

The Voices of Annam.

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There is little music in Annam. Among all the voices that rise from the land one can detect but few musical notes. The language of the people is coarse and harsh and falls unpleasantly upon the ear. Even nature's voices seem discordant when after sundown the hoarse croaking of myriads of frogs in the rice fields mingled with the distant barking of dogs fills the air. But when the shrill voices of quarreling women from some nearby village rise in the darkness, all other sounds fade into a soft accompaniment of music! Surely no tongue ever sounded so harsh as the Annamese in the mouths of these women as they scream at each other over the garden fence. The din ceases, and through the peaceful air floats the sound of a lullaby as the mother in some little hut swings her baby to sleep in its basket. The long-drawn-out quavering notes remind one of the buzzing of many swarms of bees and the deep droning sound has a peculiar power of inducing sleep.

"Rock-a-by little one, go sound to sleep,
Let mother go to market, do not peep.
She will buy lime to chew with tran,*
At the market of Wom Pho she can get can,*
And a hat for her boy there will be at Tien Son,
In the market of Dinh a new coat she will buy,
And a needle to sew it she will find at Man Tai."

As the darkness deepens, the voices cease, and only the tapping of the night watchman's bamboo alarm resounds through the night air as he makes his "beat" through the village, warning thieves of his approach.

Daylight brings a change; nature is silent, but the voices of the toilers can be heard as they begin their day's labor. Women trotting along the roads carrying their loads of wood, fish, and rice swung in two baskets from the ends of a bamboo, gossip with one another in the unmusical Annamese tongue. They swarm the markets and keep up a ceaseless din until evening. The little street vendors bearing their wares in a basket on their heads burst out in shrill cries, "Who will buy sugar-cane? "Who wants to buy candy?" The beggars by the roadside dolefully cry, "Please, lady, give me a sou; I have very much sorrow; I am very hungry."

The Annamese like to sing at their work, for heavy loads can be pulled much more easily if accompanied by song. About the only tune observed is the natural tones of the words in exaggerated pitch, but the peculiar rhythm and time, sung in a continuous minor strain, give a very weird effect. The following is a rude translation of one song they sing while ploughing the fields or drawing heavy carts. The sentences are usually so condensed that a whole story is suggested in three or four words.

"King Thuan ploughed the fields under a friendly sky.
Good King Han Van saw the great dragon fly.
Kind to his parents was the worthy Lao Lai.
And so good to his family Ken Khuong was he
That a river by his house sprang full and free.
Little Tho Kwong's mother was stolen away;
But when he grew big, he found her one day.
For his sick parents Kiem Lau gave his life,
And Gran Cach carried his to a place free from strife.
Chang Diem, clad in skins, ran among a herd of deer,
And brought milk for his parents, trembling with fear.
In the ice, to catch fish, lay the dutiful Vuong Thuong.
A thick blanket to his father gave the little Hoang Huong.
Quach Cu, great of mind and loving of heart,
To provide for his old starving parents a part,

His only loved son determined to bury;
But on digging the grave, a fortune untold
Appeared to him there—a great urn of pure gold!
Sent down by the gods as a sign of their pleasure
To one whose great heart was filial beyond measure."

But Annam has another voice. It is heard in the temples where the priests are chanting prayers and beating gongs as the worshipers prostrate themselves before the gods. This voice, which is a prayer, rises in the smoke of the incense sticks before the altars, from the silent graves and tombs, and from the gaudy funeral processions where flying banners and clanging gongs protect the dead from the evil spirits of the air. The prayer goes up even from those beautiful tall-spired cathedrals that grace the rich green country of Tonkin. It is the cry of human souls who have never seen the day, or have been lured into deeper gloom by a false light that is only darkness. Who can know this cry of the heathen heart? They themselves least of all, perhaps, for having known nothing but darkness and bondage, how can they know that light has come into the world, or that liberty has been proclaimed for the slaves of its god? They cannot voice their own prayers nor probe the depths of their own souls' need. But there is One who understands the sorrow that cannot speak and the misery that is mute for He "has seen their affliction, and has heard their cry, and knows their sorrows," and He waits to deliver them. The Lord has seen the oppression of the taskmaster and has heard the dumb groans of those who have been bound, and doubly bound so long. No human ear can hear that sound, for it is the deep moan of an immortal soul that has gotten so low under the oppressor's hand that only God's ear can catch it. This is the cry—the voiceless cry that rises up to Him from neglected Annam where millions of souls live but to pass away into the darkness of death they so greatly fear.

Who can hear this voice save God? Only those whose hearts are near to His, whose ears have grown deaf to other voices, they too understand. To understand means to feel, and to feel deeply means to act as He has bidden: "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel." "Pray ye the Lord of the harvest to thrust forth laborers." "Ask of me, and I will give thee the heathen for thine inheritance."

Then when prayer becomes praise, through faith in the power of God, the voices suddenly change, the discords cease, and the heart's ear catches the distant sound of the song of the joyful reapers mingled with the tears of the sowers, and hears the strains of that wonderful music—the praises of redeemed souls—blood-washed Annamese singing before the Throne of God.

*Tran and can are the betel nut and green leaf the Annamese chew with a bit of lime.