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William John Gill

Excerpt

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THE
RIVER OF GOLDEN SAND.

CHAPTER I.

OVER THE SEAS AND FAR AWAY.

China resolved on—Preliminary Visit to Berlin—Baron Ferdinand v. Richthofen—Marseilles, and Voyage in the 'Ava'—Sea-flames—The Straits—Chinese Practices first realised—Approach to Saigon—The City—Hong-Kong reached and quitted—Shanghai and its peculiar Conveyances—The Chinaman's Plait—Voyage to Chi-Fu—The Chi-Fu Convention—The Minister Li-Hung-Chang—Ceremonial of his Departure—Voyage to the Pei-Ho—Difficulties of Navigation up that River—Scenery—Arrival at Tien-Tsin—Choice of Conveyances—Carts of Northern China—Mongol Ponies—'Boy' found—Horse-buying—Scenes on the Tien-Tsin Bund—Risky Building and Chinese Devotion—Tien-Tsin Hotel—Preparation for Travel—Suspicious Wares—Arrangements for a Start completed.

WHY not China ?

Such were the words addressed to me by a friend I met in Trafalgar Square early in May 1876.

Up to this moment I had never thought of China. My attention had never been directed to it, and my notions regarding it were crude in the extreme : dim ideas of pigtails, eternal plains, and willow trees ; vague conceptions of bird's-nest soup and puppy pies. I had never been particularly attracted to the country, and naturally replied, ' Why should I go to China ? '

At the time I gave the matter no further consideration, and it was with some surprise that, a fortnight

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later, I was met with the same question ; this time, however, my friend had some reasons to adduce, the result of which was that, on June 26, a fine breezy morning, I stood on the deck of the Ostend steamer lying in Dover harbour.

A fresh north-easterly breeze just crisped the tops of the waves, and a bright sun lighted up the Dover cliffs as they gradually merged into the mist. For the first time for many days, I had time to think, and when at last the cliffs were lost to view, I seemed to have launched into a new and unknown sea ; for whither fate would lead my steps I could not say : all that was definite was, that I was going to Peking.

Through the kindness of Colonel Yule I was furnished with a letter of introduction to Baron von Richthofen, the greatest of modern explorers and geographers, whose long travels in China had made him the first authority on the country ; and it was to make his acquaintance that now I bent my steps to Berlin.

It was a lovely summer day, and the haymakers were busily at work as we dashed past them, and past smiling villages, and lazy Belgian streams : here a quaint steamer with its paddles scarcely in the water, making more splashing and noise than a man-of-war ; there a barge drifting slowly onwards towards the sea ; now a country château with its trim lawn and bright flowers from which we could almost catch a breath of fragrance ; through many a village where the stout Flemish horses drew the quaint long-backed country carts ; by waving corn-fields where the blue corn-flowers seemed to nestle lovingly in the shadow of the wheat and barley, on through busy Liège to Verviers and Cologne, where I spent a few hours wandering about the quaint old streets, and then in the evening continued my journey to Berlin.

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Some Japanese were my travelling companions, dressed in black coats, tall shiny hats, and white shirts, of which they seemed remarkably proud ; they took off their boots, and placing their feet on the seat next me, we soon all fell asleep. In the morning they were pitiable objects to look upon, their black coats and neck-ties covered with dust, their faces shining with a greasy glow, their collars and wristbands without any visible signs of starch, and their thick black hair that had been carefully parted the night before now standing on end 'like quills upon the fretful porcupine ;' and even then I thought that it was not all gain to the Japanese, when they abandoned their national dress and their ancient customs, and threw themselves recklessly into the arms of western civilisation.

I was fortunate in finding Baron von Richthofen in Berlin, and the week that I spent in his society passed only too quickly. Hour after hour he gave up his valuable time to me, and opened volumes from his rich store of information ; day by day I grew wiser, and little by little true pictures of China and Chinese life formed themselves in my mind. Baron von Richthofen possesses in a remarkable manner the faculty of gathering up the details presented to his view ; putting them together and generalising on them with rare judgment ; forming, out of what would be, to a lesser genius, but scattered and unintelligible fragments, a uniform and comprehensive whole. During all my conversation with Baron von Richthofen, not one word passed his lips that was not gold seven times refined, not one hint was given me that did not subsequently prove its value ; his kind thoughts for my comfort or amusement were never ceasing, and his refined and cultivated intellect and genial manner

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rendered the recollections of my stay in the German capital some of the most pleasant of my life.

Leaving Berlin, I journeyed leisurely to Marseilles, awaiting a telegram without which I was unable to start. The delay was rather troublesome, as by this time I knew enough of China to be well aware that early in the winter the province of Pechili is entirely frozen up ; and it was in that province that I intended to make my first journey.

At last the welcome telegram arrived, and on July 27 I found myself at Marseilles. I had never been there before, and although it was rather warm, I was pleasantly surprised with the town ; for instead of a picturesque place, I had formed in my mind ideas of nothing but dirty streets and busy quays. The shop fronts are screened with the gayest of gay awnings, striped with blue, red, grey, and all sorts of colours ; on the sides of some of the streets magnificent plane trees, as high as the four-storied houses, meet overhead and afford delightful shelter from the southern sun ; and at a little distance there are some charming gardens, where now some glorious masses of geraniums were in their full beauty.

On July 30 the ship 'Ava,' of the Messagéries Maritimes, steamed out of Marseilles, having on board but a small number of first-class passengers, as this, the hottest time of the year in the Red Sea, is not a favourite one for travellers.

On a sea like glass we glided through the Straits of Bonifacio, steamed into the Bay of Naples, and left it again before the town was well awake. That morning's sun set like a ball of fire behind Stromboli. Scylla frowned, and Charybdis hissed, as if in impotent rage that coal and iron had robbed them of their terrors, and the lights of Messina shone awhile over

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the summer sea ; but one by one even these faded, and the last glimpse of Europe was gone from our view.

A voyage is always rather tedious, and during August the Red Sea can hardly be considered pleasant ; the days went by, however, although there was but little incident to vary their monotony.

Before arriving at Galle, the sea was one night so phosphorescent, that none of the old sailors on board could recollect a similar scene. The vessel left a trail of fire far behind her in her wake ; as her bows pierced the water she seemed to dash up liquid flames that danced about her sides as if by magic, every wave that broke illuminated itself and lit up a sheet of phosphorescent light, and all around, in every direction, as far as could be seen, fires innumerable seemed to sparkle in the ocean.

Passing through the Straits of Malacca, we steamed into Singapore on the morning of August 26, and I was rather disappointed with its scenery, of which I had heard so much. The entrance to the harbour is certainly exceedingly pretty ; there is a wonderful richness in the verdure, and the trees at the water's edge contrast beautifully with the deep red of the soil. Perhaps it is, that after some days at sea people are always in a frame of mind to exaggerate the charms of the first land they see, or perhaps it is, that the ships being able to come within twenty or thirty yards of the shore, the beauties are more apparent than in other places.

Here I passed a delightful day, enjoying the hospitalities of the Governor, Sir William Jervois.

Government House is a fine building, on the top of a little hill looking over rich green trees and green grass, to the blue sea, the town of Singapore stretching out on one side along the edge of the harbour, where

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6 CHINESE PRACTICES FIRST REALISED. CH. I.

there is a great deal of shipping and many boats. In the town there is an enormous Chinese population, and here for the first time I understood the mystery of using chopsticks. Up till now I had cherished the fond delusion that it was customary to take the rice up grain by grain ; I had sorely exercised my mind on the consideration of the length of time that a Chinaman would occupy in consuming a hearty meal. I was therefore much interested in watching the process. The bowl, something like a large teacup without a handle, is held in the left hand close underneath the chin, the chopsticks being used as a shovel, by which the rice is pushed into the mouth, an extraordinary gobbling noise accompanying the proceeding. The grains of rice, moreover, even when cooked by a Chinaman, are not invariably all separate, and it is easy for a skilful performer to take a good deal of rice between his two chopsticks. The method of holding the chopsticks is almost impossible of explanation, but the art is acquired with a very little practice, and, once learnt, it is not difficult to pick up the smallest grain.

In the afternoon I rode with the Governor to the Botanical Gardens, on a pony which upset the popular theory that all horses tremble in the presence of lions and tigers ; for he could with difficulty be kept away from the bars of a cage in which there was a tiger that had been presented to Sir William Jervois by a neighbouring rajah. In the evening I was obliged to take my leave, and steaming out of Singapore early the next morning, we arrived off Saigon on August 29.

The mouth of the river is rather pretty ; as the steamer runs up, on the starboard hand are hills about one hundred or two hundred feet high, covered with forest, in which there are here and there open patches

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of beautiful green grass ; the trees come down to the water's edge, the coast is broken into innumerable little creeks and bays, native villages are scattered about, and on the other side the low coast is seen two miles away. In a very short distance the hills disappear ; the river, about half a mile wide, is very tortuous, and winds through a flat, swampy, uninteresting country, covered with low jungle, where I was told there were a great many tigers ; but as Frenchmen seldom hunt savage beasts for sport, they probably exaggerate the number of them.

The town of Saigon lies fifty miles up the river, and is close to a very large and important Chinese town, the seat of ancient trade ; it was for commercial purposes necessary to establish the colony here rather than at the mouth of the river, where there would have been a more picturesque, more convenient, and far more healthy site ; strategically, too, there were good reasons for choosing this rather than Point St. Jacques at the entrance to the river, for with torpedoes, the navigation of the tortuous channel would be almost impossible to a hostile fleet, while an attack on the point from the open sea would be comparatively easy. The Messageries Company wished to avoid the waste of time consequent on the navigation of this troublesome fifty miles, and applied to the French Government for permission to establish a station at Cape St. Jacques, and to perform the inland service in small steamers. There would have been no difficulty about this, for the roadstead is always safe, and small vessels can in any weather ascend to Saigon. The French Government, however, refused permission, and the mail steamers thus lose forty-eight hours on their passages, without any apparent compensating advantage.

As soon as we had anchored, a fellow-passenger accompanied me ashore, and we hired a carriage, that would in our India be called a shigram, drawn by the tiniest of tiny ponies, which, notwithstanding their diminutive size, galloped along at a rapid pace. Taking a drive round the town we saw Government House, a fine building, but not so imposing as ours at Singapore; this is, however, partly owing to the natural beauty of the Singapore situation. Here we noticed the marines on guard, in the stewy heat of this climate, dressed in dark blue cloth coats.

With regard to the town itself, the French have certainly made more of the little that nature has provided them with, than we have at Singapore of a much better site. The principal street of the town is a fine broad boulevard, with trees on both sides, where there are a few French shops amongst those of the Chinese. The public buildings are plain, and do not deserve much notice; there are of course cafes and restaurants, in as close imitation as circumstances permit, of the gay French capital. There is no gas at Saigon, as there is at Singapore, but the streets and houses are well lighted with petroleum. This is said to be a very unhealthy place, residents being liable to a form of dysentery that nothing appears to cure; the governors, whose salary is 8,000*l.*, are rarely able to remain more than two years. We found that, with an admirable idea of how most to inconvenience the public, the Post-Office was closed till 4.30 P.M., the officials being busy preparing their mails; so we took another drive, and when we returned we found that the *poste restante* business, the selling of stamps, and the receipt of valuable articles, were all conducted by one official at one little pigeon-hole.

People had been dropping in one by one during

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CH. I HONG-KONG REACHED AND QUITTED. 9

the past hour, and the street now presented something the appearance of one of our west-end thoroughfares on the night of an entertainment, with a long string of carriages on each side of the road. When at length the pigeon-hole was opened, a crowd of Chinamen, French soldiers, sailors, officials, and people of all sorts fought for the services of the man inside ; we also engaged in the conflict, and at length succeeded in posting our letters. Before returning to the ship we had to listen to the most doleful jeremiads of a sleepless night in store for us, from the size and virulence of the mosquitos, with which the river was said to swarm ; visions of large dragon-flies, with the stings of scorpions, presented themselves to me as I turned in, but happily the reports were exaggerations, and we none of us suffered much.

Leaving Saigon we steamed on again to the East, passing the Ladrone Islands, famous in the days of yore, where the old Portuguese navigators first entered these waters, and where, finding themselves the unfortunate victims of the numerous pirates and murderers that cruised about among these narrow channels, they called this beautiful archipelago the Ladrone or Robber Islands.

The times have changed, but the nature of the people is not much altered ; and though at a distance the fleet of junks, with their red sails bellying in the freshening breeze, might be mistaken for mackerel boats on our own English shores, and though by profession the people follow the peaceful avocation of fishing, they are still on occasions robbers, pirates, or buccaneers.

It was a delightful change at Hong Kong to pass a couple of days amongst kind friends ; it was refreshing too, once more to see English soldiers looking

as smart as only English soldiers do ; and after so many weeks of walking up and down the deck of a ship, a real hill was quite a treat. But our time was soon up, Hong Kong gradually disappeared, and we sailed away again over the blue waters, where the extraordinary number of fishing junks formed a marvellous sight. All day and all night the steamer passed through a swarm of these vessels that seemed to fringe the whole coast ; at one time I counted 150 in sight in one quarter of the compass, and we were obliged to stop our engines two or three times to avoid the nets.

My journey in the 'Ava' was drawing to a close, and on the morning of September 8 we entered the Yang-Tzö-Chiang, or Ocean River, which here flows majestically through a perfectly flat country, cut up by innumerable small canals, where the vegetation appears wonderfully rich, and where there seem to be plenty of fine trees. No hedges or walls were to be seen dividing the fields, and on the river there were a great number of fishing and trading vessels, all of one shape, but of various sizes, with two, three, four, or five masts, stuck in without any regard to the angle at which they were stepped, and all the more picturesque on account of their irregularity.

At Shanghai I presented a letter of introduction to that most hospitable of firms, Gibb, Livingstone, and Co. Here I enjoyed a dinner on shore, and afterwards went on board the steamer that was to convey me to Chi-Fu.

A machine called a jinnyrickshaw is the usual public conveyance of Shanghai. This is an importation from Japan, and is admirably adapted for the flat country, where the roads are good, and coolie hire cheap. In Japan, I have been told, they are also used