

The City of Peking.

Archibald R. Colquhoun, for twenty years an acute observer and student of Asiatic conditions, in his recent book, *Overland to China*, gives a very interesting account of Peking, the city that is just now holding the strained and anxious interest of the civilized world.

It lies in the midst of a practically unbroken plain that stretches from the Nankow Pass to the Gulf of Pechili a hundred miles away. A day's journey from the Pass brings the traveler to the city. The one feature of the place which Mr. Colquhoun is able to praise with heartiness is the fine quality of the air at certain seasons of the year—

"in winter dry and sparkling, the very champagne of atmospheric vintages; in spring and autumn a delicious blending of frost and sun. Life is then one continued exhilaration; the floods of light pour a tonic into the blood, the keen air braces the nerves until mere movement is a joy. After the summer heats and steamy downpours, who shall describe the first crisp blow from the north—the whispered message of autumn from the steppes? Or who forget the sweet Æolian melody of the wheezing pigeons; the almost motionless wings of the great brown hawks, poised against the blue; the sparkling frosted hill when snow has fallen and every outline shines in the luminous air; the tinkle of distant camel bells; or, indeed, any of the hundred nothings that make up the unique and indescribable Peking atmosphere?"

The walls that surround the city seem to spring out of the very sands. They are built of earth faced with bricks, and have an inward slope. They are so broad even at the top that three chariots might race abreast on them. Bushes and even trees grow along the sides, thrusting their roots into interstices, and drawing their nourishment from the earth below the brick facings. Each wall is three miles in length, and is broken by two gates a mile from each corner, the south wall having also a gate in the centre, corresponding to the main gate of the imperial palace within. Each of these eight gates opens on a great thoroughfare that stretches clear across the city to the opposite gate, thus dividing the city into nine squares. "Roughly parallel with these main arteries run roads of lesser dimensions, the intervals being filled up by houses, rubbish spaces and an infinity of tortuous lanes and alleys."

The buildings are nearly all of one story, no other kind being permitted. The only exceptions are the temples, the pagodas, the French Catholic Cathedral, which lifts up the solitary spire to be seen in the city, resented too by the citizens, and the imperial palace. This last, called the "Forbidden City," rises from the centre of the metropolis, "enclosed in high walls of faded vermillion, and appearing from the city wall to consist mainly of a line of glittering yellow-tiled pavilions, extending to just within the gate before alluded to,"—the one that pierces the centre of the south wall. It is appalling to think of the iniquity that has been plotted within the precincts of this "Forbidden City," of the anti-foreign passions aroused from there, perhaps exceeding the expectations of those who kindled them, a terror to the palace as well as to the legations. When the veil is lifted that now hides Peking from us, there may be strange as well as tragic revelations.

The four main thoroughfares that run straight through the city are about fifty yards in width, with a loose earth embankment in the centre, wide enough for wheeled traffic going in opposite directions to pass. As there is scarcely a tree growing in the streets, so there are no pavements. Only a hollow separates the embankment in the centre of

the streets from the houses. The only illumination the city enjoys is for a few moments in each month when the "General of the Nine Gates" makes his round. On these occasions along the edge of the embanked roadway mutton-fat dips, in lantern cages surmounting wooden stands about four feet high, giving out a sputtering and sickly light. With this momentary exception the city is shrouded in darkness at night. The difficulty of locomotion under such a state of things can be imagined, particularly in view of the condition of the streets.

Their filth is indescribable. The hollow that separates the embanked roadway from the houses, and which is made to answer the purposes of our pavements is "a waste of refuse, stagnant water and filth, through which runs the remains of an open stone drain. Foot-passengers pick their way along the shop fronts by an uneven track beaten in the mud or dust, as the case may be. During the summer rains these thoroughfares become sloughs of unimaginable despond. Men and mules have been drowned in the cesspools which form between the houses and the embankment, and even the streets in which the foreign legations are situated are not much better. Outside the Netherlands legation a few years ago a pond of this sort was appropriately named the Zuyder Zee. A Russian *Charge* has been known to ride out to dine 'pick-a-back' on a Cossack of the escort. When cesspools, foot paths and boundary stones are thus submerged, only an *habitué* who remembers the bearings of every stone and every hole could make the journey to the club without risk."

The diplomats all reside in "Legation Street," like the thoroughfares just described, an unpaved slum, and we can well believe it is a curious sight to see an occasional European or American groping his way "between the ruts and puddles with the donkeys and camels." In view of the present tragic uprising against the foreigners, Mr. Colquhoun's account of the prior deep hostility manifested towards the members of the legations is significant:

"It is, one feels, only the ever-present fear of bodily chastisement that restrains the populace to an attitude of sullen dislike, or at very best of polite indifference, their true sentiments, however, being voiced by the rowdies who, from safe distance, shout constant abuse—obscenity of which the mildest specimen, and one incessantly heard, is not repeatable here."

The relations between the diplomats and the court circles are thus described by Miss Scidmore in her volume on *China: The Long-dreamed Empire*:

There have been no social relations between the diplomatic corps and the court circle, no meeting or mingling save for the formal presentation of credentials, the dreary New Year's audiences in the palace inclosure, the ladies' audience of 1898, and the formal exchange of visits with the members of the board of the Tsungli Yamen, and, in general, none know less of Chinese character and life than those officially acquainted with the Emperor of China. No Chinese official dares maintain intimate social relations with the legations, even those who have appreciated and keenly enjoyed the social life and official hospitalities of London, Paris, Tokyo, and Washington relapsing into strange conservatism and churlishness, the usual contemptuous attitude of the Manchu official—when they return to Peking. Even then they are denounced to the throne for "intimacy with foreigners," black-balled and cold-shouldered at their clubs, and persecuted into retirement by jealous ones, who consider

association with foreigners a sign of disloyalty. Even the needy literati, who teach Chinese at the different legations, would scorn to recognize their foreign pupils on the street or in the presence of any other Chinese and the contempt of *grandses* and pretty button-folk as they pass one on the streets of Peking is something to remember in one's hours of pride.

In what Miss Scidmore calls the "formal exchange of visits with members of the board of the Tsungli Yamen," however, the Chinese officials, according to Mr. Colquhoun, sometimes develop an unexpected and rather effusive cordiality.

"On a day fixed beforehand the Chinese ministers, presidents of the various boards, and others,—forming a formidable column of sedan chairs and outsiders,—ran the gauntlet of all the legations in one afternoon. No light undertaking this! At each they were regaled with choice vintages and cakes, of which etiquette compelled them to partake. However soberly they might set out for the Belgian legation, the first to be visited, they arrived rumpled and flushed at that of the United States, at the other end of the line. All the ceremonial, all the stiffness had by that time dissolved, the habitual masks had been discarded, and the real men came forth from underneath. At this stage the Confucians were to be tickled by a straw. Solemn viceroys would evince a disposition to change hats with their foreign hosts, and consequential ex-governors of provinces as large as England would find a source of innocent merriment in the elastic properties of the cords of the military epaulettes, which they would pull out and then release, amid peals of laughter. Sweets, confits and (one lady maintained) even curios were stuffed into capacious satin boots—for the children."

The cordiality of the mandarins under such circumstances was a doubtful satisfaction. The habitual churlishness of which Miss Scidmore speaks, even of Chinese officials who had served in their legations abroad, and had enjoyed social courtesies from diplomats who were afterward accredited to Peking, is illustrated in a case cited by Mr. Colquhoun:

"A member of the Tsungli Yamen a few years ago, as Chinese Minister in St. Petersburg, became extremely intimate with Count Cassini—dropping in without ceremony to lunch, driving out with the Count, and so forth. But though the Chinaman afterwards found himself in his own capital at the same time as his former friend—who meanwhile had become Minister to China—much to the Count's half amused disgust, he carefully avoided the Russian legation, except when visiting it with his colleagues as a unit of the Tsungli Yamen, nor did he ever show sign of remembering the old days on the Neva."

The books that are appearing just now in rapid succession, dealing with China and her people, making it plain not only that the ancient capital of that ancient nation is a curious compound of stagnant and decaying conservatism, absurd customs and filth, but that the terrible scenes enacted in recent weeks have been but the fierce outflaming of a long burning and hardly repressed hatred of foreigners.

A city lady was spending her summer vacation in the country. "Uncle Rasmus," she said, one day, "is that chicken standing by the gate a Brahma?" "No," said the farmer, "that is a Leghorn." "How simple of me," said the city young lady. I might have known that myself: I can see the horn on his ankles now!"