works and under them the city has been drained and made



TRAIN ON TRAMWAY BETWEEN SAIGON AND CHOLON.

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