

# A Missionary of Annam: A Chinese War Story

By Pierre Loti

Translated by Katherine Head

IN the sinister yellow country of the Extreme Orient, during the worse period of the war, our boat, a heavy ironclad, was stationed for weeks at her post in the blockade in a bay on the coast.

With the neighboring country, with its impossible green mountains, and its rice fields like velvet prairies, we had almost no communication. The inhabitants of the villages or the woods stayed at home, defiant or hostile. An overwhelming heat descended upon us from a dull sky, which was nearly always gray and veiled with curtains of lead.

One morning during my watch, the steersman came to me and said:

"There is a *sampan*, Captain, that has just come into the bay, and which seems to be trying to speak to us."

"Ah, who is in it?"

Before replying he looked again through his glass.

"There is, Captain, a kind of priest, Chinese or I don't know what, who is seated alone at the stern."

The *sampan* advanced over the sluggish, oily, warm water without haste and without noise. A yellow-faced young girl, clad in a black dress, stood erect and paddled the boat, bringing us this ambiguous visitor, who wore the costume, the headdress, and the round spectacles of the priests of Annam, but whose beard and whose astonishing face were not at all Asiatic.

He came on board and addressed me in French, speaking in a dull and timid way.

"I am a missionary," he said, "from Lorraine, but I have lived for more than thirty years in a village six hours' march from here, in the country, where all the people have been converted to Christianity. I wish to speak to the commandant and ask for aid from him. The rebels are threatening us, and are already very near. All my parishioners will be massacred, it is certain, if some one does not come promptly to our aid."

Alas! the commandant was obliged to refuse aid. All the men and guns that

we had had been sent to another place, and there remained on board just enough sailors to guard the vessel; truly we could do nothing for those poor parishioners "over there." They must be given up as lost.

The overwhelming noonday hour had arrived, the daily torpor that suspended all life. The little *sampan* and the young girl had returned to land, disappearing in the unhealthy vegetation on the bank, and the missionary had, naturally enough, stayed with us, a little taciturn, but not recriminative.

The poor man did not appear brilliant during the luncheon he shared with us. He had become such an Annamite that any conversation with him seemed difficult. After the coffee, when the cigarettes appeared, he seemed to wake up and asked for French tobacco to fill his pipe; for twenty years, he said, a like pleasure had been refused him. Then, excusing himself, because of his long journey, he sank back on his cushions.

And to think that, without doubt, we should have to keep with us, for several months, this unforeseen guest that heaven had sent us! It was without enthusiasm, I assure you, that one of us went to him to announce on the part of the commandant:

"They have prepared a room for you, father. It goes without saying that you will be one of us until the day when we can land you in a safe place."

He did not seem to understand.

"But I am only waiting until nightfall to ask you to send me to the end of the bay in a small boat. Before night you can surely have me put on shore, can you not?" he asked, uneasily.

"Landed! And what will you do on land?"

"I will return to my village," he said, with sublime simplicity. "I could not sleep here, you know. The attack might be made to night."

This man who had seemed so vulgar at

first grew larger at every word, and we surrounded him, charmed and curious.

"But it is you, father, who will be most in danger."

"That is very likely," he replied as tranquilly as an ancient martyr.

Ten of his parishioners would wait for him on the shore at sunset. At nightfall, all together, they would return to the threatened village, and then, at the will of God!

And as we urged him to stay, because to go was to go to certain death, to some atrocious Chinese death, this return after aid had been refused, he became indignant, gently but obstinately and unchangeably, without long words and without anger.

"It is I who converted them, and you wish me to abandon them when they are persecuted for their faith? But they are my children!"

With a certain emotion the officers of the watch had one of the ship's boats prepared to take him to shore, and we all shook hands with him when he went away. Always quiet and now insignificant again, he confided to us a letter for an aged relative in Lorraine, took a little French tobacco, and went his way.

And as twilight fell, we watched in silence over the heavy, warm water the silhouette of this apostle going so simply to his obscure martyrdom.

We got ready to leave the following week, I forget for where, and from this time on events gave us no rest. We never heard more of him, and I think for my part that I would never have thought of him again if Monseigneur Morel, Director of Catholic Missions, had not insisted one day that I write a little missionary story.

## The Life and Literature of the Ancient Hebrews

### VIII.—Hebrew Stories Retold

By Lyman Abbott

THAT fiction was deliberately used for didactic purposes in the parable by the Hebrew is doubted by none; there is no reason to doubt that it was half-consciously used by story-tellers in folk-lore; and if we judge of Hebrew literature by the ordinary literary standards, it is equally clear that it was sometimes artistically used by skillful story-tellers for the entertainment and inspiration of their readers. Two notable illustrations of such use are afforded, one by an Idyl of the Common People, and the other by a Historical Romance. The first,<sup>1</sup> although it describes scenes taking place prior to the organization of Israel as a kingdom, was almost certainly written after the return from the exile.

In their captivity the children of Israel had learned to hate the heathen with hatred so strong that it finds expression

in the phrase, "Happy is he that shall take thy little ones and dash them against the stones." With this not unnatural spirit in their hearts they return to the holy land; in the period of their colonization a new patriotism is born—narrow, intense, bigoted, yet genuine. The laws against any fellowship with foreigners are revised, if indeed they are not now first enacted; especially marriage with foreigners is condemned by the priests with great vehemence. Then it is that some unknown dramatist writes the story of Ruth. A Jew and his wife, driven by famine from Judea, seek refuge in Moab, a heathen country. Two sons are born to them, and two daughters-in-law come into the home. Then the husband dies, the sons die, and the widow and her two daughters-in-law, both Moabites, are left. In her poverty Naomi's thoughts return to the land of her fathers, and she resolves to return thither. The daughters start to go back with her. She pleads with them to leave her. "Can I furnish you husbands?"

<sup>1</sup> The place of Ruth in the Biblical genealogies (Ruth iv. 22; Matt. i. 5) indicates very clearly that there is a historical background for this story, as its structure indicates very clearly that it is in its spirit and form a work of fiction.