

Picturesque Experiences of a Lone Woman Travelling in China

PRIOR to the Boxer uprising there were many towns and villages in Northern China in which the foreigner could never consider himself safe. It was generally conceded that of all such places to be avoided by the prudent traveller unless he were well armed or one of a sufficient number, Taku, on the coast, and Tongu, some fifteen miles up the Peiho river, were easily first. Both are mere collections of mud hovels, peopled by bands of thieving cutthroats, although the natives at Taku were kept somewhat in check by the officials at the fort on one side of the river and the quarantine station on the other. Tongu is the terminus of the short railway line to Tientsin, where it connects with the main line to the capital, all of which was destroyed by the Boxers. It has been rebuilt, and as a species of poetic justice carried quite within the walls of the sacred Tartar city itself. The station formerly was several miles distant, an erratic electric tramway depositing passengers at the outer gate of the Chinese city, whence one was conveyed to the hotel by jinrikisha.

I left Shanghai for Pekin early in September preceding the troubles that were even then impending, being so fortunate as to fall in with a gentleman, an American, who was born in China and spoke "Mandarin," the dialect of the court, fluently. He very kindly took me in charge so the journey was made with comparative comfort. I had intended to return within a fortnight under the same competent escort, but I had been able to secure comfortable lodging in one of the foreign compounds, and finding the ancient city so interesting I decided to prolong my stay. Expeditions into the interior had been planned, with good interpreters and trustworthy servants, of which I felt that I must avail myself. The difficulties of making my way back to Shanghai alone, running the gauntlet of the secondarily hordes in Tongu, taking the risk of any unforeseen accident that might detain me there, had to be considered. But I concluded to trust to the luck that had never failed me. I remained in the north until I was informed that the last steamer for the south was about to sail, and unless I wished to be detained in Pekin all winter I must secure my passage. The time had gone like a dream, with visits to the Ming Tombs, the Nankou Pass, the accessible temples and other places of interest, but the day of departure came at last.

THE JOURNEY BEGUN.

I had hoped that I should find some English or American fellow traveller, at least as far as Tientsin, where there are usually numbers of foreigners going south by every steamer. In both particulars, however, I was doomed to disappointment.

The goodbyes were said, and my host went with me to the distant station. We were taken to the gate of the Chinese city, in jinrikshas, as we had come, bouncing into ruts and holes and out again, until the transfer to the waiting train car was something to rejoice over.

Both motorman and conductor were Chinese, with their greases tied to a button on their blouses, so as to be out of the way—the native method of hair dressing not being well adapted to the management of Western inventives. There had been, fortunately, a recent improvement in the mode of operating the line. A few months before the cars had been run on a schedule essentially Chinese, each following the other at a safe distance, until all were collected at one end of the line. The true function of the switch had been finally learned, and we were not obliged to wait until the other cars caught up with us.

The train was waiting to pull out—a "mixed train," in the fullest sense of that term. The open flat cars were crowded with natives, eating and drink-

ing among their mules and ponies, which had been led on board and conveniently tethered; the more luxurious "mail carriers" had their complement of passengers, as had the ordinary first class compartments. The latter were furnished with plain, wooden benches, made necessary by the filthy habits of even the wealthier natives.

My heavy luggage was consigned to the platform, where I could keep my eye upon it through the open door, although I should have been quite powerless had it been shaken from its insecure place by the jostling of the train. One can always count upon a most miscellaneous company where my number are gathered together in the Far East. My compartment was shared by a dark-skinned, courteous young Czech and a Belgian, with his Chinese wife. The Belgian, who, as well as the Czech, spoke excellent English, had lived in China forty years, and had been made a magistrate—a very unusual honour for an "outside barbarian." He wore the native dress, even a queue, jet black, fastened on somehow, and contrasting with his reddish-gray hair, which showed conspicuously below the rim of his black satin cap. The wife was fat and smiling, clad in rich blue brocade with costly ornaments of pearl and jade. Their son had accompanied them to the station, a tall, handsome young man, arrayed in elegant and perfectly fitting European clothes. He was employed as an interpreter at the Belgian Legation. As he bade his Chinese mother goodby he kissed her very tenderly, and the tears sprang to her eyes as she returned the caress—a most un-Chinese demonstration.

My three fellow passengers were extremely sociable. The young Czech at once begged to be of any assistance that he could, offering to fetch refreshments from the buffet, which I declined, having been supplied with a well-filled lunch basket when I left Pekin. This was explained, but his hospitable proffer was not to be refused; he went away and returned presently with a cup of delicious tea, some thin slices of bread and butter and two hot, hard-boiled eggs, which I had no choice but to accept.

"He's nothing but a Jew," remarked the expatriated Belgian, across the aisle, very contemptuously, as my entertainer departed to return the plate and cup to the buffet.

Not to be outdone in civility, however, the Chinese wife, at the husband's suggestion, very finally offered me a handful of roasted chestnuts and two fine Pekin pears. As I did not wish to discriminate, I was forced to accept these also, giving her in exchange some little sugared cakes from my own supplies. The tentative cordiality being thus established, we settled down for the tedious journey.

The husband spoke to the wife in Chinese, and then, turning to me, remarked: "I am telling her to notice how the American ladies can go about alone without fear. The American ladies are wonderful." Of course I realised that much as he might admire such enterprise in the abstract, he would probably discountenance it utterly in the female members of his own household, which I was informed were no inconsiderable number. Nor did I doubt that he was secretly gratified when the lady shook her head, implying that she would never dare to imitate the example so politely pointed out to her!

At the hotel in Tientsin I was advised on no account to take a train that would get me into Tongu after midnight. There was no place for the accommodation of foreign travellers, and the owners of sampans who might be induced to row one out to the steamer had an unpleasant habit of holding up their defenceless passengers and extorting a ruinous "squeeze," which the victim had the alternative of paying or being taken ashore again, to spend the night where and as he could. Dr. L., an American physician whom I had met at Pekin, was fortunately on duty at the Taku quarantine station. Both Tongu and Taku are connected by telephone with Tientsin, and,

having tested the boundless kindness of my country people in many out-of-the-way corners of the world, I felt quite free to telephone, asking him if it were entirely convenient to meet at the railway station in Tongu.

I had succeeded in getting the very last berth (there were but two) on the Chung-King, the last southbound steamer leaving that season. This accomplished, I went to the customs office and attempted to call up Dr. L. He was not there, but an attendant promised to deliver the message when he returned, and with this uncertainty I was forced to be content. The attendant might forget, the doctor might have been ordered elsewhere for the day—any one of a dozen accidents might prevent him meeting me at Tongu, in which event, were there no other foreigners leaving Tientsin on my train, I must manage as best I could, and the prospect was by no means agreeable.

The Chung-King was a freight steamer engaged in the coastwise trade between Shanghai and the most important ports along the Gulf of Pechili. Her crew were Chinese and her officers English. She had accommodations for but two passengers. I had been unable to learn whether she was anchored upstream at Tongu, which was possible at high tide with a light cargo; at the mouth of the river or Taku; or in the roadstead across the bar, some six leagues out at sea. Should my message be delivered and Dr. L. able to grant my request all would go well; otherwise the situation presented a number of possibilities, none of them reassuring.

I left the hotel at Tientsin, where I had been detained three days, in state. The commodore in his jinriksha led the way, I following, and my baggage, consigned to others, bringing up the rear, all making quite an imposing procession. We reached the Peiho just in time to be caught on the drawbridge, which turned to let pass an interminable string of junks. There we waited fully half an hour, I painfully realising that my train might start at any moment. The bridge was packed with as strange a medley of human beings as could be gathered together—Japanese, Americans, Chinese coolies and mandarins, French and English. Among the latter was a tall, pallid personage, in perfectly fitting tweeds, keeping one languid eye on a Gladstone bag bearing his honourable cipher, surmounted by a coronet.

I learned that the opening of the draw at inopportune times was usually prearranged to force travellers who did not wish to lose their trains to employ the sampans that hovered about, the boatmen waiting in greedy expectation. Fortunately I was not forced to this extremity. As I bought my ticket, however, when the station was finally reached, the agent said:

"If you wish to go by this train you will have to run."

My luggage, by some short cut unknown to me, had been taken to the train and stored on board, and should it depart without me upon its arrival at Tongu it would probably be appropriated by the first enterprising coolie that could lay hands upon it. And they were enterprising, as I had already learned to my discomfort.

I did not attempt to reach my carriage by the usual way—down the platform and over the bridge that spanned the line, in the safe, English fashion. I ran like a deer, leaped off the platform, some five feet from the ground, sprang on an intervening train, leaped from that, and so caught my own, just as it began to move. I sank into a seat, drew a long breath, and then began to think about Tongu.

The sky became overcast as we approached the sea, intensifying the poignant melancholy of the landscape, the keen wind rustling the sere, coarse grass, that grew sparsely upon the larger of the cone-shaped mounds.

There was but one other passenger in the carriage, a big, blond bearded Norwegian sea captain, who, fortunately for me, spoke a little English. In the course of our difficult talk I made known my uncertainty, and he at once relieved

my anxiety, like the gallant sailor that he was.

"Have no fear," he said. "We will find the ship. Should your friend not come, there will be no trouble about that."

As we approached the squalid village the line made a great detour, and we could see the station a long distance away. It was a neat, low building of gray brick, conforming to the best type of Chinese architecture, uniform with all the others along the line, approved by the clever engineers who had superintended their construction. Around it swarmed a dense crowd of blue clad coolies—thieves, and ruffians, probably, every one.

TOO WILLING SERVANTS.

The night was coming on, and as we approached nearer I saw nothing of Dr. L. When we halted the coolies rushed into the carriage and fell upon us like savages, struggling with each other and shouting, in their mad haste to get hold of the foreigner and his belongings. My Norwegian captain was able to stand them off, but he soon discovered that this required his undivided strength and attention. For a few painful seconds I found myself quite helpless. One possessed himself of my umbrella; another seized my handbag, a third my bulky holdall. I could neither prevent them nor recover what they had secured. The carriage was packed to suffocation with the screaming creatures.

Just then I heard an angry shout, and I exclaimed with fervour—

"Heaven be praised!"

The doctor had appeared upon the scene. He was accompanied by his Chinese servants, and there was a brisk interchange of remarks in the native vernacular. Piece by piece my property was wrested from the clutch of unwilling hands. The message had been delivered and once more the fetes were propitious.

The Captain of the ship greeted me with an outstretched hand and a word of cordial welcome. Then I was shown to my tiny stateroom and a moment later the Gidly steward came in with the tea tray. How delightful it all was! How spotless and immaculate was the little ship, her decks scoured to snowy whiteness, and all her brasses polished until they shone again!

From my safe vantage I looked across at the hideous hovels of Tongu, with the black, pestilence stream of filth debiling the river banks, and watched the clumsy ferryboat conveying its swartly, blue clad passengers to and fro.

It was an indescribable contrast to the ship which I had reached, after much suspense, in safety. I recalled it often during the delightful voyage back to Shanghai—the one lone woman on board.

But the wisdom of that hurried journey was not realized until afterwards. Within a few months the railroad had been destroyed, the pretty stations levelled to the ground by hostile Boxers and the mud puppets of the European allies.



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