

# FROM PARIS TO AYUTHIA THREE HUNDRED YEARS AGO

June 18th, 1660 - August 22nd, 1662

by

*Bishop L. A. C. Chorin*

Nowadays it is quite normal for a traveller to leave Paris by plane on a Saturday and alight on the Bangkok airfield on the following Sunday. So, we are fairly taken aback on reading the ancient *relations* of former missionaries, of the time they took, the difficulties they encountered, the hardships they underwent when they left France to travel all the way to Thailand.

We here intend to illustrate this by publishing in an abridged form the account of the overland travel of the first three missionaries of the Paris Foreign Missions Society. That *relation* was printed in Paris in 1666 by Denys Béchet, Rue Saint Jacques. Needless to say that the book is now exceedingly rare. The title of the book runs thus: "Narrative of the journey of Bishop de Berythe, Vicar Apostolic, through Turkey, Persia, India, etc., to the Kingdom of Siam and other places, by M. de Bourges, priest, missionary apostolic.

The book is divided into three parts :

- 1) From Paris to Aleppo, 1660 - 1661.
- 2) From Aleppo to Masulipatam, 1661 - 1662.
- 3) From Masulipatam to Ayuthia, March 26th 1662 to August 22nd 1662.

## **First Part**

### ***From Paris to Aleppo 1660-1661.***

On June 18th 1660 a young bishop, thirty six years of age, left Paris a fortnight after his consecration accompanied by a priest a little younger than himself, and by a lay attendant. The bishop's name was Pierre Lambert de la Motte. He was born at Lisieux on the first of January 1624. After a brilliant course of studies he was appointed to an important post at the Appeal Court of Rouen; but soon he gave up a promising career to devote himself to the service of God; ordained to the priesthood at Coutances on the 27th of

December 1655, he returned to Rouen to take over the management of the General Hospital.

During his frequent visits to Paris he made the acquaintance of a canon of Tours, François Pallu, and through the guidance of divine providence, they found themselves together in Rome in 1658, and both received from Pope Alexander VII the mission to start for the Far East and work for the formation of a native clergy.

The priest's name was Jacques de Bourges, sprung from a well-to-do family of Paris. After bright studies in theology he received the degree of Doctor in Divinity and soon after made up his mind to join the group of French priests, the founders of the Foreign Missions of Paris. To reach their destination and carry out their new undertaking which way was the most advisable? To apply for a passage on board the Portuguese vessels was not to be thought of, as the Lisbon Government refused to deliver passports.

The Dutch East-India Company accepted no passengers except their own members. The ships of the French East-India Company never ventured beyond the waters of Madagascar. As a last shift they thought of fitting out a vessel and form a company that would take the Vicar-Apostolic and their missionaries to the Far East; but the loss of the "St. Louis" in December 1660, the first ship built in Holland for that purpose, put an end to this enterprise. In the meantime and months before the wreck of the "St. Louis" Bishop Lambert de la Motte had already set out on his journey across the Mediterranean and then through Turkey, Persia and India, thus complying with the wishes of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith.

Without giving information of his intended journey to escape the entreaties of his friends, he set out for Lyons; a painful trial overtook him there: he caught a malignant fever that brought him to death's door. M. de Bourges despaired of his recovery and was about to send to Paris news of his approaching death; the Bishop however would not allow that: "let us not alarm our friends, he said, this illness is of no importance, within three days we shall be

on our way". And so it happened, the fever disappeared suddenly but the patient was extremely weak. Eager to proceed on their journey (they had already lost fifty-two days) they embarked on a river boat and sailed down to Avignon, and thence by post-chaise reached Marseilles. There the two missionaries welcomed a third companion, M. François Deydier, a deacon from Toulon, whom the entreaties of his bishop had failed to keep in his diocese. He had heard that M. Cotolendi had given up the living of Sainte Marie Madeleine at Aix-en-Provence to devote himself to the newly-started missionary work. During a visit he had made to Paris the previous year he had been strengthened in his purpose, and now he came to assert his readiness to start. Bishop Lambert de la Motte ordained him to the priesthood and on the 27th of November 1660 they set sail on their perilous voyage. A heavy storm threatened to strand them on the low rocky coasts of Sardinia but the danger was averted and they landed in Malta on December 3rd and stayed there for eighteen days.

Bishop Lambert was received with the greatest marks of honour by the Grand Master of the Order, and by the Bishop who requested him to ordain seventy clerics on Saturday in Ember week, December 18. On the twenty-first the ship set sail again and on the twenty-eight dropped anchor at Cyprus and stayed there until January 5, 1661; six days later the passengers were landed at Alexandretta, then an unhealthy place on account of the marshes that surround it.

From now on our travellers must be prepared to undergo all sorts of vexations and insults at the hands of fanatical Mohammedans; to be ever on the alert to throw marauders off the scent or repel the attacks of highwaymen, assured of the connivance of the unscrupulous guides. They had to follow tracks hardly cared for by the Turkish Government and with little facility of procuring supplies on the way. Having left Alexandretta on the 28th of January they reached Antioch two days after, and there they found out that the few Christians living there were schismatics, and that the Church, the first see of St. Peter, had been converted into

a mosque. They left the town and rode the whole day without a halt; in the evening they perceived lights far away and thought it was the place where they had intended to put up for the night. "Our Janissary had wandered from the path either through ignorance or sheer malice, and led us far into the night and made us halt in the open country far from any human abode. We were uneasy and suspected our guide of having intercourse with some lurking Turks whose evil designs none could guess. To be on the safe side we refused to camp there and we rode on as far as our horses could carry us. We halted on a small hill where, in spite of a biting cold no fire was allowed, a simple precaution in these unruly wastes. We kept a sharp look out the whole night, our provisions were exhausted and we had not even a drop of water to refresh us, after the hardships of the day; as the moon came up we started again and after various incidents we reached Aleppo on the 25th of January.

### Second Part

#### *From Aleppo to Masulipatam 1661-1662.*

On the 25th of January 1661 Bishop Lambert de la Motte, Messrs. de Bourges and Deydier reached Aleppo where they were sure to receive a warm welcome at the hands of the French Consul, M. François Picquet, a man of great merit and virtue who later on received Holy Orders and was made Bishop of Babylon that he might look after the spiritual needs of the Christians of Mesopotamia and Persia. The wearied travellers could not well decline the generous hospitality the worthy man extended to them. As soon as he was informed of the plans of Bishop de Berythe, he gave His Lordship full assurance that he would give him all the assistance that his authority and credit could allow him to grant.

Fully aware of the bad faith of the Turks towards Christians he was careful to draw up a contract in due form with the leader of the caravan which was about to set out for Bagdad; thanks to these precautions and to small presents offered on the way the travellers were able to secure a guide both sure and diligent. In order to allay suspicion and greed, they were advised to appear as simple and poor as

possible; they readily took the advice from a sense of poverty befitting their profession. They were not to show any money, settle their expenses in small cash, travel Turkish fashion and wear a turban. "Such headgear, notes M. de Bourges, is not so convenient as a hat but it makes a good appearance". Moreover, they profited by the wise counsels based on years of experience of the Religious of Aleppo : Jesuits, Capuchins, Descalced Carmelites who had for some time past settled down in the town. Protected by the French consul, the Christians enjoyed a certain amount of freedom though restricted in many ways for they were forbidden to assemble in churches, religious instruction and sermons being allowed only in private houses.

On the 2nd of February they left Aleppo. From Aleppo to Bagdad the crossing of the wilderness made the journey wearisome and painful, it was rendered more so by the insecurity of the country. If there is a place in the world where one needs ingenuity and frugality, where one must ever be on his guard, sleep little, keep cheerful, though always on the look out, it is surely during caravan journeyings where mutual distrust is the law and where differences of religion, language and habits are a continual source of contentions and suspicions.

Horses and camels are the usual means of conveyance; the only meal of the day is taken in the evening; but during the tedious hours of the day biscuits and dried fruit are always at hand to allay one's hunger and break the monotony of the journey. When a halt is called a large fire is lit and rice is boiled along with butter. Fuel is scarce; for want of rosemary which has a pleasant smell when burning one has to be satisfied with camel dung dried in the sun and picked with care. In such a wilderness no other dwellings are to be found but those carried along on camel's back, that is the tents. The rainy season had set in and the going was rather heavy. At night the cold was intense, the tents afforded but a poor shelter against pelting rain or biting wind; at times the canvas froze and we had to sacrifice precious time to allow for proper packing after sunrise. Water was extremely rare and when by good luck we came

upon a well the guides left the caravan to fill the leather bottles. Camels can stand thirst for a long time, with men it is quite different. The water was generally bad and foul; to make it drinkable the Turks put some coffee into it, a drink which is now becoming popular in Europe. The coffee plant is a native of Arabia, not far from Mecca; it grows in such an abundance that it is exported to all countries of Asia and practically to all the places where there are Mohammedans who made use of that beverage whose stimulating properties are somewhat akin to those of wine; it strengthens the stomach and facilitates digestion; moreover, it purifies the vapours of the head. The coffee bean is roasted in a stove, then ground to powder in a mortar, passed through a sieve, the burnt black flour being boiled in water for the space of a "Miserere" and then drunk as hot as possible. Although the beverage has a rather bitter taste it is nevertheless held in high esteem by the natives owing to the good effects it produces. This is an instance of the beneficent action of Providence Who supplies all lands with the necessaries and even the amenities of life; no doubt other lands are provided with plants with similar properties.

During the first fortnight the caravan travelling across the desert of Syria had kept to the right bank of the Euphrates. Three full days were now necessary to cross the river on wretched tubs near about Aboukernal. Then they proceeded along the left bank of the river until they stood off Bagdad on the banks of the Tigris which town they made in due time.

The French Capuchins, the only missionaries of the place, offered Bishop de Berythe a cordial hospitality and requested him to confer the Sacrament of Confirmation to one hundred and twenty persons. On the sixteenth they embarked and sailed down the river until they reached Bassorah on the 30th. They were warmly welcomed by the Carmelite fathers, the incumbents of a fine church built formerly by the Portuguese, and now frequented by hardly a score of Catholics. Built just below the confluence of the Tigris and the Euphrates and surrounded by a forest of date-palms, Bassorah (now Basra,) the emporium of Europe and Asia, was visited by mer-

chants of all nationalities. The travellers expected to find there a vessel bound for India; but in those days navigation had to take the monsoon season into account; now the trade winds could not be relied upon before September or October; and so, what were they to do for months together in that city with a sultry and oppressive climate? They made up their minds to use that delay to sail upstream towards Persia hoping to find a way to China by the overland route. After five days' sailing on wretched boats made up of boards fixed together without nails or cramps, but kept together with wretched ropes, with a crew in keeping with the vessel, the clumsy affair reached the port of Bandaric (Bender-Rig) on the Persian Gulf, thence a five days' march to Calzeron (former Cesaria) through narrow paths along mountain slopes. Fortunately the air grew fresher and the going became easier. The important town of Shiras contained only a few Catholic families under the guidance of Carmelite Friars.

On May the 20th they left the town always travelling by night and made Ispahan on June 11th. Some twenty years before a French Carmelite, Father Bernard de Ste. Thérèse, Bishop of Babylone, (the same one that was to cede in 1663 the houses he owned on Rue du Bac and thus contribute to the foundation of the Foreign Missions of Paris), had made at Ispahan the acquisition of a property which on his departure from Persia he had entrusted to the keeping of Portuguese Augustinian Friars. With the kind consent of the Fathers, Bishop Lambert and his companions made it their residence and forthwith started inquiries with regard to their prospected journey, but were greatly alarmed on hearing that some thirty thousand Tartars threatened to overrun the north-east of Persia; the road by which they might have gone to China through the Nepal and Butan States was already in their hands. No other course was left but to get back to the Persian Gulf. On leaving Ispahan they had the good fortune to travel in the company of the British consul; and so thanks to his good offices they were spared the inquisitive search of custom officers and the harassing vexations of highwaymen. On reaching the port of Gamron (Bender-Abbas) they were lucky

enough to obtain a passage on board a British vessel bound for Surat. The month of November was drawing to a close. The sea of Oman was crossed in four weeks and the year 1661 was nearing its end when they reached the west coast of India. The vast Peninsula was crossed in 41 days by means of bullock carts. Several provinces of the great Mogul Empire and of the Kingdom of Golconda successively travelled through left in the minds of the travellers an impression of fabulous wealth and unparalleled grandeur. Having at a distance caught a glimpse of the Palace of the King of Golconda they were struck by its magnificent appearance and were told that the tapestries, the bolts and bars were all of solid gold. On the sixth of March 1662, the little caravan reached the port of Masulipatam on the eastern coast of India.

### Third Part

#### *From Masulipatam to Ayuthia March 26-August 22, 1662.*

Bishop Lambert de la Motte and his two companions, Messrs. de Bourges and Deydier, reached Masulipatam on the 6th of March 1662 and made a twenty days' stay in that town. We remember that while in Persia the travellers had contemplated the possibility of proceeding directly to China through Nepal and the Butan States when they were informed that the frontier road was occupied by Tartars; now from Burma where they intended to go, could they not find an overland route to China? After careful enquiries they were assured that from Ava the capital of the Ava Kingdom and Pegu (now in Burma) a twenty days' march would take them into the Middle Empire but that the King forbade the use of that road for fear that if the Tartars knew of its existence they would invade his own kingdom after overrunning China.

So the travellers resigned themselves to make for Siam. They embarked on a Turkish vessel, crossed the Bay of Bengal and landed at Mergui after a thirty three days' quiet voyage, retarded by wearisome calms. Besides, the Portuguese pilot, not too skilful in navigation confessed that having to choose a second mate among the crew, he had picked up the most ignorant for fear of having a

master instead of a companion. So badly manned was the ship that she was nearly wrecked on the coast of an island in the Andaman Islands whose inhabitants were reputed as murderers and cannibals. The port of Mergui was reached on April 28th. At that time it was a Siamese possession and it was well known that the sovereign of that State used to give foreigners a kind welcome. So there was no difficulty on that score, but passports were indispensable for sailing up the Tennasserim river. At Mergui the missionaries received from May 19 to June 30 a cordial hospitality at the hands of Father Cardoza a Portuguese Jesuit who requested them to take charge of one of his two parishes. He also asked Bishop Lambert to administer the Sacrament of Confirmation during the Pentecost Ember week.

The missionaries had now to cross the Peninsula from West to East in order to reach the mouth of the Menam Chao Phraya. They went partly by boat up the Tenasserim River wherever it was navigable and partly by bullock carts. It took them the whole month of July to negotiate the river because of the swift current and hidden reefs. Fortunately the canoe, some six or seven metres long, provided with an attap roof was strong and steady. Yet it was no pleasant and plain sailing. At times the paddles were powerless against the rushing torrent and the craft drifted along at the mercy of snags and whirlpools when the best skill was of no avail. Once the canoe bumped against a half submerged tree and capsized. Men and baggage were thrown helplessly into the swift flowing stream but as luck would have it or rather owing to the kind assistance of Providence they succeeded in clinging to the branches of the tree and with the help of the canoe men salvaged most of their belongings; but the boat had foundered and their passports had gone. Another canoe was secured but Mr. Deydier had to go back to Tennasserim for new passports.

On July 29th the travellers left the river and continued their journey overland. The only vehicles available were bullock-carts, clumsy affairs affording but little comfort; they are made of planks

roughly hewn affording sitting place about 3 feet wide; they rest on an axle that fits somewhat into the nave of two huge ungainly wheels, accidents often happen, things get out of gear, and delays are unavoidable. Material discomfort was bad enough, but added to this was the frequent broils among drivers. Once the good Bishop himself came in for rather rough handling when tipsy teamsters refused to allow the missionaries carts to pass before theirs: the good man was beaten several times after trying uselessly to bring them to their senses; he says he kept calm and was glad to be able to suffer for his Master's sake. In the same spirit of faith did the three apostles accept all the hardships of the journey and they were many: when crossing swampy places they were assailed by leeches whose bite is painless but suck much blood before one is aware of their presence. They mention a small fly, a real pest indeed whose stinging is painful; they come out at sundown and render sleep well-nigh impossible; their number is legions (he means mosquitoes). But these inconveniences pale before dangers of a more serious nature: they were trekking across jungles swarming with tigers, rhinoceroses, wild buffaloes and elephants; the latter especially were most to be feared as nothing can frighten them. "When a traveller comes upon one of these monsters of the forest, the best thing to do is to keep still, avoid any provocation or try to run away; if you stand in the track of the beast, move slowly aside and don't show any excitement; it will very likely proceed on its way without minding you; but if it gets inquisitive, the custom is to drop something on the ground, as a hat, a helmet, a piece of cloth, the beast will pick it up, play with it and pass satisfied with these apparent marks of respect. If it should show fight the only way of escape is to keep behind him well on his left side as it never turns to the left to face its enemy, the time it takes to move its huge bulk around gives you a fair chance to climb a tree, or slip into a ditch or go up some steep mound; if no such means is at hand your only chance of safety is to keep behind it all the time until it tires out and gives you an opportunity to slip away.

On the 13th of August the travellers came upon a large city surrounded by a brick wall where they put up for a much needed rest; but their first care was to erect an altar to say Mass; and so they celebrated the Assumption of our Lady with all the solemnity they could display under the circumstances. "Our joy was so great that we readily forgot all the troubles we had endured during our long and perilous journey, troubles which are a source of great spiritual consolation when viewed in the light of faith. They were close to the eastern coast of the Peninsula and the Gulf of Siam. It was now easy to reach the mouth of the Menam the pride and beauty of the country; they sailed up the river and at last reached Ayuthia on August 22nd 1662; a journey of two years and two months was at an end.

Bishop Lambert de la Motte died at Ayuthia, without ever returning to France, on June 15th 1679, at the age of 55. Some months later, Messrs. de Bourges and Deydier, his two fellow-travellers, were both promoted to the Episcopate. To the first was entrusted the Vicariate of Southern Tonking to the second the Vicariate of Eastern Tonking. No bishops were available for the Consecration and it was only in 1682 that Bishop Bourges came to Ayuthia to receive episcopal consecration at the hands of Bishop Laneau who had succeeded Bishop Lambert. On his return to Tonking the new Bishop consecrated Bishop Deydier. The latter died in Tonking in 1693. Bishop de Bourges survived him by over twenty years; exiled from his mission in 1713, he took refuge at Ayuthia and there on the following year ended his long apostolic career at the ripe age of 84.

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