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Beyond the Great Wall of China

George Fleming

Excerpt

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TRAVELS ON HORSEBACK

IN

MANTCHU TARTARY.



CHAPTER I.

SUMMER AT TIEN-TSIN — EXTREMES OF TEMPERATURE IN NORTH CHINA
— ASK LEAVE TO TRAVEL IN THE COUNTRY — DIFFICULTY OF OBTAIN-
ING PERMISSION — OUR PASSPORTS — OFFICIAL AND NON-OFFICIAL —
OUR TRAVELLING EQUIPMENT AND 'MOUNT' — DISLIKE OF CHINESE
INTERPRETERS TO TRAVEL, AND OUR JUVENILE BARGAIN.

THE month of July, 1861, was ushered into the distant supreme province of the Middle Kingdom, as delightful old Spenser has it, 'boiling like to fire,' and with such an unexpected fierceness and ardent intensity as took everyone of the foreign community, civil and military, located within or without the walls of the city of Tien-tsin, by surprise. It altogether banished from their minds the favourable opinions they had been forming as to the salubrity of the climate of North China, as well as smothered the grateful expressions they were about to pour forth, at their good fortune in being permitted to spend a whole summer in the country, and miss the sickly effects of a season always justly dreaded by Europeans in the southern portions of the empire.

It seemed but yesterday since we were shivering and freezing in the glacial temperature of an almost arctic winter,

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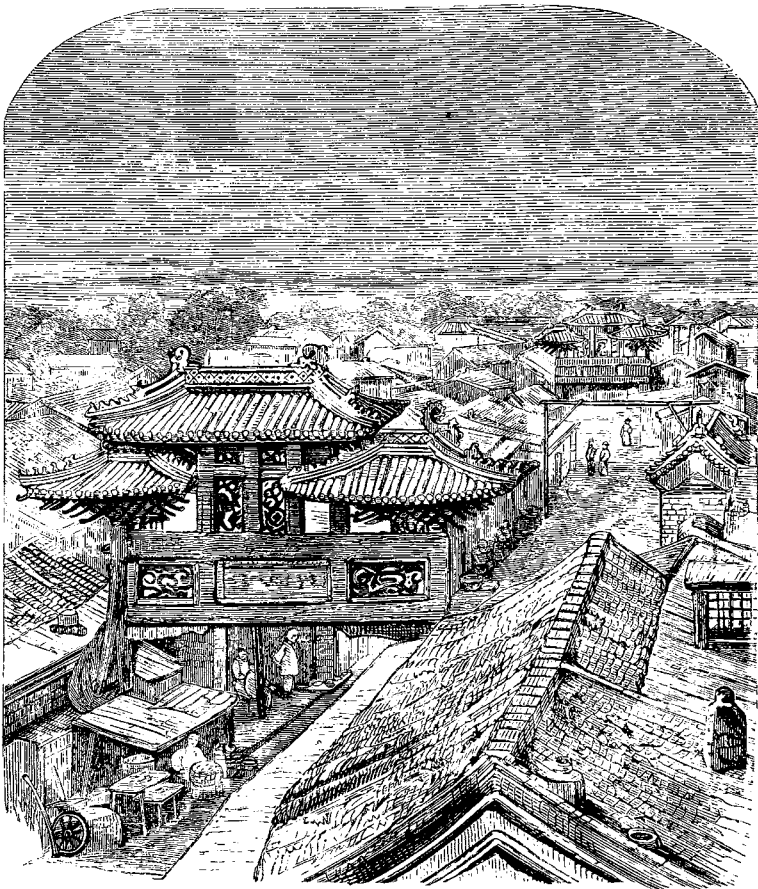
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[More information](#)

2

INCLEMENT WEATHER.

with sharp-cutting winds sweeping everything animated into sheltered nooks and recesses, and whirling dust and earth high up in the air, until the daylight was nearly eclipsed by a canopy of opaque clouds of as muddy a tinge and repulsive an appearance as the turbid waters of the Peiho ;



A Street in Tien-tsin.

while we, muffled in every available shred of woollen stuff, closely enveloped in furs and sheepskins, and with ears and noses carefully guarded from the 'wind's keen tooth,' by curious appliances attached to gigantic head-covers of cotton-quilted pelage, huddled around the feeble fire of mess or

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[More information](#)

EXTREMES OF TEMPERATURE.

3

sleeping room, through which the breeze sported in the most wanton and malignant spirit. It seemed, as I have said, but yesterday since we were striving to maintain vitality, and keep noses, ears, and toes safe from the frigid regions of a Spitzbergen winter; yet here we were, with unknown, and therefore unguarded, violence, projected into the warmest corner of the torrid zone—transported, as if by the influence of some malevolent genii, from the inhospitable regions of Greenland to the unwelcome plains of Hindostan. Truly this is a climate of excess, of rapid transitions from heat to cold, of dust-storm and cloudless sky, relentless cold and unmitigable heat; and its effects require no small amount of elasticity of constitution, physical tenacity, and mental rigidity, to successfully encounter such strange treatment.

The universal cry, or rather plaintive 'vapid' murmur, sounded feebly from every tongue, 'Oh, isn't it hot!' 'What blazing weather!' 'Never felt it so dreadfully warm in India!' 'I wish we had the winter again!' with other interjections, interrogations, and complaints, as pithy and laconic as strength or resolution would allow. And there could be no difference of opinion about it, for the weather was disagreeably hot. No matter whether the thermometer, suspended in the shade of a brick wall with a northern aspect, and screened under a roofing of mats, indicated 108° or 110° at the General Hospital, or, in the deepest shade of a field-officer's bedroom, only gave 96° or 98°, everybody seemed to be satisfied that he had arrived at as near a condition of igneous fusion as it was possible for mortality to bear without succumbing, or passing entirely into the liquid or gaseous forms assumed by bodies exposed to a sufficiently high temperature; and if the thermometers chose to differ by a few degrees, no one would have the energy or desire left to discuss the propriety or necessity of exposing the mercury in the light shade out of doors, or of burying it in the depths of a room, a cellar, or a well. At rest or in motion,

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in the perpendicular position, or in a state of horizontal collapse, the perspiration seethed, trickled, eddied, and saturated, until calico, flannel, and kirkee were wringing wet; until handkerchiefs and towels had absorbed twice their own weight of fluid. Complete prostration, we thought, was almost inevitable to the flaccid, enfeebled British soldier, forced to swelter away the fiery months of a Chinese summer in the low-roofed, hampered, and jammed-together dwellings of a filthy town. Friends and comrades one met with in the constricted streets, looked like sponges imbibing ceaselessly large quantities of fluid, and as expeditiously filtering it through the countless pores that were covered with a torturing scarlet eruption, inadequately designated 'prickly heat.'

The only winds moving over the city, and now and again penetrating to our pent-up courtyards, had the suffocating qualities of the African simoom, combined with the parching tendencies of the Syrian sirocco. Nothing could escape the perpendicular radiation of the sun, whose fiery gleams darted through roof, screen, and shades of reed-mat raised high over court and housetop; and in the streets, like lightning, it pierced through helmet of pith and head-piece of covered basket-work, striking in upon the brain until it induced either vertigo, fever, or deadly sun-stroke.

The solar rays might have been concentrated to the burning focus just over our heads, so scorching were they, and at times they felt so unbearable that the enervating breath of the Harmattan seemed to be fanning them into active flame. Terrestrial radiation during the night was either altogether in abeyance, or at best but feebly and almost imperceptibly maintained in the few long hours intervening between the rising and setting of the sun; for the baked earth around and underneath us seemed to have become so thoroughly surfeited by the great amount of heat upon its surface, as to have lost the power of cooling down again when the sun

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[More information](#)

FROZEN PORTER.

5

had left it; so that by night, as well as by day, the atmosphere felt as if it were under the ascendancy of some intense subterranean combustion that threatened to burn up everything above ground. Yet at night the grateful fires blazed and crackled, and doors were carefully closed to exclude the bitter night-wind.

A rattling blast of cold air would, in that month of July, have proved more refreshing to our overheated bodies, than a draught of icy water to the traveller in the Great Sahara, and the clear, bracing chilliness of a frosty night in England, if granted to us but for a few minutes, would have been equally welcome. How often did the winter, with its nipping but healthy cold, rise pleasantly before us when some of us threw ourselves on our beds in a state of fever, while others recklessly wore icy applications to their heads, or sat for nights in tubs of cold water; and in those rooms which day by day appeared to be contracting in size, like the iron-chamber of the Inquisition, how often did we not strive to recall the story of the gallant Captain Somebody, of the ——th, who, if we can remember aright, in passing through Charing Cross — for we have a Charing Cross at Tien-tsin, but, alas! how unlike the original! — met a soldier of his regiment with a rather suspicious-looking bag carried on his back. ‘Where are you going with that bag?’ demanded the captain.

‘To the barracks, sir,’ replied the man.

‘What have you got in it?’

‘Porter, sir.’

‘What! porter in a sack! Oh, nonsense! let me see.’

‘Very well, sir;’ and the bag is heavily, and with no cheerful grace, dropped on the frozen ground, and slowly opened, when a huge wedge of coffee-coloured stuff, having the peculiar crystalline fracture of ice, is laboriously extracted from the depth of the sack and exhibited to the perplexed gaze and astonishment of the wondering officer. ‘It’s the ration porter, sir,’ the exhibitor chuckles, as he

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[More information](#)

shifts the heat-abstracting mass from hand to hand to prevent his fingers being frost-bitten—'It's the ration porter, sir, only it's freezed.'

From an early hour in the morning until late in the evening, there was no moving out of doors unless on some very urgent business, when the shadiest side of each street, house, or wall, was eagerly sought for and clung to, by the European, as he looked with horror on the infatuated Chinese who perambulated the streets and went about their everyday occupations in the full glare of the midday sun, with the apparently most reckless disregard of consequences.

On one of the earliest days of that month, when fur busbys were exchanged for iced night-caps, and immersion in cold water for hours together preferred to heavy winter clothing, I forwarded an application for leave of absence, that I might wander into some of those curious nooks and corners which must, it was predicted, exist somewhere between Tien-tsin and Moukden—the birth-place and nursery of the Mantchu dynasty—the distant capital of Mantchu Tartary—and make a hurried survey of an almost unknown region, for the satisfaction of a desire that had long haunted me to learn whether the terms of the Treaty of Tien-tsin, in so far as they related to British subjects travelling in China, were understood or known in the numerous towns and villages supposed to intervene between the Peiho and the heart of the Mantchu country; and also to prove whether Europeans, divested of Jesuitical artifice and Chinese costume, could ride along their roads, refresh themselves during the day in their halting-places, and sleep securely amongst them in the night.

In the more favourable spring months application had been made on several occasions for a passport and permission to revisit Peking, and to extend my journey to the mountains beyond, and even to Inner Mongolia, did time and opportunity favour such a project, but unfortunately with no success.

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[More information](#)

DESIRE TO TRAVEL.

7

Indeed, with little prospect of any, for the City of the Plain had become once more a sealed city, the country on the other side of it forbidden ground; and that article of the Treaty which stipulates that 'British subjects are to be allowed to travel for their pleasure, or for purposes of trade, to all parts of the interior,' was, for the time, set aside in the direction of Peking, especial care apparently being taken for the exclusion of those annoying intruders from beyond the seas who would persist in seeking to explore the ruinous streets and buildings, and filthy purlieus of the far-off, vast, curious city of Kambalu.

All hopes of passing from the known to the unknown, the explored to the unexplored, in that quarter were abandoned, and I was obliged to surrender myself, very unwillingly, to the baking and stifling atmosphere engendered in stench, effervescing ditches, and filth-garnished streets, until, luckily, a Shanghai gentleman, accustomed to Sinensian travel in the South, arrived at Tien-tsin, fully bent on increasing his knowledge, and, perhaps, trade relations with the dwellers beyond the Great Wall.

No sooner were his plans and projects made known to me than the scarcely subdued feeling of inquisitiveness was again roused, and another desperate attempt was resolved upon to obtain leave, for the purpose of accompanying Mr. M—— through all the prospective risks, adventures, and obstacles incidental to such trips, regardless of the warnings thrown out about the danger of travelling in a country, the inhabitants of which had scarcely yet returned to their homes from the fields where they had met and been defeated by our troops. They were generally acknowledged to be the most formidable of all the tribes who muster under the Imperial standard. The insufferable temperature gave other friends a rather good reason for plying me with serious advice and earnest solicitations to await the approach of the autumn, when the weather might prove more auspicious, and less

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danger might be apprehended should we be compelled to journey in the middle of the day. But I had sternly resolved to make the venture, and, greatly to my delight, my leave was at once granted, without a reference to Peking:—in which case it was, indeed, very questionable whether the tour would have been looked upon with favourable eyes. Major-General Stavely, who commanded the garrison, was fully impressed with the good results which would accrue to everyone concerned in our relations with China, were we allowed, without scruple, freely to traverse the country in every direction in accordance with the terms contained in the ninth article of the Treaty.

We had only to wait for the authorised form of passport from the consul before we were ready to start. This was procured in two or three days—the shortest space of time in which the pettifogging, scribbling Chinese officials could copy out all the particulars from the English paper, then note those puzzling names of ours, besides inserting numbers of their hieroglyphics in vacant lines on the Chinese portion of the document, and affixing what was said to be a seal, but which, in our eyes, bore more resemblance to a blotch of red-lead and oil.

The English part of the document was singularly brief, and, as it was somewhat of a novelty in its way, we were particularly careful to make ourselves thoroughly acquainted with it.

Passport No. ———

British Consulate, Tien-tsin:

July 3, 1861.

‘The undersigned, Her Britannic Majesty’s Consul at Tien-tsin, requests the civil and military authorities of the Emperor of China, in conformity with the ninth article of the Treaty of Tien-tsin, to allow Mr. ———, a British subject, to travel freely, and without hindrance or molestation, in the

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[More information](#)

COMMISSIONER CHUNG'S LETTER.

9

Chinese empire, and to give him protection and aid in case of necessity.

'Mr. —, being a person of known respectability, is desirous of proceeding to Newchwang, and this passport is given him on condition of his not visiting the cities or towns occupied by the insurgents'—Signed by the Consul. A note was appended on the other side, intimating 'that all passports must be countersigned by the Chinese authorities at the place of delivery, and must be produced for examination on the demand of the authorities of any locality visited by the bearer. British subjects travelling in China without a passport, or committing any offence, were there said to be liable to be arrested and handed over to the nearest consul for punishment,' which ominous threat was followed by 'FEE ONE DOLLAR,' a sum that was not, as I at first unkindly imagined, to be applied to any other purpose than that of rewarding justice; should the infliction of the menaced pains and penalties be awarded on conviction, but simply as a means of defraying the expenses attendant on the issue of these evidences of our good character and peaceable intentions.

Through the kind offices of a friend in the Chinese Customs, a more ostentatious authority was procured for our service from the Imperial Commissioner at Tien-tsin, an article got up quite after the time-worshipped fashions of our co-citizens of the Central Kingdom. It was mysterious and verbose enough for the most fastidious of Chinese scholars, inscribed in a running sort of hand, and confined within certain limits by a kind of magic square of blue ink, elaborately festooned with crooked dragons and flowers, and each of the corners defended by one of those terror-inspiring monsters—a wonderful sort of hybrid, something between a striped French poodle and a rabid hippopotamus—which are met with everywhere delineated in stone, wood, or metal, and which seem to be the

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[More information](#)

appointed tutelary mastiffs for guarding all manner of things, especially those appertaining to the Government.

The words were written on a large sheet of the most delicate cobwebby paper that could be made, and it required no small degree of patience and careful manipulation to unfold it and examine its contents without reducing it to shreds.

'Chung,' it said, 'Imperial Commissioner and Superintendent of Trade for the three Northern ports, issues a passport to the two Englishmen F. and M. (names twisted about in a startling and almost incomprehensible manner to suit their pronunciation), who propose travelling from Tientsin to Newchwang, lest they should meet with any obstructions on their way. Therefore, on their presenting this pass, or order, at places on the route, the local Mandarins are to aid them and facilitate all matters connected with their journey.' 'A pass issued to the two Englishmen, F. and M.,' was subjected to an almost endless number of repetitions, and the date, 'the Eleventh year of the Emperor Hien-fung, fifth month, and twenty-seventh day,' concluded the strange document, which was tattooed in circles and other figures in red ink at those places where particular attention was called to certain words or sentences of unusual import.

We thought ourselves fortunate in being favoured with this mark of the Imperial Commissioner's desire to lend his aid to strangers travelling through his suspiciously-guarded country, and though we did not then deem the paper of much importance, seeing we had already a more potent instrument, yet we surmised that it might prove of value at some time or other on the way.

It was decided that, in spite of the hot unfavourable weather, we should travel the whole distance on the backs of Tartar ponies, as riding was not only more 'favourable for exploring, sight-seeing, and speed, but much more compa-

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tible with sound limbs and intact spines than confinement in the narrow, springless, wooden-axle-treed boxes of native carts, that were dragged ruthlessly through and over all sorts of paths and roads.

A single cart was, nevertheless, necessary to carry the small stock of provisions we considered it advisable to have with us in case of need, as we knew nothing of the nature and resources of the country beyond twenty miles to the north-east of Tien-tsin, and were unwilling to trust too much, at first, to the hospitality of the people we ventured amongst. As M—— had providently brought with him, from Shanghai, a tolerable supply of rounds of canister containing the essences and quintessences of everything nutritious to be found at home, and had also speculated largely in rice as a stand-by when everything else should fail, we could not begrudge the delay that might attend the progress of such a vehicle, the more especially as it also carried the very slender stock of clothing and bedding that could not be dispensed with, unless we were indeed very hard pressed.

I purchased a rough, raw-boned tyke of a Tartar pony—whose body was a series of salient angles and ridges, with unsightly, and by no means symmetrical, protuberances in the most conspicuous places—from a roguish Chinese horse-dealer who had all the vices and dodges of his Western confrères, without a single redeeming quality, except that of showing off his stud in a manner that would do infinite credit to a more enlightened and conscientious trafficker in the equine species; telling at the same time as many falsehoods about the age and good traits of his various beasts as would have ruined the reputation of the most depraved screw-dealer in London.

Although our purchase looked the most unpromising to the eye of a casual observer, and was the cheapest of the lot brought for our inspection, the rascally vendor demanded forty dollars. We gave twenty. There was a confident look