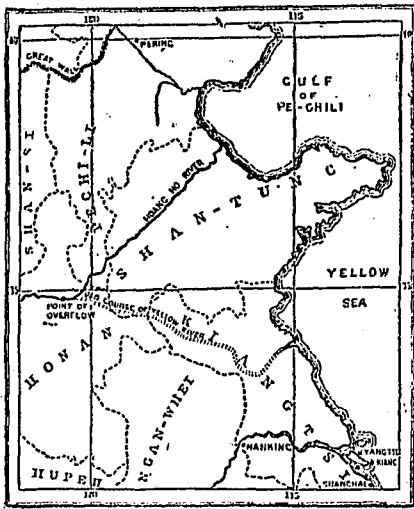


CHINA'S SORROW.

(From article by C. F. Gordon Cumming in Leisure Hour.)

To the majority of our readers the term "River" either suggests a glassy stream flowing calmly on through green meadows or through some great city, or else it recalls more picturesque waters rushing down rocky ravines from their cradle in the mountains; but in either case, the vision



Locality of the great flood.

thus suggested is that of a reliable river, not given to any very serious variation either in its bulk or in its course.

Very different is the conduct of many of the huge rivers of Asia, specially those of India and China, which travel perhaps two or three thousand miles from their source in some remote mountain range ere they finally reach the sea. The greater part of their course lies across vast dead level plains, so totally devoid of rocky boundaries that there is really nothing to prevent the waters from meandering in any direction, obedient to any sudden impulse. Such wayward wanderings are generally due to the enormous accumulation of sediment brought down from the mountains by the thousand torrents born of the melting snows, all combining to form the one great stream. Here and there, without apparent cause, the waters deposit this silt, thus forming great sandbanks and shoals, which, in the course of perhaps only a few weeks, suffice to obstruct the free flow of the river, which accordingly glides off aimlessly to right or left, eventually forming a new channel, probably miles away from the bed which it has hitherto filled.

From the earliest historic days the Chronicles of the Empire record the damage done by the sacred stream of the Hoang-Ho or Yellow River, the propitiatory offerings made to the river god by the Emperor and his people, and the enormous sums of money expended on constructing or repairing gigantic embankments in order to strengthen the bed of the river, and induce it to remain within whichever of its self-chosen channels it happened to be occupying.

The records of the Empire prove that "China's Sorrow" (as this Bohemian water-flood is poetically called) has changed its course nine times within the last 2,500 years. But the legends of prehistoric days tell of far greater changes; namely, of a vast inland sea which covered the whole province of Honan, until the Emperor Yü, who now receives divine honors as the mightiest of engineers, devised means for the construction of such stupendous embankments, that the waters of the Hoang-Ho were therein captured and confined at the remote point where they pour down from the high table-lands of Mongolia, across which they flow from their far-away cradle in the mountains of Thibet.

Thus he drained the vast lake, and obtained a new province, so amazingly fertile that it has ever since been known as "The Garden of China." The whole of that enormous area of upwards of 65,000 square miles, is a level plain of the richest alluvial soil, known as loess. This is a yellow earth, very light and friable, and, supposing the rainfall to be sufficient, its fertility is inexhaustible. It forms an upper bed of from 100 to 300 feet in depth.

But this yellow soil has all been deposited in past ages by the river, which derives its own name from the very large quantity of the same soil with which its waters are always charged, and which it continues to

deposit in such quantities as to be forever raising its own bed higher and higher above the level of the surrounding plain. Consequently it is only by ceaselessly raising the embankments to a corresponding degree, and strengthening them, that the river is artificially kept within bounds. These cyclopean banks of mud, or of basketwork full of small boulders, and faced with brick and stone, extend for hundreds of miles, and at some points they are so high that to reach the summit one has to ascend sixty or seventy granite steps, when one stands on the brink of a swift river, averaging half a mile in width, and looking down on the boundless level plain. Such banks have to be built so as to allow for the river's natural rise of fully twenty feet.

But what can human vigilance avail against the might of such a stream as the Great Yellow River, when, in autumn, it pours down from the mountains with about ten times its winter volume, flowing rapidly for a distance of about two thousand miles, its waters saturated with sand and earth, which it deposits all along its course, raising its bed and forming shallows, till at length the waters either overflow their artificial channel, or else (sometimes aided by weeks of soddening rain) some portion of the bank gives way? Then indeed "the mighty floods are out," and the officials know that their degradation is certain.

Nine distinct channels are known to have been thus occupied by this fickle stream at various periods within the last 2,500 years, channels which in some districts are still marked by wide tracts of dry dust and arid sand.

But the present generation had well-nigh forgotten the erratic tendencies of these unstable waters, when suddenly, in the year 1852, they burst the northern bank near the city of Kaifung, about 250 miles inland, flooding the land, and spreading ruin and desolation as they swept onward in a north-easterly direction, their course being guided by the rocky range which borders the huge promontory dividing the Yellow Sea from the Gulf of Pe-chili. Thus the river was compelled to flow northward till it reached the latter sea, at a distance of fully 500 miles from its old mouth, leaving its former bed a level plain of dust, to the despair of all gardeners, farmers, and traders.

Strange to say, so little did foreigners even then know of anything that occurred—beyond the limits of the treaty ports, that five

years elapsed ere the Europeans living in Shanghai had any inkling of the tremendous catastrophe which had occurred scarcely so far from their homes as Edinburgh is from London! Two years later, though it was then known beyond a doubt that the great river had vanished from its accustomed bed, no foreigners knew what had become of it, nor are we even now in possession of any details of that terrible inundation.

Regular sacrifices to the water-spirits are offered twice a year, but with how little result was sadly proved again last autumn, when, on the 28th September, suddenly at dead of night, the raging river burst its banks right in the heart of the Province of Honan, which, for its fertility, is commonly called "The Garden of China."

The river being then at its fullest, the embanked portion has been compared to a gigantic reservoir, about five hundred miles in length and nearly a mile wide. Its waters, rushing down at headlong speed, bore with unwonted violence against a corner of the southern embankment, where the river bends, near the town of Chang Chou, forty miles to the west of Kaifung, which was the scene of the disaster in 1852. The previous fortnight had been unusually wet and stormy; the banks were sodden with the prolonged rain, and a heavy freshet, driven by a high wind, brought the last strain.

About a hundred yards of the southern embankment gave way; with frantic, but, of course unavailing efforts, the watchmen strove to patch the breach, which rapidly widened to twelve hundred yards. Then with awful resistless rush the escaped torrent poured into the valley of the Lu-chia river, filling it to the brim as a thing of small account; and the appalling deluge forming a mass of water about twenty feet deep in the centre, and about thirty miles wide, swept on over the fertile and well-cultivated Province of Honan, covering about one-sixth of the whole, namely, an area of about ten thousand square miles. In other words, a densely-peopled plain about half the size of Scotland, dotted over with about three thousand large villages and cities, inhabited by millions of the most industrious people on the face of the earth, was suddenly overwhelmed by this awful flood, and transformed into a raging sea.

Imagination can scarcely picture a scene so appalling as this. For two long months

the immense volume of the waters of the Great Yellow River have continued to pour down from the mountains on to the inhabited lands, ever enlarging the boundaries of the re-created great inland sea, which has thus once more reclaimed the lands drained by the deified Emperor Yü. It is said of these wide waters that none have as yet reached the ocean—unless, indeed, it be true that a branch of the great river has betaken itself to the channel of the Hwei, or Little Yellow River, and thus flows to the sea. A later account, however, states that much water is escaping southward through the Grand Canal and the river Yang-tse-kiang.

For the relief of the sufferers the Emperor and Empress-mother head the subscription with 100,000 taels from the privy purse, and 2,000,000 taels (about £500,000) from the Imperial treasury, and command that the whole revenue of Honan be devoted to the task of building banks and dykes for the restraint of the waters. Thirty-two million pounds of rice were stopped on their way to Peking, and sent to the starving sufferers—a good beginning, but it is evident that both private and public charity must do their utmost to meet such great need, and that the strain will be long continued. For when the waters do subside, a considerable part of the land will probably continue to be a malarious swamp, giving birth to wide-spread sickness; fever and ague will assuredly follow as the natural result of miasma and pestilential smells of decaying animal and vegetable matter. Famine too, seems inevitable, for even were the land now dry and ready for sowing, there is literally no seed-corn left, the whole harvest, which had just been safely garnered, being all lost.

The idea at present seems to be, to endeavor to induce the river to return to the channel in which it flowed prior to 1852, and doubtless, by dint of perseverance and energy, the work will be accomplished, and the province will once more be converted into a smiling garden, and for one or two generations all will go fairly well, till the next flood, when the story will be repeated. So long as the system of artificially banking up the raised bed of a river is adhered to, there must always be the same danger. It has been suggested that the only hopeful solution of the difficulty would be to cut a broad and deep canal for three hundred miles to the ocean. Such a channel, once made, might, by continual dredging,

