

Sir Robert Hart eBook

Sir Robert Hart

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A WORD OF INTRODUCTION

Seventy-three years ago a little Irish boy lay in his aunt's lap looking out on a strange and mysterious world that his solemn eyes had explored for scarcely ten short days, while she, to whom the commonplaces of everyday surroundings had lost their first absorbing interest, was busily engaged in braiding a watch-chain from her splendid, Titian-red hair. These chains were the fashion of the hour, and the old family doctor, friend as well as physician, paused after a visit to the boy's mother, to joke her about it: "You're making a keepsake for your sweetheart, I see."

"No, indeed," she answered gaily with a toss of her bonny head, "I'm making a wedding present for this new nephew of mine when he marries your daughter."

It was a long-shot prophecy. The doctor was even then a man past his first youth; the neighbours looked upon him as a confirmed bachelor; he seemed as unlikely ever to possess a daughter as a diamond mine. Yet, all these improbabilities notwithstanding, he had taken to himself the luxury of a wife within a very few years, and soon children were climbing on his knees. I cannot say whether this red-haired young woman had the gift of second sight or whether, by some subtle power of suggestion, she willed the doctor to carry out her prophecy. I only know that the prophecy *was* startlingly fulfilled, for among his children was one little girl who, when she grew to womanhood, *did* marry the nephew and *did* get the watch-chain as a wedding gift.

The doctor's daughter was an aunt of mine, and her romantic marriage, by tying our two families together, gave me some slight claim on her husband's affection. Propinquity afterwards ripened what opportunity had begun; we lived long side by side in a far-away corner of the world, and from the formal relationship of uncle and niece soon slipped into that still better and warmer companionship of friend and friend.

For me the friendship has ever been, is, and always will be, a thing to take pride in, a thing to treasure. Nor will you wonder when I confess that he of whom I speak is none other than the great Sir Robert Hart, the man whose life has been as useful as varied, as romantic as successful.

The story of it can be but imperfectly written now. There are many shoals in the form of diplomatic indiscretions to steer clear of; there is much weighing and sifting of political motives for serious historians to do, but the time has not come for that. Much of the romance of his long career in China lies over and above such things, and of the romantic and personal side I here set down what I have gathered from one and from another—chiefly from those who have had the opportunity to collect their information at first hand, who either knew him sooner than I or were themselves concerned in the events described—in the hope that some readers may sufficiently enjoy the romance of a great career to forgive any imperfections in the telling for the sake of the story itself.

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CHAPTER I

EARLY YEARS

Robert Hart began his romantic life in simple circumstances. He was born on the 20th day of February, 1835, in a little white house with green shutters on Dungannon Street, in the small Irish town of Portadown, County Armagh, and was the eldest of twelve children. His mother, a daughter of Mr. John Edgar, of Ballybreagh, must have been a delightful woman, all tenderness and charity, judging from the way her children's affections became entwined around her. His father, Henry Hart, was a man of forceful and picturesque character, of a somewhat antique strain, and a Wesleyan to the core. The household, therefore, grew up under the bracing influence of uncompromising doctrines; it was no unusual thing for one member to ask another at table, "What have you been doing for God to-day?" and so rigidly was Sunday observed that, had the family owned any Turners, I am sure they would have been covered up on Saturday nights, just as they were in Ruskin's home.

When the young Robert was only twelve months old the Harts moved to Miltown, on the banks of beautiful Lough Neagh, remaining there barely a year. Then they moved again—this time to Hillsborough, where he attended his first school. It came about in this way. One afternoon he was called into the parlour by his father. Two visitors—not by any means an everyday occurrence in Miltown—were within. One was a stoutish man with sandy hair, the other a very long person like a knitting-needle. The stout man called the boy to him, passed his hand carefully over the bumps of his head, and then, turning to the father, said, "From what I gather of this child's talents from my examination of his cranial cerebration, my brother's system of education is exactly the one calculated to develop them," The men were two brothers named Arnold, who proposed to open a little school in Hillsborough and were tramping the country in search of pupils.

At the impressionable age of six or thereabouts an aunt fired the boy's imagination with stories of the departed glories of the Hart family. She used to tell him how their ancestor, Captain van Hardt, came over from Holland with King William, fought at the Battle of the Boyne and greatly distinguished himself; how afterwards, in recognition of his gallant services, the King gave him the township of Kilmoriarty as a reward; how the gallant captain settled himself down there, kept his horses, ate well, drank deep, and left the place so burdened with debt that one of his descendants was obliged to sell it.

"When I'm a man," the little fellow would say solemnly after hearing these things, "I'll buy back Kilmoriarty—and I'll get a title too." Of course she laughed at him quietly, thinking to herself how time and circumstances would separate the lad from the goodly company of his ambitions. Yet, after all, he saw clearer than she; he never wavered in the serious purpose formed before he reached his teens, and he actually did buy back

Kilmoriarty when it came on the market years afterwards. As for a title, he gained a knighthood, a grand cross and a baronetcy—thus fulfilling the second part of his promise grandly.

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From the care of the phrenologist brothers Arnold, Robert Hart was taken over to a Wesleyan school in Taunton, England, by his father. This journey gave him his first sight of the sea and his first acquaintance with the mysteries of a steamer. The latter took firm hold of his imagination; he long remembered the name of the particular vessel on which they crossed, the *Shamrock*, and many years later he was destined to meet her again under the strangest circumstances.

In England he stayed only a year, just long enough to make his first friend and learn his first Latin. The friend he lost, but recovered after an interval of forty years; the Latin he kept, added to, and enjoyed all his life long.

When the summer holidays came, one of the tutors, a North of Ireland man himself, agreed to accompany the lad back to Belfast; but in the end he was prevented from starting, and the Governor of the school allowed the eleven-year-old child to travel alone. He managed the train journey safely as far as Liverpool, betook himself to a hotel, and called, with a comical man-of-the-world air, for refreshment. Tea, cold chicken and buns were brought him by the landlady and her maids, who stood round in a circle watching the young traveller eat. His serious ways and his solemn air of responsibility touched their women's hearts so much that when the time came for him to sail they took him down to the dock and put him on board his ship.

Henry Hart met his son at Belfast, and was so angry, at finding he had been allowed to travel alone that he vowed the lad should never go back to Taunton, and therefore sent him to the Wesleyan Connexional School in Dublin instead. Here his quaint, merry little face, his ready laugh, and above all his willingness to perform any trickery that they suggested, made him a favourite among the boys at once. To the masters he must have been something of a trial, I imagine, with his habit of asking the why and wherefore of rules and regulations and his refusal to submit to them without a logical answer. One day, for instance, when a certain master spoke somewhat sourly and irritably to him, Robert Hart then and there took it upon himself to deliver him a lecture which, in its calm reasoning, was most disconcerting.

"It is wonderful the way you treat us boys," he said, "just as if you were our superior; just as if you were not a little dust and water like the rest of us. One would think from your manners you were our master, whereas you are really our servant. It is we who give you your livelihood—and yet you behave to us in this high-handed manner." That tirade naturally made a pretty row in the school, but the obdurate young orator melted under the coaxings and cajolings of the Governor's gentle and distressed wife, and duly apologized.

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The slightest of excuses served to turn him suddenly from a clever, scatterbrained imp of mischief into a serious student. It happened that the whole school met on an equality in one subject—Scripture History. The head of that class, therefore, enjoyed a peculiar prestige among his fellows, and it was clearly understood that a certain Freckleton, a senior and the good boy of the school, should hold this pleasant leadership. What was more natural, since he was destined to “wag his head in a pulpit?” But Robert Hart could not see the matter in this light. Some spirit of contradictoriness rising in him, he thought a little dispute for first place in Scripture would add spice to a naughty boy’s school life and both amuse and amaze. So on Sundays, while the rest of the boys were otherwise occupied, he would walk up and down the ball alley secretly studying Scripture.

When the examination day came the whole school was assembled; questions flew back and forth. Now one boy, now another dropped out of the game; at last only Freckleton and Hart were left, the big boy prodigiously nervous, rubbing his hands on his knees, the small one aggravatingly cool and collected. At last the examiner called for a list of the Kings of Israel. Freckleton stumbled. The question passed to Hart, and, while the boys sat tense with excitement, he answered fluently and correctly. The first place was his, and a hearty cheer greeted his unexpected success.

After this little victory the Governor of the school remarked to him:

“Now you see what you can do when you try, Hart; why don’t you try?”

Why not, indeed? Here was a new idea. He accepted it as a challenge, took it up eagerly, and from that day on devoted himself to study with an enthusiasm as thorough as sudden. Everything there was to study, he studied—even stole fifteen minutes from his lunch hour to work at Hebrew—till the boys laughingly nicknamed him “Stewpot” and the “Consequential Butt.”

The result was that at fifteen he was ready to leave the school the first boy of the College class, and his parents were puzzled what to do with him next. His father considered it unwise to send such a young lad away to Trinity College, Dublin, where he would be among companions far older than himself; and the end of the matter was that he went to the newly founded Queen’s College at Belfast instead because that was nearer Hillsborough and the family circle.

He passed the entrance examinations easily, and of the twelve scholarships offered he carried off the twelfth—nothing, however, to what he was to do later. The second year there were seven scholarships, and he got the seventh; the third there were five, and he got the first. He heard the news of this last triumph one afternoon in a little second-hand book-store where the collegians often gathered. It was a gloomy day wrapped in a grey blanket of rain, and he was not feeling particularly confident—his besetting sin from the first was modesty—when suddenly a fellow-student rushed up and said, “Congratulations, Hart. You’ve come out first.”

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"What," retorted Hart, astonished, "is the list published already?" They told him where it was to be seen, and he hurried off to look for himself. Quite likely they were playing a joke on him, he thought. But it was no joke after all; his name stood before all the others—though he could scarcely believe his own eyes, and did not write home about it till next day, for fear that the good luck might turn to bad in the night.

Unfortunately these successes left him little time for the sports which should be a boy's most profitable form of idling. He ran no races after he left Taunton, where he was known for the fleetest pair of heels in the school; he played no games, neither cricket nor football, not even bowls or rounders—but these amusements he probably missed the less as they were not popular at Belfast, the College being new and without muscular traditions, and the students chiefly young men of narrow means and broad ambitions.

On the rare occasions when he had time for recreation, he either made a few friends in the world of books—Emerson's "Essays" influenced him most—or tried his own hand at literature. Once he even went so far as to write a poem and send it to a Belfast newspaper, signing it "C'est Moi." It was printed, and, being short of money at the time, he wrote his father that his first published writing had appeared, and received from his proud parent L10 by way of encouragement.

But his literary success was short-lived. When he tried the same editor with another effusion signed with the same pen-name, the unfeeling man actually printed in his columns: "C'est Moi's' last is not worth the paper it is written on." Alas! for the prophet in his own country. Years afterwards he got another criticism just as harsh from another Irish paper. It was a review of his book "These from the Land of Sinim," and the Irish reviewer for some unknown reason rated the book thoroughly, declared its opinions were ridiculous, its English neither forcible nor elegant, and concluded with the biting remark, "We hear that the writer has also composed poems which were lost in the Peking Siege, thank God."

In 1853 Hart was ready to pass his final Degree Examinations. They were held in Dublin, where the three newly established Irish Colleges—Cork, Galway and Belfast—took them together. Belfast had been fortunate the year before in carrying off several "firsts," and the men were anxious to do as well as, or even better than on the previous occasion. So they arranged amongst themselves that each should cram some particular subject and try for honours in it.

Young Hart, with his character compounded of energy and ambition, agreed to take two as his share. One was English, the other Logic, which he had studied under the famous Dr. McCosh, which he delighted in, and which undoubtedly developed his natural talent for getting directly at the point of an intricate matter. He worked eighteen hours a day during the last three weeks before the Literature Examination, and when it came he did well—at least, so he supposed.

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The rule was that only those in each class who had shown marked ability and knowledge of their subject at the “pass” examination should be recommended for re-examination for honours. But to his surprise, when the list was read out, Hart’s name was not even amongst the successful candidates. The Belfast students were thoroughly angry. They felt the honour of the College was at stake; he had not done his share in upholding it, and they did not hesitate to tell him so. Hart listened to their reproaches and answered never a word, but quietly went on, in the week that intervened between the pass examination and the final, with his preparations for the latter. The ability to do so showed courage and character—and he hath both in an unusual degree.

The very night before the “final” his reward came. Some one hurried up his stairs and burst into his little sitting-room. It was the Professor—the famous George Lillie Craik—who had set the papers for the Literature class.

“I come to apologize to you for a mistake,” he said very kindly, “and to explain why you have not been chosen for re-examination. The truth is you answered so well at the ‘pass’ that I wrote your name on the first sheet, and nobody else’s—as nobody came near you. Unfortunately this page, almost blank, was mislaid, and that is how it happened that you, who should have been chosen before all the rest, were overlooked. Now I want to ask you to come up for re-examination to-morrow, and, at the same time, wish you the best of luck.”

Robert Hart went—and won. He received a gold medal and L15 for this subject, a gold medal and L15 also for Logic and Metaphysics, and sufficient honour and glory besides to turn a less well-balanced head.

Meanwhile the choice of a future career naturally filled the young man’s thoughts. First he seriously debated whether he should become a doctor, but gave up the idea when he found he came home from every operation imagining himself a sufferer from the disease he had just seen treated. Next there was some talk of putting him into a lawyer’s office—talk which came to nothing; and finally a lecture he heard on China at seventeen almost decided him to become a missionary to the heathen, but he soon abandoned this plan like the others.

After taking his B.A., he went instead to spend a post-graduate year at Belfast, and read for a Master’s degree—this in spite of the fact that he was worn out with the strain of eighteen hours’ work a day, and used to see authors creeping in through the keyhole and wake in the night to find illuminated letters dancing a witches’ dance around his bed.

Then, just at the critical moment of his life—in the spring of 1854—the British Foreign Office gave a nomination for the Consular Service in China to each of the three Irish Queen’s Colleges, Belfast, Cork and Galway. He immediately abandoned all idea of

reading for a fellowship, and applied. So did thirty-six others. A competitive examination was announced, but when the College authorities saw Hart's name among the rest, they gave the nomination to him, *without examination*.

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Two months later he presented himself at the Foreign Office in London and saw the Under-Secretary of State, Mr. (afterwards Lord) Hammond, who gave him some parting advice. "When you reach Hongkong," said he, "*never* venture into the sun without an umbrella, and never go snipe shooting without top boots pulled up well over the thighs." As no snipe have ever been seen on Hongkong, the last bit of counsel was as absurd as the first was sensible.

He actually started for China in May 1854. It is not easy to imagine in these feverish days of travel what that journey must have meant to a young Irish lad brought up in a small town lad to whom even London probably seemed very far away. But the mothers of other sons can give a pretty shrewd guess at how the mere thought of it must have terrified those he was leaving behind. "Will he come back a heathen?" one might ask, and another—but never aloud—"Will he come at all?"

But, whatever they felt, none would have selfishly held him back; on the contrary, they were all encouragement, and the last thing his father did was to put into the young man's hand a roll of fifty sovereigns—a splendid piece of generosity on the part of one whose whole income at the time did not amount to more than a few hundreds a year—and later, splendidly repaid.

It is interesting to review the curious series of incidents that guided Robert Hart towards the great and romantic career before him. Had it not been for the tutor's detention, the subsequent move from Taunton to Dublin, and the sudden awakening there of his mischievous ambition over Scripture History, he would probably never have developed into the ardent student he did at a very early age, or left school so young.

Again, had it not been for his extreme youth, his family would probably have sent him to Dublin instead of to Belfast—and Dublin received no nomination for the Consular Service in China. Such nominations were not usually given to Colleges, and the only reason that the three colleges comprising the Queen's University in Ireland received them was because the University was new, and the Foreign Office (at which, by the way, the Chief, Lord Clarendon, was also Chancellor of the Queen's University) desired to give it some recognition and encouragement.

Surely if ever a boy was "led," as the Wesleyans say, to do a certain work, Robert Hart was that boy.

CHAPTER II

FIRST YEARS IN CHINA—LIFE AT NINGPO—THE ALLIED COMMISSION AND SIR HARRY PARKES—RESIGNATION FROM THE CONSULAR SERVICE



The journey out to Chinn in 1854 was not the simple matter that it is now. No Suez Canal existed then, and the *Candia* that took Robert Hart from Southampton left him at Alexandria. Thence he had to travel up the Mahmudi Canal to the Nile, push on towards Cairo, and finally spend eighteen cramped and weary hours in an omnibus crossing the desert to Suez, where he got one steamer as far as Galle, and another—the *Pottinger* from Bombay—which called there took him on to his destination.

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He remained three uneventful months in Hongkong as Student Interpreter at the Superintendency of Trade, awaiting the return of Sir John Bowring, H.B.M.'s Minister to China, who was away at Taku trying to open negotiations with the Peking Government. It was this same Sir John Bowring, by the way, who first aroused Robert Hart's interest in Chinese life and customs—subjects on which so many foreigners in China remain pitifully ignorant all their lives. "Study everything around you," said he to the young man. "Go out and walk in the street and read the shop signs. Bend over the bookstalls and read titles. Listen to the talk of the people. If you acquire these habits, you will not only learn something new every time you leave your door, but you will always carry with you an antidote for boredom."

When the Minister came back in September, Robert Hart was appointed to the British Consulate at Ningpo, and started off immediately, travelling up to Shanghai in a trim little 150-ton opium schooner called the *Iona*. The voyage should have taken a week; it took three. At first a calm and then the sudden burst of the north-east monsoon made progress impossible; the schooner tacked back and forth for a fortnight, advancing scarcely a mile, and all this time her single passenger could just manage to take seven steps on her little deck without wetting his feet. Then, to make matters worse, provisions gave out, and the ship's company was reduced for twelve days to an unsavoury diet of water-buffalo and peanuts—all they could get from a nearby island. Was it any wonder that Hart could never afterwards endure the taste of peanuts, or that at the mere sight of a passing water-buffalo his appetite was clean gone for the day?

He found Shanghai in the hands of the Triads (rebels), and a friend, one of the missionaries, took him to see their famous chief, who was said to have risen, not from the ranks, but from the stables of an American merchant. With Mr. (afterwards Sir Rutherford) Alcock he also went into the other camp to visit the commander of the Imperialist forces, a Mongol, the Governor of the Province and a man of fine presence. He was the first specimen of the Mandarin class that Robert Hart had seen, and consequently the details of the interview remained in his memory.

In later years he would sometimes describe what interested him most as, silent and inconspicuous, he observed the doings of his seniors. It was not the crowd of petty officials standing about, though they were curious enough to a newcomer in their long official robes and hats decorated with peacock's feathers; it was not the conversation going on between Alcock and the Governor; it was simply the way the latter, by his excessive dignity and dramatic manner, turned a simple action into a ceremony. What he did was to draw carefully from his official boot a wad of fine white paper, detach one sheet, and solemnly blow his nose upon it. The action was nothing,

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the method everything. He then proceeded to fold the paper into a cocked hat, and, calling a servant to him, gave it into his hands with a grand bow, just as if he were presenting the man with some specially earned honour. As for the servant, he took his cue excellently well, received the paper like a sacred relic, and, still as if he were taking part in some ceremony; opened the flap of the tent and threw it away.

[Illustration: *The canal: The route by which sir Robert hart first came to Peking.*]

Still more adventures awaited Robert Hart on the short trip from Shanghai to Ningpo; indeed I think the best and the most romantic adventures took a certain pleasure in following him always. At any rate, this time he was to have such a one as even Captain Kettle might have envied; he was to be chased by a pirate junk, a Cantonese Comanting, with a painted eye in the bow, so that she might find her prey, with a high stern bristling with rifles and cutlasses, so that she might destroy it when found, and with stinkpots at her mastheads and boarding-nets hung round her. Of course he was to escape in the end, but so narrowly that all possible sail had to be crowded on to his little ship, and the whole crew set to work the big oar at the stern, while every soul on board shivered and shook as men should when pirates are after them.

Ningpo itself in 1854 was the quietest place under the sun. A handful of merchants lived there, buried without the trouble of dying; one or two consulates had been built, but roads were non-existent, and the few houses were separated from one another by a network of paddy (rice) fields. The new consular assistant shared his house with a man called Patridge, for whom he had conceived a liking, a jolly fellow and a capital messmate, yet not without certain peculiarities of his own. I believe he took a special delight in posing for fearful and radical ideas like the abolition of the House of Lords, and could never be made to see why a man should not sit in the presence of his Sovereign, or wear his hat either if he felt so inclined.

The other youngsters laughed at his notions; one or two even went so far as to accuse him of being a snob and to twit him on having changed the spelling of his name and dropped the first "r" for the sake of a stylishness he pretended to despise. He protested hotly; they stuck to their assertion. He declared his name was Patridge, always had been Patridge, and never could be anything else; they disbelieved him, and so the dispute remained a drawn battle for want of an umpire till long afterwards, when Robert Hart himself proved the point in a very curious way.

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A word or two about Patridge's early history must be told in order to show how he did it. Patridge, as a young boy, was on board a vessel carrying opium along the coasts of China, when in 1842 she and another engaged in the same trade were wrecked on the island of Formosa, and both crews—175 Bengalis and 13 white men in all—were captured by the natives and taken to the capital, Tai-Wan-Foo. The Bengalis were beheaded immediately. It was touch and go whether the white men would suffer the same fate, when a brilliant idea struck the ship's carpenter. Why not seek to soften the hearts of his captors by a *kotow* as profound as it was novel; why not stand on his head? He did, with the happiest results. The Formosans, delighted with this feat of submission, spared the lives of himself and his companions and kept them in prison instead of decapitating them.

But for a long time it was doubtful whether they would ever regain their liberty, and, as a record for friends who might later search for them in vain, they made a schoolboy's calendar on the walls of their cramped and dirty prison, ticked off each day, and signed their names below. It is nice to know that they got away free at last, though their fate has little to do with my story.

The record remained. More than twenty years afterwards, when Robert Hart, then Inspector-General of the Chinese Customs, had occasion to go to Formosa on business, he found it in an old rice hong (shop), and Patridge's name among the rest, spelled with two "r's" (Partridge), whereupon he could not resist the temptation of cutting off the list with his penknife and, on his return to Shanghai, triumphantly handing it to his old messmate.

In 1855, owing to a dispute with his Portuguese colleague, the British Consul at Ningpo was suspended from duty, and young Hart put in charge of affairs for some months. His calm judgment and good sense during this first period of responsibility gained him favourable notice with the "powers that be," for a little later at Canton, when the British General Van Straubenzee remarked, on introducing him to Mr.(afterwards Sir Frederick) Bruce, "This young man I recommend you to keep your eye on; some day he will do something," the latter answered, "Oh, I have already had my attention called to him by the Foreign Office."

The Portuguese were much in evidence in the Ningpo of those days. They were numerous; they had power, and they abused it: with the result that retribution came upon them so sure, so swift, so terrible that not only Ningpo but the whole of China was deeply stirred by the horror of it.

I am thinking now of that dreadful massacre of June 26th, 1857, the culmination of years of trouble between the Cantonese and the Portuguese lorchamen, who with their fast vessels—the fastest and most easily managed ships in the age before steam—terrorized the whole coast, exacted tribute, refused to pay duties, and even fell into downright piracy, burning peaceful villages and killing their inhabitants.

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Rumours of Cantonese revenge began in the winter of 1856, when news came that all the foreigners in Ningpo would be massacred on a certain night. Some one thereupon invited the whole community to dine together; but Robert Hart refused, thinking that men who sat drinking hot whiskey punch through a long evening would be in no condition to face a disturbance if it came. Thus, while the others kept up their courage in company, he slept in a deserted house—the terrified servants had fled—with a revolver under his pillow, and beside his bed an open window, through which he intended to drop, if the worst came to the worst, and try to make his way on foot to Shanghai. Nothing happened then, however; but the talk of the tea-shops had not been unfounded—only premature.

The 26th of June saw the vengeance consummated. With great bravery and determination the Cantonese under Poo Liang Tai swept the Portuguese lorchas up the entire coast and into Ningpo. The fight began afloat and ashore. Bullets whistled everywhere; the distracted lorchamen ran wildly about, hoping to escape the inevitable. Some of the poor wretches reached the British Consulate, alive or half alive, clamouring for shelter; but Mr. Meadows, then Consul, refused to let them in, fearing to turn the riot from an anti-Portuguese disturbance into an anti-foreign outbreak, and the unfortunate creatures frantically beat on the closed gates in vain.

Perhaps much of their fate was well deserved—some historians say so—but it was none the less terrible when it came; and I can imagine that the predicament of Meadows and young Hart, standing behind the barred gates of the Consulate, could have been little worse, mentally, than that of the wretches outside praying to them in the name of Heaven and the saints for shelter.

All were hunted down at last, dragged out of their hiding-places in old Chinese graves among the paddy fields, butchered where they stood defending their lodging-house, or taken prisoners only to be put on one of their own lorchas, towed a little way up the river and slowly roasted to death. Then, “last scene of all,” the Cantonese stormed the Portuguese Consulate, pillaged and wrecked the building, and were just climbing on to the flat roof to haul down the flag when a stately white cloud appeared far down the river, serenely floating towards the disturbed city.

It was the French warship *Capricieuse*, under full sail. She had come straight from South America and put in at Ningpo after her long voyage, all unconscious of the terrible events passing there. Was ever an arrival more providential? I greatly doubt it; for had she not appeared in this miraculous fashion, who knows what would have come to the handful of white men left in that last outpost of civilization?

Such was Robert Hart’s first experience of a fight, but it was by no means to be his only one. Bugles have sounded in his ears from first to last, and a wide variety of military experiences—he was present at the taking of one city and during the siege of another—has come to him without his seeking it.

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From Ningpo he was transferred to Canton in March 1858, and made Secretary to the Allied Commission governing that city. Life was very different there from what it had been in Ningpo. Instead of the small community to which he had been accustomed, he found himself in a town filled with troops—British and French. Instead of living alone or with one companion, he occupied quarters in a big yamen full of officers and men—a change which probably benefited a character too given to seriousness and introspection.

The work in Canton was exceedingly interesting. He was much more in the centre of affairs than he had been before, and he had the opportunity of serving under Sir Harry Parkes. With some of the erraticness that is said to belong to genius, Parkes enjoyed doing things at odd hours. He liked to fall asleep after dinner, for instance, with a big cigar in his mouth, then wake refreshed and energetic at midnight, and work till morning. But he never expected his staff to follow his example, and was consideration itself to those under him—especially to young Hart, whom he liked from the first, and whom he always took with him on his expeditions around or outside the city.

There was no lack of these, since he was a man of indomitable energy, matured his plans with astonishing rapidity, and often had them carried out before any one suspected they were maturing.

The story of one particular little *coup d'état* is well worth the telling. A new Viceroy was expected in Canton, and Parkes heard that the man who was filling the Acting Appointment was anxious to go out of the city to meet his successor. At the same time he was told that if the official left the city, the occasion would be taken to make a disturbance, so he determined to use a sudden and vigorous stratagem to keep the Acting Viceroy within the walls, willing or no. Accordingly one morning he invited all the officials to discuss matters at the said Viceroy's yamen, and went himself to the rendezvous with Hart and an escort of military police.

He greeted the assembled officials cordially, and, after some preliminary remark, went on to say: "I hear that you are all anxious to go and meet the new Viceroy. Very natural, I'm sure; very natural and obviously your duty. But we really do not want you to leave Canton just at this particular moment. Ugly rumours are floating about which only your presence here keeps in check. Therefore, as we realize that if you do not go to meet your colleague, you will be accused in Peking of lack of courtesy towards him, that none of your excuses will be believed, I have brought a few men with me to keep guard outside your rooms here. You can consequently say with truth that you were *prevented from fulfilling your duty.*"

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Astonished and angry as they were at the turn of events, the Chinese were shrewd enough to see they were helpless. The soldiers stayed. Hart went every day to inquire after the prisoners, and listened to their complaints about the ceaseless tread of the sentries under their windows all night. "They never seem to sit down like other people," one of the Chinese said pathetically. "They walk all night, all night, and we cannot sleep." Parkes sent sympathetic messages, but he remained courteously firm. Perhaps he thought a few wakeful hours were not too high a price to pay for keeping Canton quiet.

There was one official, however, who had not been caught with the rest. He was Fantai, or Provincial Treasurer, who remained quietly hidden in a temple in one of the western suburbs till Parkes ferreted him out. He and Hart and the mounted police then made a second expedition. As soon as they reached the outer door of the place, Parkes jumped off his pony and rushed in with such impetuosity that the crowds of servants running before him had no time to warn their master of the intruders' arrival. Parkes continued his rapid career straight into the inner room, where the Fantai himself sat at a table strewn with papers, absolutely calm, serene and unmoved. Parkes began to talk; the Fantai remained silent. No matter, Parkes was very adroit at carrying on a one-sided interview, and conversation did not flag.

"I've come to pay you a visit," said he; "and though you have not mentioned your pleasure at meeting a new acquaintance, I am sure it is none the less deep. Ah," he went on, looking over the paper-strewn table, "you have even been kind enough to lay aside your work on my account. Let us see. You were writing letters," and Parkes thereupon read the finished and unfinished despatches under the Fantai's very eye, then profusely thanked him for the useful information.

The Chinese sat superbly contemptuous through it all, and finally spat over his shoulder, putting enough scorn into the action to freeze the boldest. Yet Parkes had the gift of looking unconscious the whole time, and babbled on gaily:

"You don't seem very talkative to-day—but of course, sometimes one feels more in the mood for conversation than others. Besides, there is no need for you to tell me any of your news. I have found out everything I wanted to know from these papers here." He had indeed; they contained the most important revelations as to the prospective movements of the Chinese troops outside the city, and also showed exactly how far the officials inside were co-operating with them.

There was no further need to prolong the interview, and Parkes began to make his adieus. In China, these are not the slight things they are with us. Host and guest have mutual obligations; the former, unless he is willing to risk being thought uncivil, must escort a visitor of rank to the outer gate himself. But the Fantai cared little whether he was thought civil or not, and he sat stolidly in his chair when Parkes made a move to go. He reckoned without his—guest, who was not the man to be slighted.

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"I am sorry to take you away from your pressing business," said Parkes affably, "but if you should neglect to s'ung (literally, bid farewell in the ceremonial manner) me, people might think that we are not the good friends we are; people might even suspect that our political relations are unsatisfactory. Therefore I must with great reluctance trouble you." The Fantai, helpless, accompanied him grudgingly to the door of the inner courtyard, whence he was about to beat a retreat when Parkes said again, insinuatingly and half under his breath, "Oh, come a little farther, please do; there are not enough people here to see our good-byes."

The same scene was gone through at each successive courtyard, and in a big Chinese temple they are neither few nor small. Hart, who was behind the other two, could scarcely stifle his amusement at the half-snarling, half-contemptuous face of the Fantai as Parkes in one phrase insisted *sotto voce* on his coming farther, and in the next, spoken a little louder for the benefit of listening servants and secretaries, thanked him profusely for his great courtesy and hospitality in seeing a humble guest so far. Only at the outermost gate, around which a crowd had collected, all, in Chinese fashion, asking who was within and what he had come about, was the irate Fantai permitted to return to his interrupted labours—after he had satisfied every canon of the elaborate courtesy.

Hart left his work under Sir Harry Parkes with real regret in October 1858, when he was promoted and appointed interpreter at the British Consulate in Canton under Sir Rutherford Alcock; but in May 1859 he resigned to enter the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs. It was the Viceroy Laou Tsung Kwang who invited him to do so, for he was one of Hart's special friends, a shrewd judge of men, clever enough himself and progressive for his day. He had been quick to notice the success of the new Custom House at Shanghai, and presently asked young Hart if he could not draw up a set of regulations for the collection of duty at Canton, and undertake the work of supervision.

To this invitation Hart replied that Mr. H.N. Lay was in charge of the Customs; that he, Hart, knew nothing about the business, having had no experience of the sort, and could not therefore agree to the proposals. But what he did agree to do was to write to Mr. Lay and see if something could not be done to bring Canton into line with Shanghai. The result of the correspondence, briefly put, was that Mr. Lay first offered Robert Hart a position as interpreter, which he refused, and later the post of Deputy-Commissioner of Customs at Canton, which he accepted. Of course he had meanwhile asked the British Government if he might resign from the Consular Service. Their reply gave the desired permission, but stipulated at the same time that he must not expect the acceptance of his resignation to imply that he might return to the British service whenever he pleased. Neither they nor he guessed then that he was beginning a work from which he would have no wish to turn back, or that it would be they who would finally beg him to return to their service, not as Consul, but as Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary.

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CHAPTER III

THE BEGINNINGS OF THE IMPERIAL CHINESE CUSTOMS—A VISIT TO SIR FREDERICK BRUCE—THE SHERARD OSBORNE AFFAIR—APPOINTED INSPECTOR-GENERAL

When Robert Hart joined the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs, the service was already four years old. 1854—the very year he passed through Shanghai on his way to Ningpo—saw its beginning as an international institution. A Chinese Superintendent had hitherto collected duties for his Government, but, owing to the capture of Shanghai by the rebels, affairs became so disorganized that he appealed to the three Consuls of Great Britain, France and the United States for help, and they responded by each appointing one of their nationals to assist him in securing an honest and efficient administration.

As far as the Chinese Government was concerned, the triumvirate gave immediate and entire satisfaction. Duties increased, smuggling diminished—all as a result of the new system, which was continued, by the express desire of the Chinese officials, even after the city was recaptured by the Imperial troops.

But the merchants on their side had no praise for an arrangement that cut large slices off their profits. They found it exceedingly annoying to be obliged to give the correct weight of their tea and silk under penalty of forfeiture; as for calmly landing and shipping their goods without permits, this was now out of the question. Yet what could they do to circumvent these innovations? Nothing—but put every conceivable difficulty, large and small, ingenious and obvious, in the way of the new inspectors.

The Frenchman presently withdrew, the American, a consular official, resigned in 1856, and the Englishman, Mr. (afterwards Sir Thomas) Wade, a sensitive man, unable to endure the social boycott imposed on him, did likewise. Mr. H.N. Lay, Vice-Consul and Interpreter in the British Consulate at Shanghai, was then appointed to succeed Mr. Wade, and, as the two other Powers concerned did not appoint successors to their original nominees, he thereafter managed Chinese Customs business alone.

Such, briefly told, is the history of the service which Robert Hart joined as Deputy-Commissioner at Canton in 1859 at the suggestion of the Canton Viceroy, Laou Tsung Kwang—which he was to build up and in which he was to make his great name and reputation. From the first he did better than well. He set to work at once on a series of regulations for Custom House management. They were greatly needed—all the internal arrangements of the infant service were in a chaotic condition—and they were also greatly praised. The Viceroy himself was delighted. Here was his own young *protege*, by his diligence, by his practical business capacity, by his unusual willingness to accept responsibility and by the promises of administrative ability he was giving, proving

himself the very man to make the newly organized Customs a success. The Viceroy had chosen better than he knew.

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Two years—from 1859 to 1861—Robert Hart spent in Canton setting affairs in order and working very hard in a hot, damp climate. Curiously enough he was never ill, though many men of far greater physical strength, of far tougher build, wilted in that steaming atmosphere; he himself was always too busy, I think, for symptoms and sickness.

During those years he had an unexpected meeting with an old friend. Word having been brought to him that a ship from Macao was expected to load teas at Komchuk—a place inland not open to trade—he started off with a posse of tidewaiters on the revenue cruiser *Cumfa*, to seize her. She was a shabby little vessel; her paint was scratched, her name almost obliterated. Almost, but not quite; he was able to make out the word *Shamrock* at her bow, and on careful inquiry identified her as the very vessel on which he had travelled to England as a boy; but alas! a *Shamrock* fallen on evil days, dilapidated by doubtful adventures in distant seas, and debased to the low company of smugglers.

In 1861 chance, luck, or Providence—call it what you will—once again interfered in the humdrum routine of events to give Hart the opportunity he had come half-way across the world to meet. A riot broke out at Shanghai, and Mr. Lay, as he was walking down the main street, was attacked by a man with a long knife and so severely wounded that he was obliged to go to England on two years' leave in order to recover his health.

Two of his subordinates were made Officiating Inspector-Generals in his place: Fitzroy, formerly private secretary to Lord Elgin, at that time Shanghai Commissioner, and Robert Hart. Both men had excellent qualities; but while Fitzroy, who knew no Chinese, was content to remain at Shanghai, his more active and energetic colleague travelled to and fro establishing new offices.

The Tientsin Treaties having recently opened more ports to trade, and the Chinese Government having repeatedly approved of the golden stream of revenue pouring into their Treasury, Customs administration was extended up and down the coasts as fast as the ports could be declared “open”—to Ningpo, Foochow, Amoy, Swatow, Chinkiang, even so far north as Tientsin, and British, French or German Commissioners put in charge of each, in order that the original international character of the service might be preserved.

Most of these ports welcomed the new order of things; but at one, notably Hankow, difficulties arose, and Hart promptly started to clear them up. At the time of his going both Wuhu and Nanking, two cities on the Yangtsze, were still in the hands of the rebels, and the river-steamer captain warned his passengers that the ship would stop at Wuhu to get her papers from them. “Take my advice,” said he, “and remain quietly in your cabin from the time we stop until we leave, for the rebels have the habit of coming on board, and were they to find a man like yourself, a Government agent on Government business, they would certainly take you ashore. They usually only look

about the saloon, however, and do not examine the cabins, so you will be safe enough if you stay in yours."

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Robert Hart gratefully accepted the advice, and, sitting on the edge of his bunk, listened to the rebels talking in the saloon outside, till, with a sigh of relief, he heard them leave the ship and allow her to proceed on her way. That the danger had been real enough the deserted river proved; terror of these same revolutionaries had swept the usually busy waterway clean of craft, and nothing further disturbed the quiet but the hoarse honk of wild geese and the whirring of ducks' wings.

At Hankow the Viceroy, Kwan Wen, was as friendly personally as he was obstinate officially. He did not desire to see the new system enforced. Again and again he politely told Robert Hart that he was wasting his time—that it was quite useless his remaining longer.

But as Robert Hart listened with equal politeness and remained, the Viceroy's patience finally began to wear thin. He then sent a subordinate official to make one last effort to persuade the Officiating Inspector-General to go. This failed, just as the other attempts at persuasion had failed. Hart simply told the man that he was acting under orders, and further hinted that when he reported to Peking and the Emperor Tung Chih heard that difficulties had been made about the establishment of the Customs at Hankow, it would not look well. "But the Emperor's name is not Tung Chih," remarked the Taotai scornfully. "You should know that as well as I." "To me," retorted Robert Hart calmly, "it seems equally strange that you as a Chinese official do not know the name of your own Emperor."

He thereupon went to a drawer, took out a new *Peking Gazette* announcing the famous *coup d'état* of November 2nd, 1861, when Prince Soo Sun's party was absolutely overthrown by the party of Prince Kung and the Emperor's official style altered from Chi Hsiang ("Lucky") to Tung Chih ("Pull Together"), and handed it to him. The man was utterly surprised. This was the very first news of the important event to reach Hankow, and as soon as it became generally known all the officials who had hitherto shaped their actions to please Prince Soo were quick to change their attitude. Even the Viceroy promptly sent for Hart and begged him, with every expression of cordiality, to do just as he pleased about everything; above all, to proceed with his business immediately.

A few weeks later, all being in working order, the Officiating Inspector-General was on his way down the river again. He had a message for the other Yangtsze Viceroy, Tseun Kuo Fan, and accordingly paid five hundred taels (L70) to stop the little steamer *Poyang* for two hours at Nanking in order to deliver it. This message was comparatively prosaic, concerning as it did nothing more interesting than the Viceroy's views relative to some unimportant trade matters.

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But the Viceroy's answer is worth recording. "You have asked me my opinion on many matters," said old Tseun. "Some of these must be settled direct with the Wai-Wu-Pu (the Foreign Office at Peking). But I will tell you this much now. Whatever is good for Chinese and foreigners I will support; whatever is good for foreigners and does not harm Chinese I will approve; but whatever is bad for Chinese, no matter how good it is for foreigners, I will die rather than consent to." In this grand old statesman's confession of his political faith it is good to find a convincing answer to the arguments of those who pretend that there are no patriots in China.

Robert Hart's next mission was to Peking itself, the grey, wall-ringed mediaeval city where he was afterwards to spend so many years, and where he stayed with Sir Frederick Bruce at the British Legation—then, as now, housed in a fine old Chinese building.

[Illustration: A VIEW OF PEKING SHOWING CONDITION OF ROADS.]

Sir Frederick Bruce was a most striking type of man, like a straight, healthy tree, most cordial in manner, with a beautiful voice that made even oaths sound like splendid oratory, a keen intelligence flavoured with a pinch of humour, and a great gift of diplomatic suavity.

Between himself and young Robert Hart a bond of friendship rapidly grew—strong enough to bear the lapse of time and even the occasional bursts of frank criticism to which the host treated his guest. At least on one occasion it was very sharp indeed. Hart and another young man (afterwards Sir Robert Douglas) had gone riding in the outer city of Peking on the fifth of the fifth moon—a feast day—when, on their way home, a yelling mob collected around them, shouting disrespectful names and even throwing things at them. True, they did it all in a spirit of playfulness, but a moment or a trifle might easily have turned mischief into malice, and, realizing this, Hart pulled up at one of the shops in the big street and asked the shopkeeper, a respectable greybeard, to tell the crowd not to pass his shop door.

"But," said the old fellow, "we have nothing to do with these people."

"I know that," was the reply, "but if they misbehave themselves I shall not be able to report them, because they are vagabonds who will disappear into the holes and corners of the city. They would be impossible to find again, but you are a man with a fixed place of residence; it will be easy enough to find you. I see, by the way, your shop is called 'Renewed Affluence' on the signboard. And if you plead that the affair was no business of yours, people will never believe that a word from a respectable man like yourself would not suffice to control a crowd of ragamuffins."

Hart's use of this argument, so peculiarly Chinese in its reasoning, showed how well he already understood the character of the people—how well he appreciated the

underlying principle of their community life, the responsibility of a man for his neighbour's behaviour. The shopkeeper was, of course, duly impressed. He spoke to the crowd and they melted away.

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But when at luncheon Hart told his host how narrowly he had escaped rough treatment, all the satisfaction he got was: "Served you right, you two young fools, riding about where you were not wanted. Served you right, I say. If I had been there I'd have had a shy at you myself."

This remark was characteristic of Sir Frederick Bruce, who, either from character or experience, or both, took a conservative view of everything—even of trifles. I know Robert Hart afterwards attributed some of his own caution to his friend's example. "In all things go slowly," Bruce was wont to say in his booming, bell-like tone. "Never be in a hurry—especially don't be in a hurry about answering letters. If you leave things long enough and quiet enough they answer themselves, whereas if you hurry matters balanced on the edge of a precipice, they often topple over instead of settling and remaining comfortably there for ever."

During Hart's visit to Peking a very important question arose concerning the policing of the China Seas. Great Britain had hitherto been doing the work, but the arrangement was considered unsatisfactory. The first idea that China should invest in a fleet of her own came up in the course of a friendly conversation between the British Minister and the Officiating Inspector-General.

Later, when they had talked the subject over at length, and Bruce asserted that Great Britain would probably be willing to lend officers and sell ships of war to China for the nucleus of the proposed navy, Hart laid the matter before Prince Kung. There were endless negotiations, the difficulty and delicacy of which cannot be exaggerated. But they ended satisfactorily.

[Illustration: A ROAD IN OLD PEKING DURING THE RAINY SEASON.]

Prince Kung memorialized the Throne, with the result that £250,000 was directed to be set aside for the purpose. Then, at Robert Hart's suggestion, the money was sent to the Inspector-General—Mr. Lay—to be spent by him in England, together with a long letter of instructions (written by Prince Kung) urging Lay to purchase everything as soon as possible, and to see that the "work put into the vessels should be strong and the materials genuine."

This delicious phrase, a true touch of human nature, is solemnly recorded in one of the despatches, and may still be seen in the correspondence on the subject in the Blue Book for the year.

It is only fair to point out that it was Robert Hart who stated that "the ability of the Inspector-General is great; that he possesses a mind which embraces the minutest details, and is therefore fully competent to make the necessary arrangements with a more than satisfactory result," when he might so easily have used his great and growing

personal influence with the Chinese (he was a *persona grata* with them from the beginning) to undermine his chief.

How the fleet “of genuine materials” came out with all despatch under the celebrated Captain Sherard Osborne and various other officers lent by the Admiralty, is a matter of history. The reputations of its commanders—for all were men of distinction—should have ensured its success if anything could have done so. But from the very moment the fleet reached Shanghai there were misunderstandings. Captain Osborne found himself subject to local officials whose control he resented.

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The truth was Lay had somewhat altered the regulations drawn up by Robert Hart and approved by Prince Kung, and had then told Captain Osborne that of course the Chinese would agree to anything he wished. Subsequent events proved him wrong, and showed that he had made the fatal mistake of committing his employers too far. Perhaps this was not unnatural considering that he was just then receiving the most flattering notice from the British press and a C.B. from the British Government for his services—yet it was none the less disastrous.

In May 1863 Lay returned to Shanghai, and, Robert Hart's acting appointment having come to an end, he was made Commissioner at Shanghai, with charge of the Yangtsze ports, the position being specially created for him by Prince Kung in order to give him more authority than would belong to the simple Commissioner of a port. That same autumn the Sherard Osborne affair came to a crisis. Returning from a trip up the Yangtsze, Hart found Lay and Li Hung Chang at daggers drawn. The former had just peremptorily demanded a large sum of money to provision the fleet, and the latter had flatly refused to put his hand in his pocket without official orders to do so, Robert Hart, who very shrewdly guessed at the real cause of the misunderstanding, offered to go and see Li and explain. Very tactfully he told Li that all Lay and Captain Osborne wanted was his formal sanction to present at the bank, as without this the transaction would not have the necessary official character. Li agreed readily enough when the matter was presented in this light; what he had objected to was Lay's abrupt demand to pay so many thousand taels out of his own pocket immediately.

But no small manoeuvre such as this, however successful, could arrange the larger matter. The fleet had been an utter failure. Osborne himself was disgusted; the Chinese were dissatisfied. They therefore made the best of a bad bargain, and sent the ships back to be sold in England in order to prevent their falling into the hands of the independent and quarrelsome Daimios of Japan, or, as Mr. Burlingame, the United States Minister, greatly feared, into the hands of the Confederates.

Thus ended a very curious incident which, by closing as it did, undoubtedly set back the clock of reform in China. It may be that from the political point of view this was as well; that, had the venture been an unqualified success, the Chinese might have thrown themselves too much into the arms of foreign Powers and tried to reform too fast by slavish imitation instead of slowly working out their own salvation.

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As far as he was personally concerned the disastrous and expensive failure long preyed upon Robert Hart's mind. He reproached himself bitterly for the mistake. But the Chinese never attached the least blame to him; they showed him no diminution of respect, rather an increase. It was on the Inspector-General H.N. Lay that their wrath fell. They considered that he had treated the whole matter too high-handedly, and within three months they had dismissed him and offered the post to Robert Hart. Of course the change gave rise to much discussion, and Sherard Osborne went frankly to Hart and told him how ill-natured people were hinting that he had intrigued against Lay. The malignity of idle gossip, however, could not turn him back. Knowing that he had worked as loyally for his chief as for himself, he simply replied that if the public looked at it in that way, instead of refusing he would certainly accept the post. I wonder if any instinct told him that the great day of his life was when he *did* accept it, or if he had any premonition of the useful and romantic career before him?

The characters of the two Inspector-Generals, the one outgoing, the other incoming, contrasted very strangely. Lay was inclined to be dictatorial and rather impatient of Chinese methods; an excellent and clever man, but with one point of view and one only. Hart, on the other hand, was tactful, patient, and, above all else, tolerant of other people's prejudices. "To grow a little catholic," says Stevenson, "is the compensation of years." But Robert Hart was catholic in this broad sense even when he was young. He would sometimes say that the habit of toleration he acquired at college, and through the most simple incident.

Seven or eight of the Belfast students were one day asked to describe what would seem to be the simplest thing in the world to describe—a packing-case. And yet every man, after stating the simple fact that he saw a packing-case, had something different to say about it. One, who stood on the right, described an address written in black letters; another, who stood at one end, dwelt on the iron hoops that bound the box; a third gave prominence to the long nails studding a corner. Thus each, according to his view-point, saw that same commonplace packing-case in a different way. After this practical demonstration Robert Hart never in his life could grow impatient with a man who did not see exactly what he saw when both were standing on opposite sides of a question.

CHAPTER IV

ORDERED TO LIVE AT SHANGHAI—FIRST MEETING WITH "CHINESE GORDON"—THE RECONCILIATION BETWEEN GORDON AND LI HUNG CHANG—THE TAKING OF CHANG-CHOW-FU—DISBANDMENT OF "THE EVER-VICTORIOUS ARMY"—REWARDS FOR GORDON

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The first order transmitted by Prince Kung to the new Inspector-General—or the I.G., as he was always familiarly called—was that he should live at Shanghai. This gave him the opportunity of meeting and working with the famous “Chinese Gordon,” to whom the suppression of the Taiping Rebellion was so largely due. For the history of that rebellion—how one soldier of fortune after the other attempted to suppress it; how the picturesque American Burgevine, on changing masters and seeking to better his fortune with the rebels, was succeeded by the prosaic failure Holland; how at last, on General Staveley’s recommendation, Charles Gordon was lent with several other young officers to the Imperialist cause—the reader must go (and will thank me for sending him) to some of the many historians who have immortalized the struggle.

Nothing remains to be told about that terrible war—except the part that Robert Hart accidentally played in it.

His first meeting with Gordon was planned for October 1863, when Major-General Brown, commanding the troops at Hongkong, came up to Shanghai for the express purpose of seeing the brilliant young commander of what was already known as “The Ever-Victorious Army.” Gordon sent the *Firefly* to take the General and the Inspector-General up the Soochow Creek to Quinsan, where he then was, and on a certain Sunday morning they intended to have started. Fortunately, as it afterwards turned out, Fate interfered at this point.

The English mail arrived suddenly on Saturday night with important despatches; the General sent his A.D.C. to say that he could not possibly leave until they were answered; and so, reluctantly, the visit was postponed—as the two men thought, for a few days, but in reality for much longer. Next morning the A.D.C. hurried round again almost before Hart was out of bed, and this time with the most sensational news—the *Firefly* had been boarded as she lay at her moorings by foreign friends of the rebels, carried up stream, and burnt. Both her European engineers had mysteriously disappeared.

The whole affair, of course, was a plot as deep laid as diabolical, hatched by the rebels for the purpose of getting rid of General Brown, who they feared was about to reinforce Gordon. But for the timely arrival of those pressing despatches it would have succeeded, and he and the I.G. would have been trapped and quietly murdered.

Not till the spring of 1864 did the delayed meeting finally take place. There had been a serious difference of opinion between Gordon and Li Hung Chang—a difference which arose over the taking of Soochow. When the city, thanks to Gordon’s co-operation, was captured, certain of the Taiping princes agreed to surrender. General Ching went to interview them outside one of the city gates, taking Gordon with him. His idea was that if the great General Gordon showed the rebels that he had actually been concerned in the successful operations against them, they would be the more likely to consider further resistance hopeless. Gordon, on the other hand, thought his presence would be

taken by them to mean surety for their safety. It was not an unnatural misunderstanding, seeing that Gordon spoke no Chinese, that neither the rebels nor General Ching understood English, and that there was no interpreter present.

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In the end the rebellious princes surrendered, not from any feeling that Gordon's presence would ensure the sparing of their lives, but because they believed—just as General Ching shrewdly guessed they would—that his presence in Soochow made it useless to continue the struggle. Had they only been wise enough to retire gracefully from the field, all would have been well. But they swaggered into Li's presence. "They appeared"—so an eyewitness described the scene—"rather like leaders in a position to dictate terms than men sharing in an act of clemency." They even had the audacity to suggest that Li should pay their soldiers—their soldiers, who had fought *him*, mind you—and divide the city of Soochow by a great wall, leaving half of it in rebel hands.

Naturally he refused to do either of these things; how could he possibly agree to such quixotic demands? But through his refusal, he found himself face to face with the problem of what to do with the surrendered Wangs. He might keep them prisoners—that would be difficult; or he might summarily behead them—and that would be easy. The latter action must certainly be open to the ugly suspicion of treachery, but he had as his excuse that the city was under martial law, and that prompt and vigorous measures might be the means of saving more bloodshed in the end. Accordingly he ordered the immediate execution of the surrendered chiefs.

When Gordon heard of it he was as angry as only a passionate nature such as his could be. The idea that his unspoken word of honour to helpless prisoners had been broken for him made him mad with fury. Out into the city he went, revolver in hand, to look for Li, and to avenge what he called the "murder." His sense of his own guilt was certainly morbid; morbid too was his treatment of the head of the Na Wang, which he found exposed in an iron lantern on one of the city gates. He brought it home, kept it for days beside him, even laying it on his bed, and kneeling and asking forgiveness beside it. The Na Wang's son he adopted into his bodyguard. No father could have treated his own child more tenderly. I believe not once but a dozen times in an afternoon he would turn to the boy and ask wistfully, "Who are you?" receiving the same soft answer, "I am your son," each time with the same pleasure.

Almost immediately after the decapitation of the Wangs, Gordon, still fuming with rage, suddenly determined to break off all relations with Li, to retire to Quinsan, and to take his "Ever-Victorious Army" with him. Though his friends, singly and in company, did their best to dissuade him from this rash course, and pointed out the consequences, he would not listen, and he went.

The Chinese Government took fright at Gordon's dramatic move—there was no knowing what he might do next—(I wonder if in the back of their minds they had a sneaking fear he might join the rebels like Burgevine?)—and consequently they thought it wisdom to send the I.G. to make peace—since peace was so badly needed.

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Robert Hart, in his new role of military arbitrator, left Shanghai on January 19th by boat, creeping slowly through the canals. The desolation along both banks was pitiful; every village had been burned, every field trampled; not a living thing was in sight—not even a dog—but the creeks were choked with corpses. No man could pass through such a dreary waste unmoved, least of all one who had the slightest power to alter the sad conditions, and Robert Hart met Li at Soochow with his determination to do all in his power to reconcile him with Gordon, and so end the war quickly, greatly strengthened.

Li promptly explained his action by justifying his policy from his own point of view, and finally ended by saying, “Do tell Gordon I never meant to do it; I meant to keep my word as to the Princes’ safe-conduct; but when I saw those fellows come in with their hair long, the very sign of rebellion, and only wearing the white badge of submission in their buttonholes, I thought it such insolence that anger overcame me, and I gave the order for their execution. But it was my doing, not Gordon’s; my safe-conduct, not Gordon’s, that had been violated. Tell him that I am ready to proclaim far and wide that he had nothing to do with it, so that he loses no reputation by it. Can you not make peace with him for me?”

To find Gordon at that time was no easy matter. He was moving about very rapidly. With his wonderful eye for country, he saw at a glance—almost by instinct—a point that ought to be taken in order to command other points, and wasted no time over the taking of it. Thus he was never long in any particular spot, and Robert Hart had a week’s search before he came up with him at Quinsan. Truly that was an exciting week’s journey, I can promise you, dodging up and down canals, expecting every moment to run round a corner into a rebel camp—yet fortunately never doing it—in fact, doing nothing at all more exciting than listening to the cries of startled pheasants.

Gordon greeted the I.G. very cordially and held a parade in his honour, just by way of celebrating his arrival. That march past was unforgettable. Though the soldiers were commonplace enough, plain and businesslike the officers, of whom Gordon had about thirty of all ages, sizes and tastes, usually designed their own uniforms, which were sometimes fantastic, to say the least. On this great occasion you may be sure none had neglected to appear in the fullest of full dress, with highly comical results. Indeed their efforts amused Gordon so much that all the time they were advancing he kept repeating as he rubbed his hands gleefully together, “Go it, ye cripples; go it, ye cripples!”

By contrast, he himself, the commander of them all, appeared so simple in his long blue frock coat—the old uniform of the Engineers—with his trousers tucked roughly into his big boots and a little cane, the only weapon he ever carried—“I am too hot tempered for any other” he would often say laughingly of himself—in his hand. This simplicity, this utter absence of affectation, was the keynote to his character—just as it was the keynote of Robert Hart’s character. Because both possessed it to an unusual degree, each understood the other—and at once.

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[Illustration: SIR ROBERT HART ABOUT 1866.]

Within a week of the I.G.'s arrival Gordon's fit of gloom, brought on by the affair of the Wangs, was dissipating; within two it was gone, for a character of such violent "downs" must have equally mercurial "ups"; within three he capitulated to argument and agreed to go back to Soochow and see Li. Impulsive and generous as ever, he then wished that Hart should say he (Hart) had induced him to come to Li. "That will give you immense influence with the Chinese," he declared. But Hart would not have it so; he preferred to tell Li that Gordon had come of his own free will, knowing that this would please Li personally far more.

The three-cornered meeting passed off well. As little as possible was said about past disagreements, as much as possible about future agreements, and the end of it was that Gordon agreed to take the field again. At the same time the I.G. took care to suggest the removal of an excuse for future misunderstandings in the person of an officious, inefficient interpreter whom Robert Hart himself described as a "'Talkee talkee, me-no-savey,' the sort of person whose attempt at Mandarin [official Chinese] is even viler than his English."

There then remained nothing more to do in Soochow, and Hart and Gordon started back together to Quinsan, though not before they had visited the historic Soochow stockades together, and Gordon, taking his friend over every disputed foot of ground, had vividly described the bloody fighting there—the victory so pleasant to remember, the tragedy so difficult to forget.

I doubt if anything he ever did in China gave Robert Hart greater pleasure than this reconciliation, or if there was any other single episode in his career in which he took more pride; though he spoke of it so seldom and so modestly that scarcely any one—certainly not the public—knew of what he had done. It cost him a few friends among minor officials who thought that negotiations should have passed through their hands rather than his. But his old friend Sir Frederick Bruce, to whom he wrote a report of the whole affair (afterwards included in the Blue Book for 1864), took genuine pleasure in his success, while the Chinese gratitude was unbounded; they realized very clearly what the extremity had been and the difficulty from which they had been rescued.

Three months after the reconciliation (April 28th) Robert Hart went once again to see Gordon and to be present at the taking of Chang-Chow-Fu. This was one of those typical water cities of Central China, walled in of course and with a canal—the Grand Canal in this case—doing duty for a moat. Gordon's headquarters were in boats, and Hart and his little party—one of whom, Colonel Mann Stuart, afterwards helped to keep the line of communications open for Gordon in Khartoum—moored his flotilla alongside. The largest vessel of the fleet was the common dining-room, and owed its excellent ventilation to two holes opposite each other torn out close to the ceiling by a shell while Gordon had been lunching a few days before.

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This taking of Chang-Chow-Fu was to be a sight worth seeing—the culminating point of the whole campaign. Nowhere had the rebels fought with greater obstinacy or gathered in greater numbers. One spy told Gordon that he had forty thousand soldiers against him; another fifty thousand; a third a hundred thousand. It was impossible to get accurate information. He only knew that twice the rebels were strong enough to repulse the Imperialist attacks and that he himself was determined to lead the third—from which there could be no turning back. “You,” said he to Robert Hart, “must arrange with Li that, if I fall, some one is ready to take my place.” Major Edwardes, also a Royal Engineer, was the man chosen; but, after all, his services were not needed.

The great attack was fixed for the 11th of May. On the 10th Gordon determined to find out all he could about the position of the rebels on the city wall, so taking a small party, which included Hart and two of his faithful bodyguard, he went out to reconnoitre. No sooner had the Taipings recognized the Ever-Victorious Leader than they pelted shots at him. The wooden screen behind which he took shelter looked in a very few minutes as if it were suffering from an acute attack of smallpox.

But Gordon, with his usual miraculous luck—in his fighting before more than twenty cities he was only once wounded—escaped scot-free, though one of his bodyguard got a bullet in his chest. With all possible haste the poor fellow was taken back to the doctor’s boat, and the surgeon began poking his fingers into the wound to find the ball. It was not a pleasant operation for the guardsman, and he made some grimaces, much to the amusement of several of his companions, who stood on the bank and jeered at his lack of courage. Those jeers, in addition to the pain, exasperated him greatly, and Hart, whose boat was moored next to the doctor’s overheard the man say to his companions, “Yes, it’s all very well for you to laugh, but if you had a rebel fiend’s bullet in your chest, and a foreign devil’s fingers groping after it, you would make more fuss than I do.”

Very early in the morning of the 11th all was in readiness. The guns from the various batteries around the city began to play. They barked and roared until noon, when Gordon gave the order to “Cease fire.” “You see,” he remarked to Hart by way of explanation, “those beggars inside will be completely thrown off their guard by the silence. They will take it that we have finished work for the day.”

Gordon then snatched a hasty lunch, and at one o’clock the signal was given for the big attack by four soldiers waving red flags on the little hill where Li Hung Chang’s tent stood. From this hill Hart and Li stood together to watch the operations. Three rushes were made simultaneously—two feints, and one led by Gordon himself. How splendidly he called his men on, how he flourished his little cane, just as though it had been a lance with flying pennant! I can imagine how the watchers held their breath with excitement. “They’re in—no, they’re out; no, they’re in,” one said to the other, I’m sure, till at last they *were* in, Gordon himself the very first to dash through the narrow breach,

his too reckless exposure of his own precious life redeemed by the inspiring audacity of his presence.

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The spectacular moment was over, but work still remained to be done. The rebels immediately attempted a turning movement, which if successful, threatened the artillery camp, and Gordon sent post haste to Li with a request for more troops to help him. Li turned to the I.G. in despair. "What can I do?" he said. "All my men are scattered over the city looting by this time. How shall I collect them?" Hart persuaded Li to send messengers and try. Meantime, luckily, the rebels dispersed and the city fell.

They fled wildly in every direction, dropping flags, rifles, and the fans without which no Chinese soldier of the old regime ever went to war, as they ran. From the grey belt of city wall the I.G. looked down on the whole tragic panorama. Fires were burning north, east, south and west. In one street he saw an old woman hobble out of a house supported by her two sons. Just before they could reach shelter a narrow stone bridge over a pond had to be crossed. The old woman limped pitifully to the middle, when a shrill ping rang out. A sharpshooter's bullet struck her; she toppled over into the water, while the men took to their heels and fled back into the smoke of the burning building.

Similar horrors took place in nearly every lane; men were struck down in the attitudes of escape, and the hateful lean dogs that infest Chinese cities crept stealthily out of holes and corners.

As Robert Hart turned away from these sights and descended the ramp of the wall, he noticed a dozen little boys following him, naked urchins with uncombed hair on shoulders. Some of Li Hung Chang's men, seeing them too, rushed up, rolling their sleeves high and flourishing swords. Here, thought they, was an excellent opportunity to gain favour with their master by cutting off some rebel heads and exaggerating the exploit into a severe fight. But the I.G. immediately stepped between, showed his revolver, and threatened to shoot the first man who stirred a step nearer to the boys. "Are you not ashamed to fight with children?" said he, and they slunk off.

At the end of the day, when he returned to the boats, the whole ragged troop was there waiting, their number increased by a little fellow of six or seven years, the son of the Taiping Wang (Prince) of Chang-Chow-Fu, who had been left behind in the confusion and rescued by Gordon from his father's burning palace. He was adopted at once by the party, made much of, petted, and consoled for his fall from high estate by being placed in the seat of honour; and he caused great amusement to the assembled company by the matter-of-fact way in which he accepted his dignity and looked about with serious eyes, as if to say, "This is just what I am accustomed to."

Yet he ill repaid the care that was lavished on him till he grew to manhood. Clothes, food, some education, and finally a position on one of the Customs cruisers, were given to him. He wasted no breath in thanks to his generous captors; but one day, when the wild fighting blood in his veins asserted itself, disappeared. Nor from that day to this has anything been heard of the errant princeling.

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What to do with the other children was a problem. All could not be adopted: so the youngest, a winning little fellow of ten years, who lisped out “Lo Atsai” when asked his name, remained at headquarters, while the rest were sent off to find their friends.

Lo Atsai was promptly handed over to the cook—with no cannibal intent, but simply to be washed. “The energy and enthusiasm that cook put into his task,” the I.G. would remark when telling the story, “made the whole operation most ludicrous. Into the river the child was plunged again and again, our chef holding him stoutly by the hair all the time as he bobbed up and down between the boats and the unsavoury corpses sticking there, till he was considered clean enough to be hauled on board again.”

This little child, son of humble parents, was destined to rise far higher in the world than the prince’s son who sat in the place of honour while Lo Atsai ingratiated himself with the servants in the confined kitchen quarters of the boat. Because of his whole-hearted allegiance, the I.G. sent him to school in Hongkong, where he improved his opportunities so well that the Head Master, reporting on him, could only say, “He is too conscientious; he will kill himself with study.”

He was truly wearing himself out with diligence, when a rich merchant took a fancy to him and gave him a good position; then another gave him a better, so that in a few years he had become a very rich man.

It is nice to add—for the benefit of those who sneer at Chinese gratitude—that at every new year he would travel, no matter how far away he might be, to see his old patron and friend. Nor did he ever grow too grand to go into the kitchen afterwards and gossip with the servants, sitting down in his sable robes and peacock’s feathers without thought of snobbery, without desire to make himself appear great in humble eyes.

Chang-Chow-Fu was the last city Gordon took. Its fall closed his career, and the I.G. arranged most of the details regarding the disbandment of the famous “Ever-Victorious Army.” He did more; once again he smoothed out a difficulty for the too impulsive Gordon. At the close of the rebellion the Chinese showed towards Gordon a warmth of feeling which it has seldom been their habit to show to foreigners. They thereupon begged Sir Frederick Bruce to advise them as to what would be a suitable reward to offer him for his valuable services to the Imperial cause. Finally a gratuity of £3,000 (Tls. 18,000) was decided upon; but when Gordon got wind of this, he was so furious at being treated like what he called “an adventurer,” that he chased the messenger out of the camp.

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Now the Chinese were utterly at a loss to understand a man who grew furious at the offer of a large sum of money, such an occurrence being without precedent. As usual in times of perplexity, they asked the ever-tactful I.G. to sound Gordon as to what he *would* accept. "Tell Wen Hsiang" (then Premier), was Gordon's answer, "that though I have refused the money, I would like a Chinese costume." Accordingly, by Imperial Decree, a costume was sent him, and, on Hart's suggestion, the famous Yellow Jacket was added. Gordon afterwards had his portrait painted in the full regalia, and, like a glorified Chinese Field-Marshal in his quaint garb, he still looks down from over the mantelpiece in the Royal Engineers' mess-room at Chatham.

Once again before his tragic death this strange soldier of destiny was to see China, though on this second visit he did not meet his old friend Robert Hart. He came in the early eighties direct from India, where he had been Private Secretary to the Viceroy. The position never suited his too independent character, and when the Chinese, perplexed over Russian questions, invited him to the Middle Kingdom, he gladly accepted their invitation.

Unfortunately the visit was a failure. His advice was unpractical, and though, as the first prophet of "China for the Chinese," he found a fundamental truth, he found it too soon for immediate utility. On political matters he and the I.G. disagreed; the latter was far too wise to hold with Gordon's somewhat visionary idea that China could raise an army as good as the best in the twinkling of an eye; and when Gordon left Peking after a very short stay, he left disappointed and disgusted.

It was, however, characteristic of him that before he had got farther than Hongkong he wrote an affectionate letter to his old friend, acknowledging himself in the wrong and giving the highest praise to that friend's policy. This, with all the rest of Gordon's letters to the I.G., was burned in the Boxer outbreak of 1900.

But what nothing could destroy was Robert Hart's admiration for the soldier hero. If the apparent inconsistencies of his character were numerous, all of them added force and picturesqueness to it, and only served to increase the affection of one who knew him and understood him most thoroughly.

CHAPTER V

ORDERED TO LIVE IN PEKING—"WHAT A BYSTANDER SAYS"—A RETURN TO EUROPE—MARRIAGE—CHINA ONCE AGAIN—THE BURLINGAME MISSION—FIRST DECORATION—THE "WASA" OF SWEDEN AND NORWAY

When his share in the arrangements for the disbandment of "The Ever-Victorious Army" was completed, the I.G. received a second order directing him to live at Peking. In those days Peking was the very last corner of the world. Eighty miles inland, not even

the sound of a friendly ship's whistle could help an exiled imagination cross the gulf to far-away countries, while railways were, of course, still undreamed of.

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The only two means of reaching the capital were by springless cart over the grey alkali plains, or by boat along the Grand Canal. Both were slow; neither was enjoyable, but since the latter perhaps presented fewer discomforts, Robert Hart chose to spend a week in the monotonous scenery of mudbanks, and land at Tungchow, a little town some fifteen miles from his destination. Thence he made his way over a roughly paved stone causeway—one of those roads that the Chinese proverb says is “good for ten years and bad for ten thousand”—between endless fields of high millet to the biggest gate of Peking itself.

To step through the gate was to step back into the Middle Ages—into the times of Ghenghiz Khan. The street leading from it was nobly planned—broad, generous; but rough and uneven like the hastily made highway from one camp to another. Rough, too, were the vehicles traversing it; the oddly assorted teams, mules, donkeys and Mongolian ponies, went unclipped and ungroomed; the drivers went unwashed. Loathsome beggars sat in the gilded doorways of the fur-shops, the incongruity of their rags against the background of barbaric splendour evidently appealing to none of the passers-by who hurried about their business in a cloud of dust.

At sundown the noise and bustle ceased; the big city gates closed with a clang, and the municipal guard, for all the world like Dogberry and his watch, made their rounds beating wooden clappers, not in the hope of catching, but rather in the hope of frightening malefactors away.

[Illustration: UNDER THE PEKING CITY WALL TOWARDS TUNGCHOW—ALONG THE GRAND CANAL.]

Yet Robert Hart had already seen far queerer places—and lonelier. I am thinking now of Formosa, that strange land of adventure where the veriest good-for-nothings, stranded by chance, have “owned navies and mounted the steps of thrones,” and where he spent some time in 1864 inspecting the Custom Houses.

A most amusing story was told him on his travels there—a story too good to leave unreported, though he personally had no part in it—unless the laugh at the end can be called a part. During one of those terrible storms which periodically sweep the shores of Formosa, an American vessel was wrecked and her crew eaten by the aborigines. The nearest American Consul thereupon journeyed inland to the savage territory in order to make terms with the cannibals for future emergencies. Unfortunately the chiefs refused to listen, and would have nothing to do with the agreement prepared for their signature. The Consul was irritated by their obstinacy; he had a bad temper and a glass eye, and when he lost the first, the second annoyed him. Under great stress of excitement he occasionally slipped the eye out for a moment, rubbed it violently on his coat-sleeve, then as rapidly replaced it—and this he did there in the council hut, utterly forgetful of his audience, and before a soul could say the Formosan equivalent of “Jack Robinson.”

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The chiefs paled, stiffened, shuddered with fright. One with more presence of mind than his fellows called for a pen. "Yes, quick, quick, a pen!"—the word passed from mouth to mouth. No more obstinacy, no more hesitation; all of them clamoured to sign, willing, even eager to yield to any demand that a man gifted with the supernatural power of taking out his eye and replacing it at pleasure, might make.

On his return from Formosa the I.G. wrote a famous paper called "Pang Kwan Lun" ("What a Bystander Says"), full of useful criticisms and suggestions on Chinese affairs. Some were followed, others were not, but he had the satisfaction of hearing from the lips of the Empress-Dowager herself—when she received him in audience in 1902—that she regretted more of his advice had not been taken, subsequent events having proved how sound and useful it all was.

In 1866, having worked twelve years in China—seven of those years for the Chinese Government—Robert Hart felt a very natural desire to see his own country and his own people again. He therefore applied for leave, and was granted six months—none too long a rest after the strenuous work he had done.

Just before starting he said to the Chinese, "You will soon be establishing Legations abroad. Do you not think that my going will be an excellent opportunity for you to send some of your people to see a little of the world?" Yes, they agreed it would be; but—though they never told him so—I think the older conservative generation had grave doubts whether the adventurous ones would return alive. Europe was then a *terra incognita*. There might easily be pirates in the Seine and cannibals in Bond Street, not to mention the hundred mysterious dangers of the great waters and the fire-breathing monsters that traversed them.

Well, in the end, the prejudices melted and the party started, chaperoned by the I.G. Five in all there were, a certain Pin Lao Yeh, an ex-Prefect, his son and three students from the Tung Wen Kwan or College of Languages. Old Pin Lao Yeh, being the senior, wrote a book about his experiences, describing all he saw for the benefit of his timid homekeeping countrymen, and giving careful measurements of everything measurable—the masts of the steamers, the length of the wharves, the height of the Arc de Triomphe, as if in some mysterious way statistics could prove a prop to the faint-hearted. Of the four lads in the "experiment," two afterwards filled high diplomatic posts. A certain Fang I was made Charge d'Affaires in London and later Consul-General in Singapore, while Chang Teh Ming was made Minister Plenipotentiary to the Court of St. James.

The voyage home was uneventful, the little party's first adventure coming at their last port. Here the Customs had to be passed. With some pride, I should like to write, only I am sure it was with his usual modesty—the kind of modesty that made strangers say, the first time they saw him, "Is that all he is?" and after they had spoken with him for ten minutes, "Can he be all that?"—the I.G. presented his letter from the French Legation at

Peking to the Chief Custom House Official Profound bows immediately from this worthy, then grand gestures and the magic words, "Passe en ambassade!"

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Accordingly the “mission” passed—in true Chinese style. The first man by had a dried duck over his shoulder, the next a smoked ham, the third a jar of pickled cabbage, none too savoury, while all the attaches and servants were equally weighted down by pieces of outlandish baggage from which nothing in the world would have induced them to part, since nothing in the world could have replaced them in the markets of the West.

From Marseilles Robert Hart went on to Paris. Though this was his first sight of the Continent, he was too impatient to be home to linger, and he only remained long enough to hand over his charges to the Foreign Minister, who promised they should be treated with the utmost friendliness. They were indeed. Half the courts of Europe entertained them; they dined with Napoleon and Eugenie; had tea with old King William of Prussia at Potsdam, and travelled altogether *en prince*.

Meanwhile the I.G. declined any share in the lionizing, and slipped off to enjoy a quiet holiday in Ireland. The only inconvenience he found in being a private individual was when he passed the Customs in London. What a difference from Marseilles! About sixty passengers crowded into the examining room together, and a slouchy man with a short pipe came forward, eyed them critically, but instead of taking people in turn, spied out Robert Hart and said roughly, “I’ll take you. Anything to declare?” pointing to his pile of trunks.

“Nothing but one box of cigars—Manillas.”

The man scowled just as if he had discovered a gunpowder plot. Finally he asked Hart where he came from.

“Straight from China, from Peking.”

“Oh,” said the Examiner, softening a little, “that’s such a long way I suppose we can let those cigars pass.”

Then he went over to the waiting people, waved his hand and said, “You can go; that’s all.”

Robert Hart was so much amused at being picked out as the likely smuggler of the party that he could scarcely restrain himself from whipping out of his pocket a card with “Inspector-General Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs” on it and presenting it to the man.

He found his father and mother settled at Ravarnet, as proud as happy to see him back again, and he dropped quite naturally into the simple home life, resumed his affectionate intimacy with a clan of sisters just as if it had never been broken off, and took the same delight in simple pleasures that he had taken as a boy. Some of his relatives wondered a little at this.



“Let me look at you,” said they, peering and peeking about him for the solution of the mystery. For mystery there must be when a great man—yes, that’s what he was already—should look just the same on the outside as Tom or Dick or Harry—should even enjoy a simple breakfast of fresh herring and tea.

“I am just like everybody else,” he would answer to their half-quizzical inspection. “No more noses or eyes than you.”

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Alas! this home life, delightful though it was, could not last very long. On August 22nd, 1866, he married that daughter of old Dr. Bredon of Portadown that his aunt had prophesied he would when, at the age of ten days, he lay upon her lap. The honeymoon was spent at the romantic lakes of Killarney, and very soon afterwards the young couple were on their way out to China again.

The house in Peking had been somewhat rearranged and remodelled while the I.G. was in Europe, in anticipation of his wife's coming. Without altering the picturesqueness of the original Chinese design, it had been adapted to Western ideas of comfort. The pretty pavilions with their upturned roofs remained; the ornamental rockwork of the courtyards, the doors shaped like gourds or leaves or full moons, were left untouched. So were the odd-shaped windows, real Jack Frost designs; but instead of paper, glass was fitted into the quaint panes and the stone floors, characteristic of Chinese rooms, covered with wood—a very necessary alteration in a town which, although in the same latitude as Naples, Madrid and Constantinople, has a winter as severe as New York.

Fortunately neither he nor his bride had a very keen taste for society, as in those days Peking could not boast of any. The Diplomatic Corps was small; no concession-hunters or would-be builders of battleships enlivened the capital with their intrigues, and the monotony of life was broken only by an occasional visitor.

Rarely, very rarely, there was a dinner party—a formal affair, to which the I.G.'s wife went in state and, as became her rank, in a big green box of a sedan chair with four bearers. Indeed this was the only possible means of going about comfortably at night in a city of unexpected ditches, ruts like sword-gashes, and lighted only by twinkling lanterns of belated roysterers.

The I.G. was therefore somewhat disconcerted when his chair coolies, having been six months in his service, came to say they could remain no longer. "It is not that we are discontented with our wages," the head man explained, "or that you are not a kind master, or that the *Taitai* [the lady of the house] is an inconsiderate mistress."

"Then you have too much work to do?"

"No, that's the trouble," the man replied, "we have not enough. Our shoulders are getting soft and our leg muscles are getting flabby. Now if the *Taitai* would only go out for twenty miles every day instead of for two miles every ten days as she does now, we would be delighted to remain in your service." Was ever stranger complaint made by servant to master?

Whenever work permitted Robert Hart and his wife rode out into the country on their stocky native ponies, sometimes to one and sometimes to another of the picturesque temples, pagodas and monasteries which then abounded in the hills near by. The favourite picnicking place of the little community—almost the only Imperial property

open in those days—was the ruined palace of Yuen Ming Yuen destroyed by the Allies in 1860. It must have been a most charming spot, at all events in the autumn months, when the persimmon-trees, heavy with balls of golden, fruit, overhung its grey walls.

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The original construction in semi-foreign style from plans by the early Jesuit Fathers was doubtless still easy to trace; an ornate facade brought unexpected memories of Versailles, while on crumbling walls old European coats-of-arms, carved, for the sake of their decorative beauty, beside Oriental dragons and phoenixes, remained to surprise and delight the eye.

Unluckily business too often stood in the way of pleasure, for the 'sixties were very busy years. China was just beginning to realize that she could no longer remain in peaceful self-sufficiency; intercourse with foreign nations she must have, willing or no; that meant drastic changes—changes in which the I.G.'s advice would be valuable. Thus circumstances helped him into a unique position, one without parallel in any other country; he was continually consulted on hundreds of matters not properly connected with Customs administration at all, and he was in fact, if not in name, far more than an Inspector-General.

[Illustration: A PICNIC IN OLD PEKING—TOWARDS YUEN MING YUEN.]

Much of this advisory work, too, was of the most delicate nature: some involved intricate dealings with several Powers having conflicting interests. The slightest false move would often have been sufficient to snap the frail thread of negotiation. It is not to be wondered at if he made some mistakes—he would have been scarcely human otherwise—but as a rule his tact and energy carried to a successful issue whatever he began.

"What is your secret power of settling a difficult matter?" a friend once asked him. "Whenever I deal with other people, and especially with Chinese," was the answer, "I always ask myself two questions: what idea that I do not want them to have will my remark suggest to them, and what answer will my remark allow them to make to me?"

The habit of deliberating before he made a statement grew upon him, as habits will, exaggerated with time, and provided an excuse for at least one *bon mot*. A certain French Professor whom he had brought out with him for the Tung Wen Kwan once went to interview his chief.

"Well," said his colleagues on his return. "What did the I.G. say about such and such a thing?" The Frenchman shook his head ruefully: "He rolled the answer back and forth seven times, and then he did not make it." Probably the I.G. had learned by experience that a person can seldom pick up a hasty speech just where he dropped it.

Another time a very charming lady went up to him at a soiree with a rose in her hand. "May I offer you my boutonniere?" said she, smiling. The mere fact of a question having been asked him suddenly put him instinctively upon his guard; an uncommunicative look spread over his face, and to her horror and his own subsequent amusement, he answered, "I should prefer to consider the matter before answering."

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In 1868 came the affair of the Burlingame Mission, with which—as with all the other events of the time in China—Robert Hart had much to do. Mr. Burlingame was then United States Minister in Peking, a personal friend of the I.G.'s and a most charming man with a genius for hospitality. Nothing pleased him more than to see half a dozen nationalities seated at his table. At one of these little dinners Burlingame noticed that a certain discussion was growing too serious and heated. Some of his guests were on the point of losing their tempers, for Envoys Extraordinary dislike being disagreed with, even by Ministers Plenipotentiary. He therefore picked up his glass of sherry in the most courtly manner in the world, held it to the light, studied it critically from every point of view, turning it now this way, now that.

“Look,” said he suddenly, addressing the table in his most charming manner, “did you ever see sherry exactly like that before? Do you notice its peculiar colour? See how it shines—yellow in one light, reddish brown in another.”

When he had drawn the interest, he went on to give the most delightful little lecture on sherries, their similarities, their differences, and their making, till the whole table listened with rapt attention and, listening, forgot their perilous discussion and the heat and irritation they had spent upon it.

These very qualities of tact and polish, combined with dignity and agreeable manners, made Mr. Burlingame popular with the courtly Chinese officials, and when he was about to return to his own country some of the Wai-Wu-Pu (Foreign Office) Ministers asked him to speak a good word for China in the United States. “Was not that an excellent idea?” they asked the I.G. next day. He agreed, and out of this trivial incident grew the Burlingame Mission to all the courts of Europe. Alas! the idea was visionary rather than practical, and doomed to disappointment—a disappointment which, luckily, Mr. Burlingame himself never felt keenly, since he died at St. Petersburg while his tour was still uncompleted.

At the same time that he was concerned with the Mission, the I.G. was “setting his house in order” with very practical measures. New Regulations for Pilotage, Rules for the Joint Investigation (Chinese and Consular) of Disputed Customs Cases, Rules for Coolie Emigration, each in turn claimed his attention, and it was he also who arranged with the Chinese that one-tenth of the tonnage dues—afterwards raised to seven-tenths—should be devoted to port improvements and lighting the coasts. Until he took the matter in hand, vessels had been obliged to grope around the difficult China coast in total darkness; to-day, thanks to his foresight, lighthouses are dotted from Newchang in the north to Hainan in the south, and a little fleet of three Revenue cruisers serves them.

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A lawsuit called him to Shanghai, when these matters were off his hands, and kept him there for some weeks. He had time to enter into the social life of the place, meet all the people worth meeting, and, what he enjoyed most of all, hear the sermons of a certain Dean Butcher, famous for his wit. The first Sunday the I.G. “sat under” him, the Dean dragged out his discourse so interminably—and quite contrary to his usual custom—that Robert Hart actually took out his watch. Just as he quietly got it back to his pocket again and noticed that he had listened for fifty minutes, the preacher looked up from his manuscript and made Hart start guiltily as he said, “You ask, is the sermon done. No, my brothers, it is not *done*. It is *read*. Be ye doers of the Word, not hearers only.” This bit of effect at the end, so cleverly led up to, accounted for the unnaturally long discourse.

Another time, when Robert Hart was present, Dean Butcher preached from a text in the Psalms, “If I go up to the heights, Thy Presence is beside me, and if I go into the utmost depths. It is there,” etc. He had subdivided the sermon into headings—preached about God in heaven and God upon earth, when he suddenly began to cough a little. “The preacher’s voice fails him,” he said—cough, cough—“fails him, my brethren”—more coughs—“fails him”—still more gentle coughs—“and so we must leave God in hell till next Sunday.”

Some years afterwards, when the I.G. was in Shanghai again, he went to a luncheon at which Dean Butcher was present. Every one was asked to tell a story, and when Robert Hart’s turn came, he told one of a certain clergyman of his acquaintance—the name he mercifully withheld—who had “left God in hell till next Sunday.” The face of Dean Butcher during the telling was a study in sunset colours, but no one except himself and the I.G. remembered the particular preacher who had been so indiscreet.

Before he left Shanghai Robert Hart received the first of his long series of honours. It came with delightful unexpectedness, with no warning of its arrival; simply, one day as he was going to see his lawyer, Mr. (afterwards Sir Nicholas) Hannen, a passing postman handed him a little brown-paper parcel with Swedish stamps on it. As he had neither acquaintance nor official correspondence with Sweden or Norway, he was completely puzzled as to what it might contain. Greatly to his surprise, on opening it he found an order, the “Wasa” of Sweden and Norway, the very first foreign recognition of his international work in China. Coming as it did just at that moment, it was singularly opportune and acceptable, and ever afterwards I know it held a peculiar place in his affections, even when he received a shower of Grand Crosses from every civilized country in the world.

CHAPTER VI

BIRTH OF A SON—THE MARGARY AFFAIR AND THE CHEFOO CONVENTION—A SECOND VISIT TO EUROPE—THE PARIS EXHIBITION OF 1878

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Three important things occurred in Robert Hart's life between the years 1870 and 1879. In 1873 his only son was born; 1875 was marked by the beginning of the famous Margary affair, and in 1878 he went as President of the Chinese Commission to the Paris Exhibition.

A propos of the birth of his son, there was a very strange—almost what a Highlander would call an “uncanny”—sequence of dates in the I.G.'s own life. The year that he himself was born, the 20th of February—his birthday—fell on the 23rd day of the Chinese First Moon. Once more it fell on the 23rd of the First Moon in 1854, the year he came to China, and not again until 1873, when his son first opened his eyes on this best of all possible worlds. A coincidence if you like, but still a very remarkable one all the same.

In 1875 the famous Margary affair, destined to become so complicated later on, first appeared upon the stage of politics in the simplest possible form. There was one hero and one villain, with a crowd of shadowy accomplices looking over his shoulder. To this day it is not certain how many there actually were. We can distinctly follow the unfortunate hero—his name was Margary, his occupation Interpreter at a Consulate—on his journey across Yunnan to Burmah as far as Tengyueh. We know he was cruelly done to death there, but we cannot sift out truth from falsehood in the rumours that he met his death with the connivance—and perhaps even under the orders of—the provincial authorities.

The simple fact of a white man's murder was, of course, bad enough; but when that white man was an official and on a mission, it was a hundred times worse. Negotiations between the British Legation and the Chinese began immediately. On the one side heavy compensation was demanded, on the other it was argued over and delayed. Neither party would move a step forward, and presently the Yunnan outrage got hopelessly mixed with every other disputed question of the day; new demands sprang up beside old ones; both parties, as Michie says, found themselves “entangled in a perfect cat's-cradle of negotiations,” and the Chinese in the privacy of their yamens were beginning to ask themselves gloomily, “Will the English fight unless we make full reparation?”

Would they? There was the rub. But now, the crisis being safely passed, I may tell that they would—that they very nearly did—and that the thing that prevented them was nothing more nor less than the moving of the Customs pew in the British Legation Chapel from the front of the church to the back. So do great events sometimes hang upon trifles.

After the arbitrary moving of his accustomed seat, the I.G. remained away from the Sunday services for more than a year. Then, just when the political atmosphere was most electric, Bishop Russell, an old friend of Ningpo days and a charming and genial Irishman, came to Peking on a visit. He was to preach in the Legation Chapel the next

Sunday, and the I.G. could not resist the temptation of going to hear his old acquaintance.

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Russell was a man of an unconventional and spontaneous type. Because other people did things in a certain way was no reason why he should do the same. Consequently, instead of beginning the service by reading the usual verses, he said, "I would like the congregation to sing a hymn"; and the hymn that he chose was "God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform." It happened to be one of Robert Hart's favourites, but beyond feeling pleasure that this particular hymn should have been chosen, the incident made no great impression on him at the time.

As soon as the service was over, he went to shake hands with the Bishop. Russell, however, was obliged to hurry away to address a Chinese meeting; there was scarcely a moment for talk then. "We must have a chat about old times," said he cordially; "when may I come and see you—on Tuesday?"

[Illustration: WELL NEAR THE CANAL, BRITISH LEGATION, BEFORE 1900.]

"By all means on Tuesday. Don't forget," was the answer, and the I.G. left the chapel with the rest of the congregation.

He noticed as he went out that Sir Thomas Wade had not been in church, which struck him as odd. Surely in a small community like Peking, where a Bishop in the pulpit was a rarity, the British Minister would have made it a point to hear him preach—unless something very unusual had occurred. Hart therefore went at once to call on Wade and see what the news might be. News? There was enough and to spare, all of the most sensational kind. Another deadlock had been reached in the negotiations. Blacker clouds than ever obscured the horizon; war was as near as flesh to bone. Luckily the I.G. saw at once that the new *contretemps* was due rather to accident than design. A misunderstanding of Chinese despatches—which are always open to several translations—had given Wade a wrong impression of the force of their contents, and the I.G. accordingly begged permission to explain the point at issue as he saw it.

Two hours later the Minister came completely round to his view, and the critical moment was safely passed.

On Tuesday at the appointed hour Bishop Russell went to see Robert Hart. They talked long over old Ningpo days, and presently Russell said, "D'ye know, Hart, my converts have grown to have such faith in me that they believe I can not only show them the way to heaven, but arrange matters on this earth as well. What do you think they said, now, before I came up to Peking? They said I was coming to prevent a war with England. And that to me!" added the Bishop, laughing his wholesome laugh, "who, as you know, am the last man in the world to concern myself with politics."

"Well," replied the I.G. solemnly, "you have prevented war with England all the same." And he told the Bishop the whole story. "If you had not come to Peking," he concluded, "I should not have gone to church. If I had not gone to church, I should not have noticed

the Minister's absence, and therefore should not have gone in to see him. Consequently I should never have known of the difficulty which then threatened the negotiations, and might not have been able to help remove it. Truly, Russell,

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‘God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform.’”

Thus, by a romantic episode, the crisis was tided over—for a time. Alas! only for a time. A second set-back, more serious even than the first, interrupted matters again just when they seemed to be going on most smoothly. It occurred on a Saturday night. On Monday morning, without saying a word to Hart—or indeed to any one—Wade started off posthaste to Shanghai to “await orders from his Government.” This bad news greatly upset and alarmed the Yamen. “You must follow him at once,” was the order they sent the I.G., so within twelve hours he too was on his way to Shanghai, determined on making one more effort to avert the war which, like a sword of Damocles, was hanging over China’s head.

He was again successful, in so far as he obtained the British Minister’s consent to reopen negotiations with the Chinese. But where?—that was the question. Should they be held at Shanghai, with the Viceroy from Nanking to assist, or should they be held at Chefoo, with the Viceroy of Chihli (who happened to be the great Li Hung Chang) to help? Wade decided for Chefoo, which, as a cool seaside resort, was especially suited for the broiling months of August and September; and Robert Hart immediately wired to Peking to arrange that Li should come to Chefoo. The Tientsin people protested vigorously against their Viceroy’s going. They even went so far as to throw petitions in hundreds over the walls of his yamen—petitions all reminding him of the fate of Yeh Ming Shen, the Governor-General of Canton in 1858, whom the British seized and sent to Calcutta, where he died.

Yet, in spite of their warnings, Li showed sufficient absence of superstition and sufficient patriotism to go, which was certainly rather noble of him, more especially as his personal inclination was against touching the affair at all. This he told the I.G. frankly when they met, and even upbraided Robert Hart rather sharply for, as he said, “dragging him into the business. If they fail—and there has been no luck about these negotiations before—I shall be blamed, whereas if they succeed, it is most unlikely that I shall get any credit.”

But the I.G. reassured him in answer to his complaints. “There will be no trouble,” said he, “no trouble at all if you work with me. Say nothing, arrange nothing, promise nothing that we do not both agree upon beforehand.” Every evening at ten o’clock, therefore, the I.G. would go to Li’s house, and the two would remain talking, often far into the night, of what had been done during the day and what was to be done on the morrow.

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Unfortunately in some mysterious way the plans and proposals they discussed leaked out, allowing the other side to checkmate their best moves and woefully retard progress. It was really too provoking just as these troublesome negotiations promised to end so well; it meant precious time wasted; it meant unnecessary anxiety and worry. But no matter, history has never been made without trouble to its makers; the I.G. was well prepared for obstacles; he met them with patience, discovered their cause with rare intelligence, remedied them with despatch—and this time the Convention was safely signed. Pens had been poised over it so long that I can imagine he breathed a sigh of relief when the signatures were actually on the document.

A big banquet celebrated the signing—a grand affair given by Li to the personnel of the drama. Most of the Foreign Ministers from Peking were present, they having come down to Chefoo to see what was going on. Two British admirals had put in for the same reason, so the banquet did not lack distinguished guests. The display of uniforms, medals and decorations was dazzling, while the decorations of the hall were as gorgeous as splendour-loving Orientals could devise.

The clever Li toasted the occasion by a happy speech, in which he dwelt on the joy of meeting so many friends together. Most of them he had known (outwitted, too, I daresay) for some time, but now, unhindered by the restraints of public business, he could enjoy their society with a freedom hitherto denied him, and he concluded, “Since at this port of Yentai [Chefoo] beautiful scenery delights the eye and cool breezes give health to the body, it is fitting that our minds should be in harmony with the beauties of nature, cultivating friendship and sincerity as being the noblest traits of human character.” All of which was very pretty sentiment, and if some poetic licence got mixed in with the truth, surely the occasion justified the alliance.

Li certainly had reason to feel pleased with himself and his work. The Convention was excellent—though it might have been still better had Robert Hart had more of his own way. He wished, and the Chinese agreed, to include in it clauses relative to the establishment of a national Chinese Post Office and the opening of mints for uniform coinage throughout the Empire. But it did not suit all parties to allow one man to make too many suggestions, and so his schemes were frustrated.

Still, over and above all petty international jealousies he had scored another diplomatic triumph, and the Chinese were duly grateful to him for his share in the work. That was, after all is said, the secret of his unique position—that confidence of his Chinese employers which he never lost. Probably the real reason he kept it so well was because of his calm and reticent character, because he could never be moved to anger and impatient words. Sir Thomas Wade, on the contrary, was a man of exactly the opposite type, and his *ch'i*, better translated as excitability than anger, often increased his difficulties at a difficult time.

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The I.G.'s association with the great Li Hung Chang by no means ceased after the Margary affair. Business in the succeeding months frequently took him to Tientsin—the nearest port, eighty miles from Peking, and the post of the Chihli Viceroy—and whenever he was there, he had a standing invitation to lunch with Li—an invitation which he very often accepted.

What greatly appealed to him about Li's household was its absolute simplicity. Instead of a wearisome array of courses, never more than two plates were served—fish, and perhaps a dish of chicken, cooked, of course, in the Chinese manner and eaten with big portions of rice. The first was seldom touched. Li would say to his guest, "If you do not want any fish, we will send it in to the *Taitai*" (his wife, who, according to Chinese etiquette, was dining in the next room); and Robert Hart, always the smallest of eaters, would invariably answer "No," leaving the fish to go whole and untouched to Madame Li, much to her husband's delight.

One day afterwards in Peking the I.G. happened to speak with his Chinese writer about Li Hung Chang's household—praising a simplicity so rarely to be found in the yamens of the rich and powerful. There happened to be a long interval before he lunched with the Viceroy again, and when he did, he noticed to his horror that the servants were bringing in an array of dishes suitable for a feast. Shark's fins preceded expensive pickled eggs and followed choice bird's-nest soup. What could the change mean? Simply that his complimentary remark, maimed and contorted beyond recognition by ill-informed or mischievous persons, had travelled to Li's ears, and that he had therefore determined to treat his guest with the greatest possible formality.

"You shall not have the chance to go away again and say that you have been fed like a coolie in my house," said the Viceroy proudly at the end of the banquet.

"Nevertheless, the very simplicity of your hospitality was what I most appreciated," the I.G. replied. "But if you believe that I could have made any such remark, and if you persist in altering the style of my reception, I shall not come to lunch with you again."

As if the cares of treaty making and Customs supervision, coupled with the responsibility of being unofficial adviser to the Wai-Wu-Pu, were not enough for one man, the I.G., at the request of the Chinese, undertook to supervise China's part in the international exhibitions of Europe. First came the Viennese Exhibition in 1873. He set his various commissioners of ports collecting the products of their provinces—silks, porcelains, lacquers and teas. It sounds so simple, but often what may be told in a dozen words may scarcely be done in as many months, and little less than a year of writing and planning and directing can have elapsed before all details were in order, and his four Commissioners of Customs were driving, like the Marquis of Carabbas, in a glass coach through the streets of Vienna. The Chinese spared neither pains nor expense to make a good showing, and gave a gala performance at the Opera in return for Austrian hospitality.

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In 1878 came the Paris Exhibition, and to this he went himself as President of the Chinese Government's Commission. He arrived in Paris just before the Exhibition opened—just in time to be present at the great opening ceremony in fact. This was a very grand affair, but with—for him—a ludicrous climax. Coming away, he and his secretary lost their carriage in the crowd, and had to walk the whole way home, not a cab being obtainable—and this, too, in elaborate and heavy uniforms, and at the risk of being hooted by *gamins*. But by good luck, in those days gold lace and medals were so plentiful that they attracted no embarrassing attention.

[Illustration: SIR ROBERT HART IN 1878.]

Numberless functions, of course, took place in connection with the Exhibition, and scarcely a night passed without some gigantic official reception at which two or three thousand people were present. The Minister of Education, for example, gave a magnificent *soiree* at which the old dances, the stately minuet and the graceful pavane, were danced in splendid and appropriate costumes. Bernhardt, then at the height of her powers, recited one night at the Elysee; so also did Coquelin. But to Robert Hart these “crushes” were often an ordeal. Conventional entertainments never had a great attraction for him; besides, these gatherings were really too big for any one's comfort or pleasure; conversation was nearly impossible, and nobody felt at home.

What he did enjoy was a drive in the beautiful Bois with his children, from whom, for the sake of their education, he had already been separated for several years. Or else he liked to take them to the many excellent concerts then being held. They often went to hear the Norwegian singers who, so the advertisements said, had walked all the way from their northern home in their quaint national costume, and they scarcely missed a Wednesday at the Trocadero, where there were contests of massed bands.

Music, in fact, would draw Robert Hart any day, for he loved it dearly. Other people might talk learnedly about various schools and tone poems; he took all he could get silently and with a thankful heart; and because in far-away Peking he could not count upon others playing for him, he performed the prodigious feat of learning to play both violin and 'cello himself without a teacher, and long after he was a man grown.

Just before the Exhibition closed, all the fine blackwood furniture of the Chinese pavilion was presented to the Marechale MacMahon. The I.G. had to make a speech on this occasion, which he greatly dreaded, having none of that love of getting on his feet that is characteristic of the south of Ireland Irishman; but when he did so his voice, always soft and gentle, with the faintest trace of Irish accent, never wavered for a moment, and every word he said could be heard by all.

Whether it was the speech making or the festivities or the hard work or a combination of all three I cannot say, but Robert Hart suddenly found himself over-tired and threatened with a breakdown of health by the time the Exhibition closed. Sir William Gull, the

famous specialist, whom he consulted, put the case tersely to him: "If you will do work, work will do you."

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There was nothing for it then but six weeks of idleness at Ischl, with long walks in the wonderful clear air, another six weeks at Baden-Baden, and a quiet winter at Brighton. So, much to his regret, he had very little opportunity to see London or enjoy the life and gaiety which would have been such a happy contrast to the solitude of Peking. A few hasty visits—I think the longest lasted scarcely ten days—left him no time at all to meet the many men whose acquaintance would have meant so much to him.

The only thing he did of a semi-political character was to accept an invitation from the Reform Club to address them on the opium question. The men he met there had all their opinions and convictions settled beforehand; they had really invited him, the great authority on China, to agree with them, and no schoolboys who had found that sixpences had been put into their pockets in the night could have been more surprised than they when he did not.

At least, it is not exactly accurate to say that he disagreed; he took a practical view of a question which at that time was regarded with much heat and sentiment. He quoted statistics to them, proved that foreign opium was smoked by only one-third of one per cent of the population of China, and by the calm sanity of his views made much of their agitation seem unnecessary. But they were finally consoled when he agreed with them that even so small a percentage in so large a population meant millions of smokers, and that it would be well to rescue these from so damaging a habit.

This was the last public affair in which he took part before the close of 1878, when, being sufficiently recovered in health, he started back to China, little thinking that he was not destined to see Europe again for thirty years.

CHAPTER VII

YUAN PAO HENG SUGGESTS PROHIBITION OF OPIUM SMOKING IN CHINA—NEW BUILDINGS FOR THE INSPECTORATE—THE FIRST INFORMAL POSTAGE SERVICE—THE FRENCH TREATY OF 1885—OFFERED POST OF BRITISH MINISTER

Curiously enough, almost as soon as Robert Hart was back in Peking (1880) the opium question was brought to his attention again. This time it was by a Chinese official—one Yuan Pao Heng, an uncle of the famous Yuan Shih Kai, whose influence is paramount in the Flowery Land to-day, and who more than any other single man was probably responsible for the Imperial Edict (1906) which ordered the opium traffic to be abolished within ten years.

The uncle was as bitter an enemy of the drug as his nephew, but though his views were sound they were in advance of his time, and the I.G. very properly pointed out to him that the cultivation of the poppy could not be stopped suddenly. However wise

theoretically it might be to do this, practically it would be dangerous. A great source of revenue must not be cut off abruptly, or China might find herself in the position of the man in the old fable, who thoughtlessly mounted the tiger, and then found out too late that he had forfeited the right to dismount when and where he pleased.

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Haste in the Far East is a commodity for which it is easy to pay too high a price—when it is obtainable at all—which, to tell the truth, it generally is not. “Change slowly—if change you must” has ever been the motto of China, and for years the capital itself was an example of the saying. Improvements were not encouraged. There were no more public buildings in 1879 than in 1863. I doubt if a single tumble-down wall had been replaced—the dirt and smells still remained, and the roads were no smoother. Only a few more Legations had established themselves there, and, by clustering together, they formed what might by courtesy be called a Legation Quarter, which lay between the pink wall of the Imperial City—the innermost of the ring of three cities that form Peking—and the frowning, machicolated grey wall of the Tartar town.

The Chinese, partly no doubt with the idea of keeping all the foreigners together and partly for the convenience of business, presently gave the I.G. a piece of land in this quarter, and he accordingly moved down to comparative civilization—as we understand it—from his far-away corner of the suburbs, as soon as the buildings were ready. He had a modest row of low offices, several houses for his staff, each standing, Indian fashion, in its own compound, and, in a large garden, his own dwelling.

This, like the rest, was a bungalow—for the Chinese in those days objected to high buildings lest they should overlook the Palace—and built in the form of a letter H, partly from a sentimental connection with his own initial, and partly to utilise all the sunshine and southerly breeze possible. Two fine drawing-rooms, a billiard- and a dining-room filled the cross-bar of the letter: one of the perpendicular strokes was the west, or guest wing; the other contained his own private offices, a special reception-room, furnished in Chinese style—stiff chairs and rigid tables—for Chinese guests, and his living-rooms. It was characteristic of the man that these were the most unpretentious rooms in the whole house.

Undoubtedly one of the chief reasons which allowed Peking to preserve its mediaeval aspect intact for so many years was the difficulty of communicating with the rest of the world for several months of the year. Its port, Tientsin, was ice-bound from November to March, and the foreign community was therefore completely cut off during the long winter. Neither letters nor papers enlivened *la morte saison* until the I.G. conceived the idea of arranging a service of overland couriers from Chinkiang, a port on the Yangtze, to Peking. The seven hundred miles intervening was covered by mounted men, who took from ten to twelve days for the journey, and they as well as their mounts—the latter of course in relays—were provided on contract by a clever old mafoo (groom) who had the reputation of getting the best ponies for the Tientsin amateur race meetings, and who was in league with all the picturesque Mongol horse-dealers.

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[Illustration: OUTSIDE SIR ROBERT HART'S HOUSE BEFORE 1900.]

On the whole the system worked admirably, though of course there were occasional hitches. Sometimes a messenger was attacked by bandits on the way and had his bags stolen. I know once the I.G. chuckled over such a disaster. It so happened that in the missing bags there was one letter which he had written giving an appointment in the Customs to a certain man. No sooner was it gone than he regretted what he had done, and would have recalled his decision had it been possible. Well, believe it or not, this and one other were the only two letters of that lost pouch ever discovered, and they came into the possession of a French Missionary Bishop and were afterwards returned by him to the I.G.

Now and again, too, an accident happened to the incoming mails even after they reached Peking. Of course they were taken direct to the Inspectorate for sorting, and while headquarters were still in the *Kau Lan Hu Tung* the messenger was more than once thrown on his way down to the Legations—perhaps he met one of those gong-beating processions which would be enough to frighten a hobby-horse—and his mails recklessly distributed by the terrified animal. And sometimes a courier would stumble into a ditch in the rainy season when the road was all river, and narrowly escape being drowned, but these little incidents were only the fortunes of war.

It is not to be wondered at, considering the international work he was doing, that his own country decorated Robert Hart as early as 1879. It is only strange—to me—that they gave him no more than a humble C.M.G. But this was soon changed into a K.C.M.G., and, as it happened, at a most opportune moment—just when an American University conferred an LL.D. upon him. There he was within an ace of being called “Doctor” for the rest of his life, when the knighthood providentially came to save the situation. The K.C.M.G. was followed by a G.C.M.G., and the G.C.M.G. by a baronetcy, both the Liberals and Conservatives giving him honours alternately. The last, the baronetcy, came from Gladstone's Ministry, and with it he received a friendly letter from the Grand Old Man, who always admired him immensely, and said so when a brother of the I.G.'s—at the time in Europe acting as interpreter to Li Hung Chang—was presented at a big dinner to the Premier.

[Illustration: PEKING: A MESSENGER CARRYING MAILS IN THE RAINY SEASON.]

“So you are a Mr. Hart from China,” he remarked. “You should feel very proud of a man who has made his name illustrious for all time.”

France was not long behindhand in adding to his ever-growing list of honours. He had the “Grand Officier” of the coveted “Legion” in 1885 after bringing safely to a conclusion the French Treaty of that year. Undoubtedly this was one of the most picturesque and interesting incidents with which he was ever connected, and perhaps it will not come amiss to give some details of how it came about.

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The trouble began over a disputed boundary—the Tonkin frontier, to be exact. One side, the Chinese, wanted the Red River for the dividing-line, would hear of nothing else, declared loudly that this was the natural division; the other, France, was equally obstinate for the older frontier between the State of Tonkin and China proper, because this meant far more land for her. Meanwhile, in the disputed area, Liu Yung Fuh, a very famous soldier of fortune—somewhat of an Eastern d'Artagnan—roamed to and fro with his band of "Black Flags," threw in his lot with the Chinese, and made harassing raids on the French side of the disputed border-line. Like the picador at a bullfight, he maddened his enemy with dart-pricks, and the Chinese, who, to continue the simile, had the toreador's part to play, reaped the enmity he provoked. The French gave them battle at Pagoda Anchorage, routed them utterly, and seized Formosa. This was the point where the I.G. first came upon the scene. Once again he was to play his old part of peacemaker. With the Nanking Viceroy Tseng Kuo Tseun as collaborator, so to speak, he went to Shanghai to interview the French Charge d'Affaires, M. Patenotre, and see what could be done.

[Illustration: A SECRETARY GOING TO THE INSPECTORATE OFFICES DURING THE RAINY SEASON.]

This Viceroy, by the way, was what we should call a self-made man; that is, he had not risen to office by the usual route, which in China is the way of a scholar. Undistinguished for any particular learning, he had none of those literary degrees which the conservative Chinese of those days prized above every other possession. He was, moreover, quite conscious of his limitations and spoke of them to the I.G. *a propos* of the visit to Shanghai of two men who held the much-coveted position of Literary Chancellors.

"It will not be possible for me to make a success of these negotiations with the French," he exclaimed ruefully, "because whatever I do these two men will find it out and disparage it in every way they can. You see their view-point is that of distinguished scholars, and they despise an unlettered man like me."

"But what would you say," replied the I.G., "if these two learned gentlemen were made your colleagues in the business—if they were ordered to work with you and share the responsibility?"

"Ah, that would be too good to be true," was the Viceroy's answer. Nevertheless it did come true, because the I.G. telegraphed to Peking about it, and shortly afterwards an Imperial Edict appointed them to be associated with Tseng Kuo Tseun. Did ever any one find a more diplomatic method of avoiding jealousies and closing the mouth of criticism.

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In government business even more than in private affairs the great danger always is what the wise old Chicago pork-packer described as “the weak mouths that let slip what they ought to retain.” Indiscreet talk has upset many a politician’s apple-cart—even the legitimate bumps on the road are not such serious obstacles. It almost spoiled the Margary affair, it threatened the French Treaty no less seriously. Again and again the two parties attempted to come to an agreement over the troublesome boundary question; again and again they failed. And why? Simply because the vexatious gossip that is the curse of small communities interfered. And then to add to the existing complications a Customs vessel, the *Fei Hoo*, was seized by the French as she was landing stores for a lighthouse in Formosa. They would not let her go, saying she had landed letters as well as stores. Perhaps she did—no one can say—but contraband mail on board or not, she had important duties to perform. All the lighthouses along that coast depended on her for supplies, could not, in fact, function without her, and all vessels of every nationality in China seas depended on those lights, so her detention was worse than aggravating.

The I.G. explained this to Monsieur Patenotre and urged him to free her. “*Ca, c’est l’affaire de l’amiral,*” was the answer, and the Admiral, when communicated with, refused to do anything. With many regrets Monsieur Patenotre told the I.G. this, adding: “You’d better go to Paris.” He probably little thought that his advice would be taken *au pied de la lettre*, but within an incredibly short time the barren negotiations at Shanghai were abandoned, and the I.G. had telegraphed at length explaining the whole position to his Resident Secretary in London and directing him to go to Paris, see M. Jules Ferry, then Premier and Minister for Foreign Affairs, and try to settle something about the *Fei Hoo* there. M. Ferry received him very cordially, said he would be interested in hearing anything such an authority as Sir Robert Hart might have to say, but, all civilities aside, the matter rested with the Admiralty, and he would be obliged to refer it to them.

Next day the Secretary, a certain Mr. Campbell, went again for his answer and found it unfavourable, for the Admiralty was still in that state of mind which we call firm when it occurs in ourselves, obstinate when it occurs in others. M. Ferry personally was distressed over the refusal. But what could he do beyond asking Mr. Campbell politely if there was any other matter about which he would like to speak? Here was an opportunity the I.G. had luckily foreseen—and prepared to meet. Thanks to his foresight, Mr. Campbell was able to take out of his pocket several long and carefully worded telegrams giving a *resume* of the situation. They suggested a workable compromise; it was adopted, and peace *pourparlers* began once more. The I.G.’s one stipulation on entering upon them

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was that they should be kept absolutely secret. And this time they were. Except Prince Ching and one Tsungli Yamen Minister, nobody knew, nobody even guessed, that anything unusual was even “on the carpet,” as the French say; and in order to deepen the impression that no political anxieties were darkening the horizon, Robert Hart embarked in private theatricals—a thing he had never done before, or since—and played Pillicoddy.

Alas, the path of treaties never did run smooth! When arrangements were just on the point of being concluded the Court suddenly desired to retract some of their promises, thinking too much had been given away. This was a cruel blow to the I.G., who well knew that the French would never agree to the proposed changes and that the painstaking work of weeks would topple over like a house of cards. As for China’s position in case the Treaty fell through, the less said about that the better.

Notwithstanding, the I.G. did speak of it, and forcibly, to Yamen Ministers, who did not listen—not because they would not, but because they dared not for fear of exceeding their powers and bringing Imperial censure on their own heads. What the I.G. must do, said they, was to send a telegram immediately to Paris and say the Treaty could not be signed as it was. He promised to do this—what else could he do?—and went home from the Yamen disheartened, discouraged, and in no mood for work.

[Illustration: STABLES OF SIR ROBERT HART IN THE RAINY SEASON.]

A weaker man would have “gloomed” openly; he did nothing more despairing than stroll into the office of one of his secretaries and have some talk about indifferent matters. None the less it was an unusual thing for him to do, as, whenever they had business together, his secretaries came to him, and he must have been pushed to it by one of those mysterious impulses that sometimes shape men’s destinies. Was it the same strange impulse that sent him over to the bookcase in the corner of the room, that made him pick out, at random, and without thinking what he was doing, a volume of the Chinese classics, and when he opened it carelessly made his eye light on the sentence “*Kung Kwei Yih Kwei*,”—literally, the “work wants another basket”? (The phrase is part of one of Confucius’ sayings.) “If a man wants to build a hill so high,” says the Sage, “he must not refuse it the last basketful of earth.”

Here was a direct answer to the I.G.’s own perplexity. Perhaps one more effort and his work, too, might be successful. At any rate he would keep back the fatal telegram for a day.

Next morning he went to the Yamen again. The first thing the Minister said to him was, “Have you sent that telegram?” And they were all anxiety till they had his reply, which, strange to say, they received with profound sighs of relief, for once again the Court had

changed their minds—had come to see the folly of risking a break in the negotiations—and the Ministers, who feared the I.G. had already taken the step they had insisted on so firmly the day before, were prodigiously relieved to find nothing definite had been done. Then, when he told them the reason, how Confucius had guided China from his grave, they were still more deeply impressed.

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The telegram that the I.G. *did* send that morning to his London agent was “Sign the Treaty. But don’t sign the 1st of April,” he added, for they were then in the last days of March. The sudden relief from anxiety made him want a little joke—but he did not want it in the Treaty. Unfortunately nobody appreciated the sally. His Resident Secretary solemnly wrote on the telegram when he handed it to the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, “Don’t sign on the 1st of April—*parce que c’est un jour nefasfe*—because it is an unlucky day.” Either as a Scotchman he deplored the unseemly frivolity, or he thought the French could not appreciate a *poisson d’Avril*, and so racked his brains for a serious reason to justify the I.G.’s objection.

It so happened that the very day this message went to Paris, Sir Harry Parkes’s funeral took place. After a useful and eventful life he died, as every one knows, at the summit of his ambitions while he was British Minister in Peking. Just as the I.G. was going into the chapel for the service, one of the Legation Secretaries drew him aside to communicate a most important piece of news. A wire had come in only a few minutes before offering “the appointment of Her Britannic Majesty’s Minister Plenipotentiary and Envoy Extraordinary at Peking to Sir Robert Hart.” To say the I.G. was surprised is not to say enough. The offer, coming as it did under such solemn circumstances, made an impression upon him too deep for words. Looking down at the coffin half hidden in flowers, he could not help feeling the vanity of earthly glories. “We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can take nothing out,” said the voice of the preacher. The Envoy Extraordinary and the beggar travel towards the same goal, and one is scarcely more indispensable than the other. Any pride he might have had in the new dignity was most effectively taken out of him, and I think that never in his life did the I.G. feel a deeper humility than on this day when, invited to take the Legation, he stood the one black-coated coated figure amid a blaze of diplomatic uniforms.

[Illustration: THE INSPECTORATE STREET BEFORE 1900.]

In the evening Mr. O’Conor (afterwards Sir Nicholas), the First Secretary of the British Legation, came to dine with him and hear his answer—which was that for the present he could not take up the appointment as British Minister because of those Franco-Chinese negotiations. So well had the secret been kept this time that O’Conor had not the faintest idea anything important was going on; he heard the news with amazement. Might he telegraph it home to his Government? Yes, he might, provided he did not speak of the matter in Peking.

At the same time the I.G. begged that his appointment might not be gazetted just then, for possibly the French would not care to negotiate with a man about to become British Minister, and even if they made no formal objection, the fact could not fail to have considerable influence on Chinese affairs.

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Accordingly the news was temporarily suppressed. But the I.G. afterwards had the personal satisfaction of hearing through a lady of the Court that when O'Connor's telegrams about the whole story were laid before Queen Victoria, she said, "I am very glad that we shall have for our next Minister in China the man who arranged such delicate negotiations as these."

By all the laws of climax the incident should close here; no writer would dream of dragging it out further, but unfortunately in real life there is little respect for climaxes, and that vexatious Treaty coquetted with her suitors once more. Really it was enough to make anybody lose patience altogether. When the ground was clear at the very last moment, how absurd that the Black Flags and the Chinese should win a big victory over the French at Langson and that, in consequence, there should have been an interpellation in the French Senate causing the Jules Ferry Ministry to resign suddenly and leaving the Treaty still unsigned.

The victory affected the Chinese no less seriously; in the twinkling of an eye they were split into two parties. The military side, elated with their success, was all for continuing the war ("Those we have beaten once we shall beat again," said they), and the wiser councils of the civil side only just carried the day, for, flushed as the soldiers were with victory, it was not easy to make them see that their success was but temporary, and the best, in fact the only thing, for China to do was to hurry on with the Treaty.

Then the endless telegraphing began again. The I.G., by the way, had spent Tls. 80,000 (over L10,000) on telegrams, a sum which, had the Treaty failed, would not have been repaid easily. But it was too late to stop now. Once more he wired instructions to his Secretary.

"You must face the jump. Go direct to the President and lay the matter before him." In those days, when he was manoeuvring for a big success, the I.G. sometimes risked much on the turn of a card.

Mr. Campbell went to President Grevy, and later to the Foreign Minister de Freycinet. Things, as they seemed most desperate, took a brighter turn; difficulties melted away, and at last, on the 4th of April, 1885, M. Billot, afterwards Ambassador at Rome, was appointed by the French Government to sign for France, and the Resident Secretary of course signed for the Chinese. Thus the work was really completed by those last basketfuls of earth, and the long months of anxiety and strain brought to a happy conclusion much to everybody's satisfaction.

Later, M. de Freycinet asked the I.G. to continue and arrange the detail Treaty, as the first had been really little more than a Protocol. The second went through without a hitch, and on June 9th Li Hung Chang and M. Patenotre signed it at Tientsin.

Next day the I.G. had a telegram from London from Lord Granville saying that the Gladstone Ministry was about to resign. "If your appointment as British Minister at Peking is to be published before the new Government under Lord Salisbury comes in, it must be gazetted immediately." He was then able to answer. "Yes. Publish whenever you please. The French Treaty was signed yesterday, June 9."

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[Illustration: ENTRANCE TO THE INSPECTORATE OF CUSTOMS BEFORE 1900.]

Sir Robert Hart planned to go into the Legation in August, on the anniversary of his wedding day. Of course you may be sure he had reported the matter to the Chinese and sent in his resignation in good time. But, as they gave him no definite answer, there was nothing for it but to remind them that he had agreed to go—and soon. Downcast faces listened; a most unconsenting silence answered.

“Well, are you willing?” said he at last. “Is Her Majesty the Empress-Dowager agreeable to receiving me as British Minister?”

“Oh, yes,” they replied; “she would rather have you than any one else, because, with your great knowledge of China, it will be very pleasant to do business with you. Besides, you are an old friend of ours.”

“Then is she willing to have me leave the Inspectorate?” continued the I.G., still feeling a subtle sense of their dissatisfaction. They brightened up at this. It was evidently the cue they had been looking for. “That is the point,” said one of the Ministers, plucking up courage. “Her Majesty would much prefer that you stayed with us.”

The upshot of it all was that he stayed; he felt that in the face of the Yamen’s remarks he could not treat such kind and considerate employers as the Chinese otherwise. But one of the quaintest touches in the whole affair was that his strongest private reason for holding back, at first, from the splendid appointment as British Minister was that he did not wish to tie himself for five years longer in China—and yet after all he was to stay twenty-five willingly in the land of his exile.

CHAPTER VIII

AN IMPORTANT MISSION TO HONGKONG AND MACAO—THE BEGINNING OF A PRIVATE BAND—DECORATIONS, CHINESE AND FOREIGN—THE SIKKIM-THIBET CONVENTION—FORMAL ESTABLISHMENT OF THE POST OFFICE—WAR LOANS

Robert Hart therefore went quietly on with his work in the Customs (1885), setting personal ambitions calmly aside, and finding—let us hope—his reward in the satisfaction which the Chinese and the service generally expressed at his sacrifice of the British Government’s tempting offer.

The very year after it was made, an important piece of business, safely, even brilliantly concluded, added greatly to his reputation. This was the settlement of questions relating to the simultaneous collection of duty and likin on opium—two of the burning questions of the day in the south. China had long desired to levy both taxes at one and the same time, but without an arrangement with the Hongkong and Macao Governments this was impossible, as clever smugglers usually contrived to hurry the

drug safely into either British or Portuguese territory before the Chinese authorities could lay their eyes, much less levy their duties, upon it. Moreover, once it had crossed a frontier, redress was impossible.

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To remedy this unfortunate state of affairs, the I.G., together with a certain Taotai, was sent on a mission. Great pourparlers were held with the Hongkong authorities, who finally agreed to the concessions he asked—provided the Macao authorities should do the same. Luckily they did with readiness—even with enthusiasm—as they themselves were anxious for a *quid pro quo* from China.

The Portuguese position in Macao had always been a peculiar one—unofficial is the word which best describes it—for though they had quietly occupied the place since the far-away days of the Mings, the Chinese had tolerated the strangers without recognizing them, only now and then murdering one by way of protest. Here, then, was their chance to obtain official status, and the Governor, a shrewd man, seized it. The matter went through without a hitch; China, in addition to getting her own way on the likin question, was given the right to open her Custom Houses at Kowloon (Hongkong) and Lappa (Macao), while Portugal on her side agreed never to sell or cede Macao to any other Power without China's consent.

A slight passage-at-arms between the I.G. and a certain Chinese official enlivened the proceedings, and threw an amusing sidelight on Oriental methods. This man, when Robert Hart met him in Canton, said with amazing frankness, "I had a spy in Hongkong who repeated to me faithfully all that went on there, all that you did, all that you said; but I had nobody in Macao. So will you please tell me what happened in the latter place?"

When the I.G. refused, saying the business concerned only himself and the Yamen, the fellow was first genuinely amazed, then righteously indignant, finally secretly vindictive. He nursed the grievance for years, and revenged himself at last by memorializing against the I.G.'s famous Land Tax Scheme, which, weathering a storm of bitter criticism, lived to enjoy great praise.

Once this Mission was over, the I.G. travelled no more. Things were so well established by this time that there was no need for him to tour the ports, and increasing work kept him ever closer to his desk in Peking. Never was a man, I think, who lived a quieter or more orderly life, or who had less recreation in his days. He went little into society; when he did, his rare appearances were immensely remarked—much as the passage of a comet might have been—and if he made a visit, it was talked of with pride all through the community. Indeed, the hostess who could say "The I.G. took tea with me to-day," was something of a heroine. He read much and wrote prodigiously, sending out—and receiving too—the mail of a Prime Minister.

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One extravagance, and only one, did he permit himself—I am thinking of his private band. Yet even that he did not deliberately seek. The idea came to him unexpectedly, put into his head by the Commissioner of Customs at Tientsin, who wrote one day that he had among his subordinates the very man for a bandmaster. Pathetic derelict, a bandmaster without a band! Acting upon a sudden inspiration—perhaps with some subtle intuition of the important part the music was to play in the life of the community in after years, and of all the pleasure it was to give—the I.G. sent money from his private purse to buy instruments and music, though until that moment the idea of a band in Peking had seemed infinitely remote if not utterly preposterous.

[Illustration: SIR ROBERT HART'S BAND IN THE EARLY 'NINETIES, BEFORE IT HAD GROWN TO ITS PRESENT SIZE.

Playing on the lawn in front of his house.]

Some dozen promising young Chinese were at once collected and initiated into the complicated mysteries of chords and keys. They learned quickly and well—so well that within a year eight of them were ready to come up to the capital and teach others. A doubtful venture became an assured success. More and more players were added; a promising barber, lured, perhaps, by the playing of his friend's flute, abandoned his trade and set to work on the 'cello; or a shoemaker, forsaking his last, devoted himself to the cornet. The neighbouring tailor laid aside his needle; the carter left his cart, bewitched away from everyday things by the music. It may be the smart uniform had something to do with the popularity of the organization; there is ever a fine line between art and vanity—but why dwell upon an ignoble motive?

Suffice it to say, whether from pure conceit or better things, the little company grew till it reached a score, and, under a Portuguese bandmaster, touched a high level of perfection, playing both on brass and strings with taste and spirit. The Tientsin branch flourished equally well and became ultimately the Viceroy's band, and the mother of bands innumerable all over the metropolitan province of Chihli. But in reputation it never equalled what was known throughout China as the "I.G.'s Own."

[Illustration: SIR ROBERT HART'S CHINESE BAND.]

In spring and autumn his musicians gave an open-air concert in the Inspectorate garden every Wednesday afternoon. Of course, this was the event of the week so far as society was concerned. Peking residents, as well as many distinguished strangers who happened to be passing, came to listen. The scene was invariably animated; ladies walked about under the lilacs, which in April hung over the paths like soft clouds of purple fog, displaying their newest toilettes; diplomats discussed *la situation politique*; missionaries argued points of doctrine; correspondents exchanged bits of news. All nationalities, classes and creeds were represented in this cosmopolitan corner of the world, but the lions and the lambs agreed tacitly to tolerate each other for the sake of

hearing the familiar tunes, warming as good old wine to the hearts of exiles, and for the sake of seeing the mysterious man whose advice, given, as it were, under his breath, shaped the course of events in China.

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He guessed well enough what brought the people, and would sometimes remark laughingly, "They come; I know why they all come. It is just to get a sight of the two curios of Peking, the I.G. and his queer musicians."

Occasionally Chinese guests would mingle with the rest, lending with their silken gowns and silken manners a touch of picturesqueness to the scene. I can well remember seeing the famous Wu Ting Fang, whose alert manner made him a general favourite. He prided himself upon it—and rightly. "How old do you think I am?" he asked his host one day. "Perhaps forty-five," was the reply. "Forty-five! What a guess! Sixty-five would have been nearer—and I mean to live to be two hundred."

He went on to explain carefully how this feat was to be accomplished. The first thing, naturally, was diet. The man who would cheat time should live on nuts like the squirrels (do they contrive to do it, I wonder?). Under no conditions should he touch salt, lest a dangerous precipitate form upon his bones, and he should begin and end each meal with a teaspoonful of olive oil. So much for the physical side: the mental is no less important. "I have hung scrolls in my bedroom," Wu Ting Fang went on to explain, "with these sentences written upon them in English and in Chinese: 'I am young, I am healthy, I am cheerful.' Immediately I enter the room my eye falls upon these precepts. I say to myself, Why, of course I am, and therefore I *am*." Was ever simpler or saner method discovered for warding off old age?

Towards the end of 1889 the Chinese Government, desirous of paying the I.G. a special compliment, chose to confer upon him an honour never before given to any foreigner. Without precedent and without warning, the Emperor issued an Imperial Decree raising him to the Chinese equivalent of the peerage. Henceforth he belonged to the distinguished company of Iron Hatted Dukes—at least not he but his ancestors did, for this was no ordinary father-to-son patent of nobility. The topsy-turvy honour reached backward instead of forward, diminishing one rank with each succeeding generation.

The Chinese reason as follows: "If a man is wise or great or successful, it is because his forbears were studious or temperate or frugal. Therefore, when we give rewards, shall we not give them where they are justly due?" Something might be said for a point of view so diametrically opposed to our own, but the question of ethics has nothing to do with my story.

The strange feature of it is that the very night before the Edict appeared—when the I.G. had not the slightest hint of what was in store for him—he dreamed of his father's father—a thing he had not done for years. Dressed in a snuff-coloured suit, with knee-breeches and shining shoe buckles, he appeared walking down the little street of Portadown leaning heavily upon a blackthorn stick and murmuring sadly, "Nobody cares for me, nobody takes any notice of me." Nobody, indeed?

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[Illustration: SIR ROBERT HART'S STABLES IN 1890.]

The very next evening at a dinner party at the French Legation some one told the I.G. of the new honour, gazetted an hour before, and how an Emperor, with a stroke of his Vermilion Pencil, had deprived the ghost of a grievance.

Equally romantic was a coincidence that happened when the I.G. was made a Baronet in 1893. The question of arms then coming up, he made all possible enquiries concerning those which his family had a right to use. Without doubt the Harts did bear arms in the days of William of Orange, when they were granted to the famous Dutchman Captain van Hardt who so distinguished himself at the Battle of the Boyne. But after his death the family grew poor; the arms fell into disuse and were forgotten so completely that one descendant thought they might have been a hart rampant, while another declared they were a sheaf of burning wheat.

Robert Hart was not the man to grope long in a fog of mystery. He decided the question once and for all by submitting a blazon of his own choice to the College of Heralds, and his design—three fleurs de lis and a four-leaved shamrock—was sanctioned, as it had not been previously applied for.

The search for the original arms was naturally given up then, but by the merest accident they were ultimately found. Some member of the family happening years afterwards to stroll through a very old cemetery in Dublin, curiosity or idleness led him to examine the tombstones. One in particular attracted his attention, perhaps because it was more dilapidated and tumble-down than the rest. He gently scraped the moss from the inscription and found that he had stumbled on the long-forgotten tomb of Captain van Hardt, and underneath the hero's name he found a coat-of-arms, half obliterated yet still recognizable. It showed *three fleurs de lis and a four-leaved shamrock*.

But it must not be imagined that Robert Hart was the man to rest on his laurels or to regard honours as so many flags of truce entitling him to draw out, even for a time, of the battle of work. From 1889 to 1903 he was deeply engaged on that very important business the Sikkim-Thibet Convention. The Thibetans having crossed the border into Sikkim, a State protected by the British, the British in return sent an expedition into Thibet and, since there was trouble about the frontier, refused to go out again. This was a very disagreeable predicament for China. She turned, as usual, to the man who never ceased labouring on her behalf, and, as usual, he rose to the occasion.

Mr. James Hart, the I.G.'s brother, lately returned from delimitating the Tonkin frontier, was sent posthaste to assist the Amban, the Chinese Resident in Thibet. As a result of this wise choice, the preliminary Treaty was put through by 1890, and the Chinese Customs opened stations in Thibet. Three questions relative to trade, however, remained to be settled, and for three long years negotiations over these dragged on at Darjeeling.

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Needless to say it was a slow and often wearisome business, with the interest, to my mind, unfairly divided. On one side, the Thibetan side, there was picturesqueness enough, though not without discomfort too, for many a time the envoys must needs cross mountain-passes so deep in snow that a hundred Thibetans marched ahead treading it down, and not less often they must sleep in the rudest camps and eat the unsavoury cuisine of the country. But on the other, the Peking side, there was nothing but hard and dreary work, since every word that the Chinese Commissioners said was telegraphed back to the I.G., and then carefully discussed with the Yamen.

No sooner was quiet restored in Thibet than anxiety about war with Japan began to agitate the Chinese capital. The air was as full of rumours as a woman of whims. One day, happening to find himself beside Baron Komura, the Japanese Charge d'Affaires in Peking, the I.G. half laughingly remarked, "So you are going to fight China after all? I suppose you will win." "Oh, one never knows," was the Minister's diplomatic reply. Strange to say the general opinion among men less practical and less well-informed than the Inspector-General, was that China would easily win a war against Japan—if it came to war—just as later the unanimous opinion in the Far East was that if Russia fought Japan, Russia must conquer.

But subsequent events proved Robert Hart right. China, after a brief struggle, was severely beaten, and peace came as a relief. Then immediately the question of loans to pay off the indemnity arose. Two small war loans of Tls. 10,000,000 each were floated, it is true, during the actual hostilities, but the first big loan of L16,000,000 was not arranged till so late as 1896.

The I.G. had the matter in hand; but unfortunately, just as he was about to complete it, French and Russian banks offered to lend the sum at a cheaper rate of interest, and so it was given to them. They also agreed to float a second loan for L16,000,000. But at the last moment, either because of some hitch in the minor arrangements, or because the Chinese suddenly thought it might be unwise to put all their eggs in one basket, they turned again to Robert Hart.

Late one night a Yamen messenger came clattering down the silent streets, the sound of his pony's hoof-beats echoing from the compound walls and arousing the whole quarter, there was a prodigious thumping on the big outer gate before a sleeping watchman could be made to roll out of his wadded quilts; but finally, after prolonged consultation, the despatch was taken in to the I.G., the messenger calmed with tea and a *pourboire*, and quiet once more restored. Next morning, early, the I.G.'s cart was at the door—a vehicle, by the way, interesting in itself, since it was chosen by Hung Ki, the man who liberated Sir Harry Parkes—and Robert Hart started for the only shop in Peking, ostensibly to buy toys for his children friends, as it was near Christmas.

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[Illustration: SIR ROBERT HART'S PRIVATE CART.

The wheels have knobs on them to strengthen them, there are no springs. The carter always walks.]

In those days the Legations watched his movements very closely; he wished them to hear that his little expedition was purely a pleasurable one. No doubt they did, for not a soul knew that, when he casually strolled into a bank near by, it was to quietly produce a paper from his pocket and say, as one might say “Good day,”—“I have here a loan agreement for L16,000,000, but I can only give it to you on condition that you sign immediately.”

Half an hour later the necessary signatures were on the document—the whole great matter put through. Looking back upon the success, one marvels at how he contrived it so rapidly that, once the news was out, people caught their breath with astonishment. Instinctively he must have felt it was a psychological moment when a man is required to take responsibility—to presume even on his power, and that in a moment's hesitation all might have been lost.

In 1896 came the formal establishment of the Imperial Chinese Post Office—in itself the work of many a man's lifetime. Money had to be found for the experiment from the Customs funds first, then innumerable rules and regulations framed and experiments tried before it became a practical working institution. The I.G.'s wonderful grasp of detail stood him in good stead then, for a hundred details came daily under his notice, and he was consulted on every possible subject—from a design on a postage stamp to the opening of a new department. To him, indeed, belongs the entire credit for the designing and building of the greatest success of recent years in China—a postal service, grown beyond the most sanguine hopes, which not only pays its own way but is beginning to turn over some revenue—indirectly, of course—to the Imperial Treasury.

[Illustration: THE IMPERIAL CHINESE POST OFFICE ENTRANCE ON A RAINY DAY IN THE 'NINETIES]

Meanwhile the “five years longer” that he had privately set as the term of his life in China when he refused to become British Minister at Peking (1885) were long since passed, and five other years had followed them, yet he had never found it possible to return to his own country. Each spring he debated whether he might safely leave his unfinished plans, which, ranging as they did over a vast number of subjects, could not well be given half completed into other hands, and each spring some new problem claimed his attention. In 1896, however, he faced a harder decision than usual. The road was perhaps unusually open—and yet he knew that, half hidden, there were obstacles waiting to be met.

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At this crisis of indecision he decided to do what he had so often done before—consult the Bible. This had been a habit of his father's before him; in fact, his whole family had asked guidance on every venture they undertook, no matter how humble it might be, and the training of his childhood was not outgrown. He accordingly took the Bible lying on his desk and opened it at random one evening. There, truly enough, was an answer clear and unmistakable in the very first verse his eye lighted upon—Acts xxvii. 31: "Paul said to the centurion and to the soldiers, Except these abide in the ship, ye cannot be saved." It immediately decided him to remain in China, and he suffered no more from perplexity or indecision.

Robert Hart was indeed deeply religious. Unlike so many men who have passed their lives in the East, he never absorbed any Eastern fatalism, nor did the lamp of his faith ever burn dimly because he mixed with men of other and older creeds. The Christian ideal he always considered the highest in the world; but once, when trying to live up to it, he was brought to confusion, though not through any fault of his own.

One day, as he was leaving the gate of a certain mission where he had been to pay a call, a Chinese of the poorer classes, unkempt and dirty, came and threw an arm about his shoulders, saying, "I see you are also coming away from the mission, so we are brothers in Christ. I will accompany you on your way."

The I.G. afterwards confessed that his first feeling was one of irritation at the man's familiarity—which amounted almost to impertinence—and his second, disgust at the grimy hand so near his collar. To summarily shake it off was a natural instinct. But, when he thought a moment, he clearly saw the absurdity of professing a creed of universal brotherhood and then, as soon as some one attempted brotherly familiarity, of repulsing him. Therefore he suffered the man's arm to remain as far as the corner of the big street, where he made a determined effort to get free, saying, "My way lies in this direction," and attempting to slip off before his companion could see which point of the compass "this" was.

But the fellow-Christian was observant and consistent. "Oh, I will come with you," he said, in the tone of one doing a kindness, so the I.G. could do nothing but resign himself to his fate. Baronet and coolie made a triumphal progress down Legation Street, much to the amusement of the sentries on guard, and by the time he reached his own door the former felt a few shamefaced doubts about the advisability of mission methods which inculcated the equality of man irrespective of colour, class, and cleanliness.

1899 saw the Germans take possession of Kiaochow, and the question of establishing a branch of the Chinese Customs there was discussed and settled, China finally obtaining the right to open her own Kiaochow Custom House, with a German staff of her own employees.

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This was the last important international work he undertook before the memorable Siege in 1900. Already the first mutterings of the storm sounded. The first Boxers appeared in Shantung—a little cloud of fanatics scarcely bigger than a man's hand. But soon they were spreading over all the north of China, and even spilling into the metropolitan province of Chihli itself.

[Illustration: A GARDEN PARTY GIVEN BY SIR ROBERT HART TO GOVERNOR TRUPEL (OF KIAOCHOW) AND PARTY.]

CHAPTER IX

THE PROLOGUE TO THE SIEGE—BARRICADES AND SCALING LADDERS—THE SIEGE PROPER—A MESSAGE FROM THE YAMEN AND AN IMPORTANT TELEGRAM—RELIEF AT LAST—NEW QUARTERS—NEGOTIATIONS—THE CONGRESS OF PEKING—AN IMPERIAL AUDIENCE

Some three weeks before the beginning of the Siege proper Peking was in a state of great unrest—how great no one, not even the I.G., could accurately judge. But as each day brought new alarms and constant reports of Boxer misdoings all over the city were confirmed by terrified eye-witnesses, it was thought wise to make some practical preparations for defence. The Legations were luckily provided with guards, whose officers, acting in concert, agreed to hold a square that included the whole quarter and the Customs property as well. Unfortunately the few troops made a pitifully thin line when they were spread over the area to be defended, and the Customs Staff, at the I.G.'s suggestion, organized themselves into a Volunteer corps, kept regular watches day and night, and prepared to assist generally in case of emergency.

Indeed they did even more; with his permission they set to and fortified the Inspectorate compounds, turning his garden into a trampled wilderness. Barricades were built across what was known as Inspectorate Street while the I.G. stood by and refreshed the thirsty workers with beer from his cellar; the big gate was loopholed, the walls strengthened, and clumsy look-out platforms, reminiscent of the Siege of Troy, constructed. From these I can guess he must have watched—and with what feelings!—the progress of the dreadful fires starting over the city; must have seen, down the long straight street, native Christians burning like torches, and must have heard the fiendish shouts of "Kill!" "Kill and burn!" issuing from a thousand hoarse throats.

The situation was terrifying enough in all conscience—yet nothing to what it was to be later when the handful of white men, encumbered with women, children and converts, were to stand against Imperial troops in addition to these savage hordes of Boxers, whose infinite daring, due to a belief in their own invulnerability, was somewhat mitigated by their inferior weapons.

[Illustration: LADY HART.]

From first to last the I.G., though no longer young, showed admirable coolness and courage in the face of the crisis. He sent frequent despatches, full of excellent and sane advice, to the Yamen. Alas! they went unheeded. So did the telegram he got through to Li Hung Chang on June 12th. This was his final effort to save a desperate situation, and the message ran: "You have killed missionaries; that is bad enough. But if you harm the Legations you will violate the most sacred international obligations and create an impossible situation."

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It did no good, unluckily; things had gone so far by this time that they must go still farther with inevitable motion, and whatever Li himself thought of the insane idea of attempting to exterminate foreigners, he could do nothing to stem the tide of mistaken Boxer patriotism.

On the 13th the telegraph wires were cut; and on the 19th an ultimatum arrived from the Yamen giving the foreigners twenty-four hours to leave Peking, and offering to convoy them with Chinese troops as far as Tientsin. The Ministers held meeting after meeting; they were somewhat shaken, but, still trustful, determined to accept the Chinese Government's offer of an escort as far as the sea. Against this proposal, however, the non-diplomatic community threw the whole weight of its disapproval, fortunately—as things turned out—overbearing it, since the Chinese Government, with the best will in the world, was not at that moment in a position to assure the safety of any one. The very best proof of this, if further proof were needed, was the murder of Baron von Ketteler, the German Minister, on the morning of June 20th.

The shock of that news filled the community with horror and consternation. The suddenness of the tragedy, the treachery of it, were appalling. Plainly no protection could be hoped for, and the same afternoon all non-combatants were ordered into the British Legation, as that was the largest compound in Peking, and the one most suitable for a last stand should the worst come to the worst. The I.G., of course, went with the rest. If it cost him anything to calmly walk out of the house he had occupied for years, leaving all behind him—he took a last look around the rooms, I remember, as though to impress their picture on his mind—he gave no sign, just as he showed none of the natural alarm which, with his responsibility for a large staff with wives and children, he must have felt.

[Illustration: By the courtesy of "The Pall Mall Magazine"

SIR ROBERT HART IN HIS PRIVATE OFFICE.]

The history of the Siege proper, like the history of the Taiping Rebellion, has been written a hundred times. Praise and blame have been variously distributed; flaws picked in one another's behaviour by a dozen eye-witnesses, but it is not my purpose to attempt to arbitrate over details which each man naturally sees through his own glasses. Only so far as the I.G. was personally concerned with the events of those two unhappy months need they be touched upon here.

At first the wildest confusion prevailed in the Legation. Misunderstandings about where a final stand should be made, doubts whether it should be made in Peking at all, had delayed very necessary preparations. There was not shelter for all the refugees, and some literally camped under the big *ting-erhs* (open pavilions with roofs but no side walls), their hastily collected household goods lying around them. The Customs, however, fared better than that; they were given a small house, into which they packed

themselves as best they could. The I.G., who refused to accept any special privileges, slept in a tiny back room and cheerfully ate the mule, which was hatefully coarse while it was fat and unutterably tough when it grew lean. Indeed, his marvellous adaptability to difficult conditions was soon the talk of that little company.

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To a man accustomed during a long life to habits regulated by clockwork, the jar must have been especially sharp; yet before his neighbours had fairly begun to wonder how he would take it, he had made for himself a new routine of living, and he might have been observed each day doing the same things at the same hours—smoking his afternoon cigarette as he leaned against a favourite pillar, or walking to and fro along a particular path—thus setting an example of regularity in an irregular and stormy existence.

As every one expected, the Yamen soon attempted to communicate with him. This they did several times, throwing letters over the wall during the night. One enquired quite tenderly after the besieged; another asked him to send a message to London saying all was well with the Legations; a third calmly requested his advice about a ticklish matter of Customs business. This latter he answered in detail—just as if he had been in his own office—and then threw the reply over the wall again. It is interesting to know, by the way, that the “writer” who assisted him with these letters received L20 for his pains—the highest pay ever earned by a literary man in China at one sitting.

But the message which the I.G. afterwards laughingly said was the most important—as far as he personally was concerned—went out of the Legation instead of coming into it. Addressed to no Foreign Office and to no Commander-in-Chief, it contained neither diplomatic nor military secrets. It was a domestic message pure and simple—yet sent neither to relative nor intimate friend. His tailor was, in fact, the man who received it. “Send quickly,” the wire read, “two autumn office suits and later two winter ditto with morning and evening dress, warm cape and four pairs of boots and slippers. I have lost everything but am well. We have still an anxious fortnight to weather.—HART, Peking, 5 August 1900.”

What a startling effect this message from the grave must have had upon people in England, who, having pictured the I.G. boiled in oil, found him quietly ordering clothes for a future which was still uncertain! As it happened his forethought was providential, for the parcel of warm clothing arrived in Peking on the morning of October 26th, when the I.G. waked to find autumn changed to winter in a night, and the ground thickly powdered with snow.

The “anxious fortnight,” he spoke of was, after all, safely weathered. On the night of August 13th, which happened to be fine and clear, the far-away guns of the relief force outside the city sounded so distinctly that all those in the Legation were aroused in a moment. The sleepers sprang to their feet; and the sentries answered the welcome voices of the pom-poms, careless of their own long-saved ammunition. Next day the relieving troops were in the city, and the besieged, in defiance of orders (the Chinese were still firing heavily), were out to meet them beyond the last barricade, and close by the historic water gate. No words could adequately picture the intense excitement of that meeting; emotion touched for a moment the most unemotional, and I may say,

without exaggeration, that there was not a dry eye, blue or black, nor a voice which could give a cheer without a break in it.

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Soon after the I.G. had the dangerous pleasure of reading his own obituary notices, and then, very much alive again, he set to work once more. Not for him was a change of air and scene possible. As he whimsically remarked to some one who urged him to take a rest after the discomforts and trials of the Siege, "I have had my holiday already. Eight weeks of doing nothing,—what more could a man expect?"

The Yamen Secretaries were seeking him out three days after the last shot was fired—while he still remained in the Legation—eagerly enquiring what he thought of the possibility of beginning negotiations with the Powers. How could order be brought out of chaos?

[Illustration: SIR ROBERT HART AND A GROUP OF CUSTOMS PEOPLE.]

As a famous Chinese, Ku Hung Ming, author of the "Papers from a Viceroy's Yamen," afterwards said, "All great men are optimists, and Sir Robert Hart was the greatest optimist we had in 1900." His hopefulness encouraged the officials so much that the heads of the Yamen soon sent word they also wished to consult him: this business, if there was any hope of its success, was too big to be entrusted to deputies. Accordingly he began a search for new offices, since the Legation was no place to receive such men and his own house had been burned down.

Alas for the mournful desolation that met his eyes when he made a melancholy pilgrimage, as it were, to his old quarters! Nothing was left of the house but a few charred walls. Broken tiles lay scattered here and there, and he picked up the head of a pretty little Saxe shepherdess, of all things the most fragile and improbable to survive such a storm. The rest of his belongings had disappeared utterly—all the treasures of a lifetime had been burned or looted—priceless letters from Chinese Gordon and from Gladstone, the wonderful rainbow-silk scrolls for his Chinese patent of nobility, the photographs of all the famous men with whom he had been associated in the past—everything.

He was glad enough to get two rooms behind Kierulff's shop for temporary living quarters. What matter if his hall door was littered with packing-cases, or if his sitting-room windows fronted upon waste ground where a herd of mules scampered? He soon learned to pick his way among the former; the latter, with characteristic caution, always respected his panes, and anyway it was not the time for finicking over trifles.

For an office he hired a tiny little temple nestling under the walls of the Tartar City. It was but a small *pied-a-terre*, yet all he required, for the Customs Archives had been burnt, and the Deputy Inspector General, Sir Robert Bredon, with the Inspectorate Staff, left immediately for Shanghai to begin the difficult task of picking up the threads of Customs work there.

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Meanwhile the *Tajens* (heads of boards) wrote to the I.G. asking for a safe convoy through the foreign lines, and he sent one of his own men to bring them down, since, though poor enough in other things, they were so rich in fears. Five came this first time, but one acted as spokesman to voice the grief of all over what had occurred, and to exonerate the Emperor and the Empress-Dowager of blame. No doubt the two sovereigns *were* innocent of responsibility for what had happened—no one would believe it at the time, however—and *were* captured, as these ministers said, by “officials of another way of thinking, and made to appear as if approving what they disapproved and ordering what they really forbade.”

Their position is not too difficult to understand when one remembers that, Oriental fashion, they were shut up in their palaces, where no breath of impartial advice could possibly reach them, and that they heard only what courtiers with their own fish to fry permitted them to hear.

The real culprits then, according to all accounts, were the officials who deliberately misled the Court. It was characteristic of the I.G., always too big for resentment, that he could find some excuse for them and, though the length of his service entitled him to more consideration than most of those who cried out bitterly for “vengeance,” could write in his book (“These From the Land of Sinim”), “In the heat of the conflict, and under the agonizing strain of anxiety for imperilled loved ones, many hard things have been said and written about the officials who allied themselves with the Boxers. But these men were eminent in their own country for their learning and services, were animated by patriotism, were enraged by foreign dictation, and had the courage of their convictions. We must do them the justice of allowing that they were actuated by high motives and love of country—not that these necessarily mean political ability or highest wisdom,” The truth is—and he realized it thoroughly—that the real deep feeling of the Chinese people has always been to be left alone in peace to pursue the even tenor of their way.

So enlightened a man as the great Minister Wen Hsiang—“one of the most intelligent and broad-minded Chinese I ever knew,” as Sir Robert Hart sometimes said—frankly confessed this when speaking to the I.G. a few years after the inauguration of the Customs. “We would gladly pay you all the increased revenue you have brought us,” were his exact words, “if you foreigners would go back to your own country and leave us in peace as we were before you came.”

Of course neither the wishes of the Chinese nor the question of Imperial responsibility or non-responsibility mattered greatly in 1900. The nations of the world were not in a tolerant mood; they would, as he pointed out, care little for excuses and less for the Chinese anxiety about the Palace, “with its ancestral contents,” or the Imperial Tombs. The only thing which might influence them was the consideration of the welfare of the Chinese people.

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Plans for the future must turn upon this as upon an axle. Moreover, to effect anything some distinguished person of high position and importance must come forward, and the man whom the I.G. named when he was asked for his advice was Prince Ching. He was the one person with whom the Foreign Powers would be most likely to treat, as it was to his influence, rumour said, that the Legations owed the merciful truce during the Siege. Li Hung Chang, it is true, had also been given full powers to negotiate with the Nations, but they looked rather askance at him because of two telegrams he had sent. One stating that the Legations had reached Tientsin in safety was a most unfortunate falsehood and prejudiced the world against him, more's the pity, as he had hitherto been considered able and powerful abroad. The other was a foolish request that no foreign troops should pass Tungchow—a town on the Grand Canal about fifteen miles from the capital. It was quite right and proper that, being appointed, Li should share Prince Ching's labours and not allow everything, criticism included, to be thrown on the latter alone; but the more he was discredited, the more need for Prince Ching to return to Peking—and quickly.

[Illustration: SIR ROBERT HART AND MISS KATE CARL

In the costume given her by the Empress-Dowager of China when Miss Carl painted her portrait for the St. Louis Exhibition.]

At last the officials discovered where he was—he had fled with the Court but stopped *en route*—urged him to come back, and he came. I believe one of the first things he did was to send for the I.G., whom he greeted with great cordiality. “This is China's oldest friend,” he said to the officials standing by, “and I rely on him to help us. Indeed I can remember, as if it was yesterday, when we worked together before on the Franco-Chinese negotiations in 1885.”

The meeting was a memorable and decisive one. As the Chinese themselves knew, and as the I.G. agreed, there were but two ways of solving the difficulty before them. Either it must be fought out—and the fact that China's military strength could not arrest the steps of the foreign troops, and that a fort-night sufficed for them to march victoriously from the sea to Peking, was in itself sufficient to show that nothing could be hoped from the noble idea of “no surrender”—or at all costs some peaceful arrangement must be made.

A note was accordingly drawn up requesting the doyen of the Diplomatic Corps to fix a day to receive the Chinese Plenipotentiaries, who “were ready to begin negotiations and had prepared a proposal for discussion,” which they enclosed. A bold stroke this, and rather a surprise to the diplomats, who marvelled that the Chinese—injuring parties as they were—should have the courage—let us call it so, for there was truly much admirable bravery in it—to take the first step.

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The details of the subsequent negotiations would fill pages. How anxiously Li Hung Chang was waited for; how memorandum after memorandum was drawn up, altered, amended, discarded altogether; how the stricken city was gradually calmed, and traders induced to bring in supplies again; how the poor ladies, wives of four Emperors, who had been left behind in the palace almost starved to death when the international troops guarding the Forbidden City forbade all ingress and egress through the pink gates, until the I.G. saved them, in the nick of time, by applying to the Allied Generals, might be told at length.

But a busy age has little patience with details, however romantic—suffice it to say that negotiations continued by fits and starts. What really complicated them was the absence of the Court! The I.G. frankly wrote as much to the Grand Secretary, Wang Wen Shao, and in so doing he only voiced the general feeling that “at such a time of suffering it would be well for the Emperor to be with his people.” Prince Ching willingly testified that. Though he had been back ten days he had not suffered any personal indignity, and hinted that, were the Emperor to return, he would, of course, meet with even greater consideration. But the Court was obstinate. While the Palace was in the hands of foreign troops they would not come—and so, for the time, the negotiators had to get on as best they could without their Imperial masters.

Only for a time, however. Then what persuasion had been unable to accomplish was brought about by a natural calamity. Famine broke out in the province of Shensi, and the Court suffered greatly in the devastated state of the country and the cramped and uncomfortable quarters of a Governor’s yamen. Soon they were as desirous of returning to their capital as they had formerly been reluctant to do so. “Hurry up the negotiations at all costs” were the orders sent to the Plenipotentiaries, and hurry they did, so that by December a settlement was within sight, the two most difficult questions—those dealing with penalties and indemnities—being the last arranged.

The first named long caused embarrassment to the Chinese side and greatly worried everybody, for there seemed no possible way to compromise about it. The last ultimately resolved itself into the simple problem not whether China would or would not pay, but what she would pay with. Tariff Revision was suggested as one method, the taxation of native opium as another. Speaking of the latter, the I.G. one day remarked to Prince Ching, “I lost all my memoranda about it when the Inspectorate was burned down.” “But you have your wonderful memory,” the Prince replied, “and you must carry it through. I count upon you, remember.”

On Christmas Eve (1900) a great meeting was held at the Spanish Legation—the Spanish Minister was doyen of the Diplomatic Corps at the time. All the Ministers then assembled to meet Prince Ching and Li and to hand over the final demands they had formulated. They were signed in French that same day, and the next telegraphed in Chinese word for word to the Court at Si-an.

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Strange to say the I.G. was not present at the meeting, and therefore reaped none of the kudos for his hard work. It was not for lack of invitation, however. The Chinese certainly urged him to come. Li Hung Chang, for instance, spoke continually of what he had done, and not an official but was sincerely grateful and would gladly have pushed him forward. A vainer man, a lighter character, must have yielded to the temptation to satisfy his vanity, but he had the strength to refuse, saying, "Being a foreigner, my presence would only complicate matters."

The Court, however, did not allow his efforts to go unrewarded. They telegraphed another high if queer-sounding honour from Si-an. Thenceforth he was to be addressed as *Kung-pao*, or Guardian of the Heir-Apparent,—who, by the way, does not exist; not that in China this trifling fact makes his guardians any less important or honourable. The Empress-Dowager herself was well aware that the importance of these Peace Negotiations could not be overestimated. She knew that his promptness in urging the return of Prince Ching probably saved the dynasty—that had Count Waldersee arrived before any Chinese officials had taken action, it is impossible to say what might not have happened; and to further show her Imperial approbation she summoned him to a private audience on her return to Peking and said so.

[Illustration: PEKING PEACE PROTOCOL, 1901.

Left to right (seated) Secretary of Japanese Legation Baron d'Anthouard, Secretary of French Legation Baron (now Count) Komura, Japanese Minister M. Kotel, Minister for the Netherlands Marquis Salvago-Raggi, Minister for Italy M de Giers, Minister for Russia M. de Cologan, Minister for Spain Baron Czikann de Wahlborn. Minister for Austria M. Joostens, Minister for Belgium Baron Momin, Minister for Germany Sir Ernest Satow, Minister for Great Britain Mr. Rockhill, Minister for the United States M. Beau, Minister for France.]

To him she showed her softest side, melted into kindness and consideration, complimented him in her velvet voice, and went so far as to say, when some question of the future came up, "We owe the possibility of a new beginning to the help you have given our faithful Ministers." Last of all she paid him a greater tribute still. When on enquiring where he lived, and being told by Prince Kung on his knees and in deeply apologetic tones, "Since the little accident in 1900, when Sir Robert's house was burned, he has been living behind Kierulff's shop," her eyes filled with tears, and with real regret in her voice she said, "How can we look you in the face?"

CHAPTER X

SOME QUIET YEARS—A CHANGE OF MASTERS—INSOMNIA—A FAREWELL AUDIENCE—AN HONOUR AND ITS ADVERTISEMENT—AH FONG AND OTHERS—DEPARTURE FROM PEKING—"A SMALL, INSIGNIFICANT IRISHMAN"

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With the conclusion of the Peking Congress a new era began in the old capital. One could scarcely expect the effects of the Siege and its terrible aftermath to wear off at once. It was long indeed before the city resumed anything like a normal appearance, before people dared to come creeping back to their ruined shops and houses. Some, alas! found they had nothing to creep back to, not even ruins—for the Legations, determined never to be caught in the same trap a second time, insisted upon reserving a big area for themselves and fortifying it. Unfortunately those who had borne least of the heat of the day received the largest rewards in the newly planned Quarter, and grabbed most greedily and with least justice. Consideration for Chinese sentiments at such a time would have been almost more than human, but revenge carried to the point of making the I.G., because he was an employee of the Chinese Government, suffer for the mistakes of that Government, seems both unnecessary and ungenerous. This, however, was just what happened. His fine garden was ruthlessly chopped to pieces in the rearrangement, and though he did not actually lose ground, the long walk around the house was spoiled and he found a frowning wall five feet from his back windows. Moreover there was nothing he could do to prevent these things—the opinions of critics who accused him of weakness notwithstanding. These critics wanted him to shout his grievances aloud, to make them audible above the din of that noisy time. But what hope had he of being heard? The Chinese officials *could* not listen and his own countrymen *would* not, so where was he to turn?

Nothing remained for it but to build his house on the old foundations—an economical plan—and try to forget about the wall near the back windows. The garden also was set in order. As the Psalmist says, “The wilderness was made to blossom,” for wilderness it was. Judging from appearances, Chinese soldiers must have encamped there. They left their rice-bowls in the path and their fans under the trees. Probably they stayed some days and looted at leisure, then disappeared as suddenly as they had come, after a sharp struggle with a company of Boxers, for two of these patriots in full regalia—red sashes and rusty swords—lay dead in the long grass. Poor patriots, they owed their quiet graves under a barbarian’s lawn to a barbarian’s kindness. I wonder if their ghosts have a sense of humour, and if they ever chuckle a little over the trick Fate played on them when they were helpless?

[Illustration]

Once established again in his new-old quarters, the I.G. went back to his former routine of life. The band-boys, scattered by the Siege, returned, one having become, all of a sudden, a hero.

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It happened during the days immediately following the Relief, when the prostrate city was given up to plunderers. A company of soldiers chose to break into a big dwelling-house, and the Chinese inhabitants scampered—men and women—in wild terror. Then suddenly, in the midst of the confusion, a bugle call rang loud and clear on the air. The European soldiers, recognizing the “Retreat” and fearing a superior force was about to descend on them, stood not on the order of their going, but left at once. Yet it was no superior force after all. A single man by his presence of mind saved the situation—and that man was the I.G.’s best cornet player. Afterwards, I remember, he used to be pointed out to strangers at garden parties, and he had quite a deal of notoriety before he and his gallantry were forgotten in the daily round of commonplace happenings.

Taking into consideration the great shock of 1900, it is wonderful how the I.G. could remain unaltered in all his habits, could be so unmoved by the changes taking place around him. The Chinese officials, for instance—who suddenly became as anxious for Western comforts as they had hitherto detested them—drove over modernized roads in carriages; he clung to his old-fashioned sedan chair. The majority of the besieged bought—or otherwise acquired loot; he never spent a penny on it, and never entered what the looters euphemistically liked to call “deserted houses.”

[Illustration: ANOTHER WINTER VIEW OF SIR ROBERT HART’S GARDEN, PEKING.]

The whole community took advantage of the opening of the Temple of Heaven and the Temple of Agriculture, fine parks free from dust and the noise of the city; he never entered either. Nor at a time when the whole world was discussing the Winter Palace and the Forbidden City, did he consider that the dictates of good breeding permitted him to go where the rightful owners would have refused him entrance. He took his outings as usual either in his own garden or on the city wall, from which he could watch the slow rebuilding of the Legation Quarter, a perfect *salade Russe* of architecture, with German gables, classic Venetian gateways and Flemish turrets jostling one another.

This calm life continued for four peaceful years. Then he was startled again by a bolt from the blue. The Inspectorate of Customs was transferred by Imperial Edict from the Wai-Wu-Pu to the Shui-Wu-Ch’u, a Board specially created to control it.

The real meaning of the change was not easy to fathom, but everybody seized the opportunity to talk at once—all the newspapers and the correspondents and the political experts; to criticize, to prophesy, to predict, to shake their heads—all but one man, the man most concerned. And he said nothing; he listened while the others authoritatively stated what he must think, what he did think, and what he would think later. To tell the truth he thought less of his own position, the prestige of which was undoubtedly affected by a move that turned him from a semi-political agent into a simple departmental head, than he did of the future of his service. Consequently, at a juncture when he had the best excuse for deserting a post which had partially deserted him, he remained to

reassure outsiders as well as employees and to prove that radical as the Edict seemed, its real meaning was not half so disturbing as it appeared.

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[Illustration: TING'RH, OR CHINESE PAVILION, IN SIR ROBERT HART'S GARDEN, PEKING.]

Anxiety could never have driven him away; it took insomnia to make him apply for the leave he so greatly needed. His brain, like Gladstone's, was overtaxed; the problems which he had so long considered gave him no rest, and by night as well as by day his too active mind thought and planned and considered. Rest was therefore imperative, and fortunately his leave was granted. At the same time the Empress-Dowager commanded him to an Audience. It was not the first by any means, as he had for the last few years always gone to the Palace at the Chinese New Year. But as it was typical of the others, a few words of description may not come amiss. He was off early in the morning as usual, surrounded by Palace officials mounted on shaggy ponies who trotted beside his sedan chair while their riders with shrieks and yells cleared a way for the cavalcade. The police guards popped out of their stations to salute him—I can tell you that hour's journey across the city was something in the nature of a triumphal progress, what with traffic airily waved aside and sentries and soldier-police presenting arms! At the Palace gates he alighted, and was met by other officials, bigger and grander, and conducted to the Hall of Audience. A considerable distance still remained to be covered; courtyard after courtyard had to be traversed and an artificial lake crossed in a barge before the Hall itself was reached and—an official having gone ahead and peeped in and announced his presence informally—he was shown into the presence of Their Majesties. Side by side on a little raised platform sat the Emperor and the Empress-Dowager, each with a table before them. He might have noticed that there were flowers on the Empress's table and none on the Emperor's, but that otherwise the room was not particularly large or imposing and very bare—without chairs, without cupboards, without ornamentation of any kind except the beautiful painting on the ceiling and the fine woodcarving on the long doors. But he had a speech to make—absorbing occupation—and as soon as it was over the Empress-Dowager was talking to him quite simply about his travels and asking questions about London. She shyly confessed that since her one and only train journey—from Si-an in 1900—she had conceived a great liking for travel and enjoyed seeing strange sights. Then she wished him a happy voyage and concluded by remarking: “We have chosen to give you some little keepsakes,” using the word meaning a “personal souvenir” rather than a formal and perfunctory “present.” It was a moment of natural excitement, and the I.G., dumb with emotion, received the intimation in unflattering silence. “Thank,” said the Minister who presented him, in agonized tones; and while he stammered out a simple “Thank you,” devoid of any conventional flourishes, the Minister went down on his knees and put his gratitude prettily. The interview was then closed; Emperor and Empress both assumed a Buddha-like impassivity of expression and allowed the I.G. to back just as if they were entirely oblivious of his presence. Such is the Chinese method of differentiating between the friend and the sovereign.

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[Illustration: SIR ROBERT HART AND HIS STAFF (FOREIGN AND CHINESE) PEKING 1902.]

In the waiting-room he told his *faux pas* to the Ministers, either coming from or going into the Audience Hall, and expressed his annoyance that the proper formula for returning thanks had slipped his mind when it did. They laughed heartily over the incident, and for his comfort told him the story of a certain man called Kwei Hsin, who had an even worse experience. Some time in the late 'seventies he returned from an audience pulling his beard, which was long and thin. He seemed visibly annoyed about something.

"What has happened?" enquired his colleagues anxiously.

[Illustration: SIR ROBERT HART WISHING MISS ROOSEVELT "BON VOYAGE" ON HER DEPARTURE FROM PEKING, SEPTEMBER 16, 1906

On the left is admiral Hu Yue Fen]

"Well," said he, "the Emperor (then little more than a child) asked me a question to-day which I could not answer."

"And what was it?" Their minds immediately flew to knotty points at issue. Was it about the finances of the provinces? Could it be a Censor had denounced some one and enquiries were to be made?

"He asked me," said Kwei Hsin slowly, "if I slept with my beard under the quilt or outside it, and for the life of me I could not remember, so I stood there dumb as a fish."

Two or three days after the audience the "souvenirs" were brought to the I.G. by the Palace servants. In addition, they gave him a little surprise of their own. He found them pasting a big red placard on his front gate. It was their way of advertising his newest honour—the Presidency of a Board—and has had the sanction of society in China since the Flood. What if it is a little embarrassing! It would be worse for the newly promoted to tell his friends about his step up in the world himself. By this method he is spared the trouble, and while he theoretically knows nothing about it, the Imperial servants take this delicate means of making the honour known, receiving a substantial tip for their thoughtfulness.

But the I.G., whose modesty was entirely genuine instead of counterfeit, was shocked at seeing himself lauded in three-inch black characters on a flaring red ground, and driven in desperation to explain that while his gratitude was unbounded, he did not want an admiring crowd collected on his threshold. So, much to the disappointment of his servants, who in China feel that their master's glory reflects upon themselves, the announcement was taken down.



Whoever says “No man can be a hero to his own valet” is wrong, for the I.G. was undoubtedly a hero to his whole household—modesty notwithstanding. Most of his servants remained with him for thirty years, and at the end one and all gave him an excellent “character.” “We have found you a very satisfactory master,” said they—which sounds strange to us, but is the Chinese way of doing things. No wonder they said so. He had such a horror of asking too much from those he employed that he was far too lenient with them. His ear was too attentive to their stories, his purse too open to their borrowings. When their relatives died—and in China each man has an army of them, including duplicate mothers and grandmothers—boys, cooks, coolies and bandsmen rushed to “borrow” from him. I cannot remember hearing that one ever came to repay.

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At last this fact struck even the I.G., long-suffering though he was. "Why do you not ask me to give you this amount?" he mildly expostulated to the next man who came pleading for the funeral expenses of his brother's son's wife.

"Oh," replied the fellow, pained and grieved at his master's want of understanding, "I couldn't do that. If I did I should lose 'face'"—that is, prestige and standing in the community. On such a slender thread hangs self-respect in the Far East.

The old butler, a Cantonese with the manner of a courtier, was even more privileged than the rest—and for the best of reasons. He had been with his master for almost half a century. His memory was wonderful, and sometimes on winter nights when he had helped to serve the I.G.'s solitary and frugal dinner, he would presume on his position, linger behind the other servants, and call up again to the I.G.'s mind the night in 1863—just such a bitter night as this, with just such a howling wind—when together they had gone to meet Gordon, and the sampan taking them ashore had capsized, throwing them both into the icy water.

Occasionally then the I.G. would retaliate with reminiscences of Ah Fong making the Grand Tour of Europe with him in 1878—how he kissed his hands to the winning French chambermaids, and called out "Allewalla, Allewalla!" ("Au revoir, au revoir!"), or how he had answered the horrified ladies of Ireland who inquired about his duties,—“Morning time my brush master's clothes, night time my bring he brandy and water.”

[Illustration: FRONT DOOR OF SIR ROBERT HART'S HOUSE, PEKING]

In this age of uninterested or inanimate "helps," a servitor like Ah Fong is about as rare as an archaeopteryx. Devotion and loyalty such as his are fast dying out of the world, but they make a pretty picture when one does find them, and I like to tell how the old servant grieved at the thought of separation from one who represented his whole horizon.

The I.G., too, must have felt some sentiment at leaving the faces to which he was accustomed, the house which had grown dear in almost thirty years of uninterrupted solitude. It is just these associations which are most intangible, which sound most trivial set down in black and white, that often take the strongest hold upon us. Habit, the little old dame, creeps in one day, sits by our fire, amuses us, comforts us, occupies us, and—before we know it—we feel a wrench if we are obliged to move away.

Nevertheless we must all move some time or another. Everybody does—even the I.G., whose going had been so often prophesied and again so often contradicted that he had come to be regarded as the one fixed star twinkling unselfishly in the heaven of duty.

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The morning of his going, I remember, broke fine and clear. The sky was beautifully blue, like an inverted turquoise bowl. The little railway station must have been startled half out of its wits by all the people flocking in. Such a thing in all its history had never happened before. Under the low grey roof trooped guards of honour sent by every nationality—all for the sake of one man who was only a civilian, and nothing but a private individual. There were this man's own nationals in the central position—a company of splendid Highlanders with pipers, and stretching away down the platform there were American marines, Italian sailors, Dutch marines and Japanese soldiers. And, of course, there were Chinese, no less than three detachments of them, looking very well in their new khaki uniforms. Two of the detachments had brought their bands, and the I.G.'s own band had come of its own accord to play "Auld Lang Syne."

[Illustration: FRONT VIEW OF SIR ROBERT HART'S HOUSE.

With his butler, Ah Fong, who served him for almost half a century.]

As the I.G. stepped from his sedan chair at the end of the platform his face wore an expression of bewilderment, but only for a moment. Then he turned to the commanding officer, and saying "I am ready," walked steadily down the lines of saluting troops while the bands all played "Home, Sweet Home." Just as quietly he said good-bye to the host of Chinese officials with whom he had been associated so long; then turned to the Europeans whom he had known so well, to all of whom he had done so many kindnesses, and none of whom could say "bon voyage" dry-eyed, while camera fiends "snapped" him as he shook hands and said last good-byes. At last he stepped on board the train and slowly drew away from the crowd, bowing again and again in his modest way.

So far as his work was concerned he could go without regrets. He left his career behind him with no frayed edges that could tangle. He had fulfilled all his ambitions. He had "bought back Kilmoriarty and got a title too," as he promised his aunt he would while still a boy in his teens. He had collected an almost unprecedented number of honours, been decorated no less than twenty-four times, eight, however, being promotions in the Orders. But still that left him sixteen to wear, and of those sixteen, thirteen were Grand Crosses. As a matter of fact he never wore any of them when he could help it, and never more than one at a time. "I do not want to look like a Christmas tree," he would say in joke. This was his humility again.

He certainly was humble, and he looked so. There was never the slightest pomp or pride about him. "A small, insignificant Irishman," so some one has described him. Is he small? I dare say he is, but one never notices it. One notices only the long face still further lengthened by a beard, the domed forehead, the bright eyes, very inscrutable usually, very sympathetic when he chooses to make them so; and when he speaks, a soft voice, quiet and even-toned but often indistinct. Not given to demonstrativeness, he appears the same under all conditions—silent when depressed, silent too when

cheerful; he may smile, but he will never laugh outright—unless called upon in society to make a special effort to amuse somebody. Then he does it, as he does all he sets out to do, well.

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But usually he allows other people to instruct him, listening patiently and giving so little hint of what he himself thinks that few people know him intimately and the general public stands a little in awe of him. What more natural? His work has been a hard disciplinarian, a relentless grudger of little joys; and, as is well known, those who make history have little time to make friends.

Yet on the whole his success has been cheap as successes go. True he worked prodigiously—how he did work, straight on from his University days!—but none of his labours have been hopelessly dull, while some have been exceptionally interesting, and all have been flavoured with a pinch of romance. Further, he has had the satisfaction of filling his years about twice as full as other people's—of helping more men than most of his neighbours, and of gaining the world's respect and admiration.

How has he done it? Shall I tell you the secret—or what he often laughingly said was the secret? It lies hidden in a verse which he wrote in his fantastic hand on the desk at which he stood for so many years with unremitting industry. First came two dates “1854—1908,” and then these lines:

“If thou hast yesterday thy duty done,
And thereby cleared firm footing for to-day,
Whatever clouds may dark to-morrow's sun,
Thou shalt not miss thy solitary way.”

THE END