COREA'S CAPITAL.

The Wonderful City of Seoul, Which May Be Wiped Out by the Present War.

Something About Chemulpo and Its Many Gunboats—A Comparison of the Japanese and Chinese Troops—The Walls of Seoul and Their Iron-clad Doors—An Encounter With a Gatekeeper—Something About Corean Women—A Mad Palace Servant and Other Matter About the Quaintest People of the Quaintest City on the Face of the Globe.

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I WANT to give you some idea of Seoul, the capital of Corea. It is the center of the war trouble between China and Japan. A battle may be fought in it any day and the King would wipe its thatched huts from the face of the earth. It lies in a basin in the mountains, and it is perhaps the most beautifully located capital on the face of the globe. It is only twenty-six miles from the sea, and it is connected with the port of Chemulpo by a poor wagon road, which climbs up the hills and over the mountains to get to it. The sluggish Han river flows within three miles of it, and it was up this river that I rode in a little steam tug to a landing place not far from the spot on which Min Ok Hum's dead body was cut into six pieces a month or so ago.

But first take a look at Corea's chief seaport.

Chemulpo is the place at which Seoul gets all its provisions. It is now the liveliest little city of Asia. There are something like two-score gunboats in its harbor, and the Japanese have all told twenty-eight gunboats and transports there. The harbor is large and land-locked by islands. The tide has an enormous rise and fall, often as high as thirty feet, and boats which get close to the town are left on the mud when the tide goes out. Chemulpo lies right on the edge of the sea, with great hills rising behind it, and it is on one of these that still stands the house where Admiral Shufeldt met the Corean commissioners in 1882 and made the treaty which opened Corea to the civilized world. Since then Chemulpo has grown to be quite a city, and it looks more like a slice of Japan than Corea. It has twenty-five hundred Japanese and thirty-hundred Corean population. There are less than a thousand Chinese, four Americans, sixteen Germans, and five Englishmen in it. The only American business firm in Corea is located in Chemulpo, and this is, I think, now closed on account of the war. It has been about decided to regard Chemulpo as neutral ground, and this will prevent its being fired upon by either party. Were it otherwise, a single gunboat could shell it out of existence, as its harbor is open and unprotected.

The fighting has been at Ya San, which is about fifty miles south of Chemulpo. It was at this point that the Chinese troops first landed, and 4,500 came here at the request of the king to aid him in putting down the rebellion. They did nothing to help, however, as has been incorrectly stated in the papers. They merely remained at Ya San. In the meantime the Japanese began sending troops to Corea, and by the 1st of July they had 7,500 soldiers in Seoul and six in Chemulpo. This caused the Chinese to send more soldiers, but they landed all their troops at Ya San, being for the time apparently paralyzed by the Japanese invasion. I learn that there is a decided difference between the equipment of the two armies. The Japs have landed their men with the best of everything and have their stores complete in every department. They have no cavalry and about no field guns, including machine and mountain guns. They have full stocks of provisions and are supplied with pontoon bridges, telegraphs and all the materials of modern warfare. On the other hand, the Chinese are said to be calling on the Coreans to supply them with ponies, cattle and rice. Corea is very poor. It is country on the verge of starvation, and the Chinese would not be able to carry on their war long by rations supplied in this way.

The Japanese have demanded of China that she give up all pretense of sovereignty over Corea. If China does this she will lose her reputation throughout the far east and it may lead to the dismemberment of her government. Her provinces are by no means closely tied together, and the fight that she is making may be for her existence as an empire as well as for a show of power in the land of Corea. In the meantime the danger of the other powers being involved in the war is very great. The Baltimore and the Monocacy, are the gunboats, are at Chemulpo. The French man-of-war Incontrant, the German gunboat Iltis, the English warship Archer and the Russian man-of-war Korenetz are also in this same harbor and the other ports of Corea contain warships. The British are very much afraid of the Russians. There is said to be a man-of-war at Port Hamilton, which is, you know, some distance below Vladivostock, in Siberia. It is put there to watch the Russian movements. The Russians are said to sympathize with the Japanese, while England, who sells ten upon ten of millions of dollars' worth of goods every year to China, favors her. If the trans-Siberian railroad was completed there is little doubt but that the Russian troops would already be in Corea. It may be so now, for Russia will not tolerate any coalition between China and England without coming to the assistance of the Japanese.

At any rate, a great part of the war has to be fought on Corean soil, and Seoul will be ground between the upper and the nether millstones. It may be wiped out of existence. If so, the most curious city on the face of the globe will pass away. I visited it six years ago, and my visit of the present year included more than a month of hard work. I have spent days in wandering through its streets. I have been inside of its palaces and have walked through its palaces. I have talked with all classes and have seen all sorts of new things at every turn. There are no guide books of Asia. You will not find accurate descriptions of Seoul in any books of travel. The tourist who comes here, without introductions could not find a lodging place. There are no hotels, and I am indebted to my friends among the missionaries, among the diplomats and with some of the high Coreans for my entertainment through these many days. I despair of giving you an accurate idea of the Corean capital, it is no different from any other city on the face of the globe. It is such a mass of the beautiful and the ugly of civilization and barbarism, of the old and the new, that I don't know how to describe it. Take its situation. It lies in a great basin surrounded by mountains, which in some places are as rugged as the wildest peaks of the Rockies, and which in others have all the beautiful verdure of the Alleghanies or the Catskills. The tops of these mountains sit rest in the clouds and masses of vapor hang in their recesses above the green pines upon which the city is built. They change in their hues with every change of the heavens, and they give Seoul a setting more gorgeous than jewels.

The basin below is just about large enough to contain the town, and a great gray wall from thirty to forty feet high runs along the sides of these hills, bounding the basin and mounting here and there almost to the tops of the lower mountains. It looks one hill at least one thousand feet in height, and this wall incloses the whole city. It was built in nine months by an army of two hundred thousand workmen, about five hundred years ago, and it is as good as solid masonry, consisting of two thick walls of granite packed down in the middle with earth and stones. Its top is so wide that two carriages could easily be driven about it, and it has, on the side facing the country, a crenelated battlement, with holes large enough for its defenders to shoot through with arrows. There are no cannon upon it, and it will be no match for defense against the batteries of the Chinese or the Japs in the present struggle. Its only use in late years has been to keep out the tigers and leopards. This wall is more than six miles in length. It is pierced by eight gates, the arches of which are as beautifully laid and cut as those of any stone work you will find in the United States. Each of these great arches has a curved roof of black tiles. This rests upon carved wooden pillars, which rise above the tops of the walls and which are watch towers for the soldiers. Over the great gates there are two such roofs, one above the other, which are guarded at their corners by massive dragons of porcelain, who seem to be crawling along the edges of the structure. It would not take much more than a gatling gun to batter down the heavy doors by which these gates are closed. These doors are larger than those of any barn in our country. They are sewing up of pieces made by pins fitting into the masonry at the top and the bottom. They are studded with plates of iron riveted on with big bolts, and up until now the common Coreans have believed them a defense against the enemy. They have so much ceremony connected with them as other nations have with their forts, and there are officers in charge of them who would lose their heads if they failed in their duty. Every night just as darkness sets these gates are closed, and they are not opened again until about 4 in the morning.

The signal of their closing and opening is the ringing of a monster bell in the exact center of the city. After this those who are to cannot get out, and those who are outside cannot get in.

The greatest care is taken of the keys to these gates. The locks close with a spring and the keys are kept in the palace of the king at the time they are used at the gates. The locks themselves are guarded all day at the palace and are only brought to the gates a short time before closing the city. It is a task to carry the keys of these locks. Each gate has two of them and they are such as heavy as a ten-year-old boy. It is all that one man can do to carry them from one part of the city to the other, and when I tried to lift one I found my back protested. They are of massive iron. They are made in the shape of a box and are two feet wide and at least a foot thick. They lock with a spring much like that of a padlock, and it takes a hammer to put them together.

When I lifted the lock the gatekeeper with horror warned me to let it alone. He pointed to my neck and drew his finger rapidly around his own in order to let me know that I was in danger of losing my head if I did with it what I intended toward me as though he would seize it from my hand. As he came up I dropped it on the stones. It clattered and I stooped over and tried to raise it again. As I did so I stood in one end and the rod of iron which was partially thrust into the iron box rested on the ground. The Corean gatekeeper's face became ashy. He grabbed the lock from me, and as he did so I could see the rod slipping for his neck. The iron which the lock rested on the ground formed the means of rocking it, and had I pushed down upon it the spring would have caught. He would have been unable to lock the gate that night without going to the palace to get the key and might have lost his head for his carelessness. My interpreter signed me the trouble and he told me that the king would surely punish the man if he knew that the lock had been out of his possession. I then went to the gate and looked at the clumsy fastening into which this lock went. The bar which I have spoken of was as big as an old-fashioned poker and the lock joined chains made of links of wrought iron which were as big around as the biceps of a blacksmith, the rings being as thick as your thumb.

It was just after this that the hour for closing the gates of the city approached. I waited and watched. First two men came from the gate house and sang out in Corean the words that the gates were closing and the time was short. Their voices were as shrill as those of an imam of a Mohammedan mosque when he calls out the hour of prayer from the minarets, and they held on to their final times for the space of twelve seconds by my watch. As they cried there was a grand rush for the gates. Hundreds of men in black hats and white gowns ran ghost-like through the darkness. Bare-headed coolies dragged great bullocks with packs on their backs through the doors, and porters by the scores, loaded down with all sorts of wares, came stumbling along. There were coolies bearing closed boxes, in which were their mistresses. There were officials on horseback and soldiers on foot, all pushing and scrambling to get in before the gates closed. As I watched the big bell pealed out its knell, and the two men grasped the great doors and pulled them together with a bang. It took the strength of both to move each one of them, and the gates locked with a swing. The key, which remains with the king over-night, is not brought back from the palace till the morning. It is a massive bar of iron, and it takes a sledge hammer to drive it into the lock. Similar locks are on the gates in the wall which incloses the palace of the king, and on each of the eight gates of the city.

Inside this great wall, within this setting of mountains, lies the city of Seoul. It is a town larger than Cincinnati, Cleveland, Louisville, Washington, Buffalo, or Detroit. It contains more than three hundred thousand people, and it has scarcely a house that is more than one story high. It is a city of wide streets and narrow, winding alleys. It is a city of thatched huts and tiled one-story buildings. On one side of it are the palaces of the king. They cover an area as large as that of a thousand-acre farm, and they are massive one-story buildings surrounded by great walls and laid out with all the regularity of a city. As you stood on the walls of Seoul and look over this medley of buildings, your first impression is that you are in the midst of a vast hay field, interspersed, here and there, with tiled barns, and the three biggest streets that cut through these myriad haycocks look like a road through the fields. You note the shape of the thatched houses. They are all formed like horseshoes with the heel of the shoe resting on the street. The roofs are tied on with strings, and the thatch has grown old, and under the sun light of the setting sun it assumes the rich color of brown plush, and there is a velvety softness to the whole. As you look closer, you see that the city is divided up into streets, and that these narrow and widen and twist and turn, without regularity or order. The part of the city is made almost entirely of tiled buildings. These are the homes of the swells, and over there not far from the gate above one such building you see on the top of a staff the American flag. That is the establishment of our legation to Corea, and the cozy little components about it are the residences of the missionaries and of the other foreigners who reside in Seoul.

Come down now and take a walk with me through the city. There are no pavements on the streets and you look in vain for gas lamps or the signs of an electric light. The city of three hundred thousand people is entirely without sanitary arrangements. There is not a water closet in it and the sewage flows along in open drains through the streets and you have to be careful of your steps. There are no water works, except the Corean water carrier, who, with a pole across his back, takes up the whole sidewalk as he carries two buckets of water along with him through the streets. The clouds are left to do the sprinkling of the highways, save where here and there a householder has a bucket of water and ladies out the sewer fluid to lay the dust. All the slops of each house run into the ditches along the sidewalk and the smell comes up in solid chunks so thick that it could be almost cut into slices and packed away for use as a patent fertilizer. Mixed with the smell is the smoke. This comes out of chimneys about two feet above the ground, which jut out from the walls of the houses in the form of a stove-pipe into your house at right angles with the face of the porch and you have the average Corean chimney. At certain hours of the morning and evening each of these chimneys vomits forth the smoke of the stuff which the people use for the fires of their cooking and the air becomes hazy. The doors to the houses along the street are more like those of a stable or barn than the entrances to residences. They are very low and in the bottom of each is cut a hole for the dog. Such doors as are open give no insight to the homes of the people, and I was in Seoul for some time before I knew that these doors facing the street were usually the entrances to large compounds or yards in which were very comfortable buildings. I thought that the nobles lived in these thatched huts. They are in reality only the quarters of the servants, and the homes of the better class are certain many rooms and are in some cases almost as well fitted for comfort as those of our own. These houses along the streets have no windows to speak of. There are under the roof little openings about a foot square. These are filled with lattice and bucked with paper. They permit the light to come in, but you cannot see through them. Here and there I noted a little eyeshole of glass as big around as a red cent, pasted into the paper, and as I go through the streets I find now and then a liquid black ball surrounded by the cream-colored buttonhole which forms the eyelids of a Corean maiden looking out.

I am human enough to want to study the women of every country I visit. I found this very hard in Seoul. The girls on the streets wear shawls wrapped around their heads, and only an eye peeps out through the folds. In India and Egypt the women are secluded, but when they go on the streets, if their faces are covered, they think they are modest enough.

The fair girls of Cairo care not that their dresses are open at the neck, if the black veil hangs over their cheeks, and the maidens of Hindoostan trot along with bare legs, while they pull thin white cotton gowns around their eyes, prifing themselves upon their bracelet covered arms and the anklets, which reach half-way to their knees. These Corean girls are mere bundles of clothes. Their feet in their wadded stockings look as fat as those of an elephant, and their skirts and their drawers hang to great bulks. I happened to rub against one as I passed her on the streets of the city. She looked angrily at me out of the tail of her eye, and fled like a deer.

As she ran I noted a gorgeous mandarin in a red dress and a little hat in white straw, which sat on the top of his head, looking at me. He had a fan in his hand, and he gimeered fiercely at me. I asked Gen. Dye, who he was, and he told me he was a servant of the palace, and that he did not know but that he was related to the girl whom I had insulted by touching her. We looked at each other for some time, and he jabbered at Pak in Corean. He was dressed more gorgeously than Solomon in his glory. He looked as though he came out of a handbox. He was, however, only one of a thousand strange characters that you may see any day on the streets of Seoul. There are no stranger people on the face of the globe. A masquerade of the nations could not furnish more strange costumes, and in going through Seoul you rub your eyes and ask yourself if you are awake or dreaming or asleep. The kingdom of Corea is made up of many classes of people, and each has its costume. There are hundreds of officials connected with the palace, each of whom wears a different dress.

The nobles strut about in all sorts of gowns, with their retainers in all sorts of liveries, and you are all the while apparently looking into a great kaleidoscope of almond-eyed humanity which changes in colors and in costumes at every turn of the turret. There are different costumes for all positions in life, and every man wears a dress different kinds of dress during a year. If he goes to a wedding he has his own outfit, and if he goes on his relative's funeral he must put on the garb of the mourner. Death gives more work to the tailors than weddings, and the mourners of Corea wear long yellow gowns with hats as big as umbrellas on their heads. You can tell something about the position of a man by the size of his sleeve, and there is no place where a hat means so much as in Corea. For a long time I hunted my eyes upon what I considered the prettiest little girls at the country. They were dressed in bright gowns. They parted their hair in the middle, and they tied the long braid which hung down their backs with neat little ribbons. Once or twice I smirked and I smiled, but I could get no smiles in return, and I know now that these little girls were no girls at all, but merely young boys, who not being married, have to wear their hair down their backs. After they are married they will put on hats and wrap their hair up on the tops of their heads in a waterfall. All of the men of Corea wear waterfalls or topknots. These are just about as big as the fist of a baby, and they rest on the crown of the head. They wear gorgeous hats, and they are, I believe, the best dressed men in the world. Their customs are as queer as their dress, and they both fit so closely together that I will write of the two in the future.

Frank G. Carpenter

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