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Travel in Korea

SUN AN, March 10, 04 -- To travel in Korea in peace-time is not particularly easy, but in war-time it becomes a pretty serious proposition. In the first place, one has to get to Korea. Japan was not overwhelmingly anxious that correspondents should get to Korea in time for the beginning of hostilities. Her officials recommended the correspondents to remain in Japan till permits to accompany the army were issued. Many lingered. And to this day of writing, so far as is known here in Korea, they are still in Japan.

At least, they are not in Seoul nor Ping Yang nor with the Japanese advance northward on the Peking Road. War was immediately preceded by a withdrawal of all vessels scheduled to sail from Japanese to Korean ports. I managed to get a third-class passage on the last vessel which departed. Her anchor was up and she was steaming out of Shimonoseki when I boarded her in a launch.

And from her I was put ashore at Fusan, at the extreme southeastern extremity of Korea. The day was Sunday. On the previous day a couple of Russian transports had been captured just outside the harbor. With this information, though no one knew of any official declaration of war, I pulled out on a cockleshell of a coasting steamer; but was thrown ashore bag and baggage, with all the passengers—I was the only white man aboard—at Mokpo.

The same day found me in a Korean sampan and heading up the west coast of Korea. Now a sampan is a tiny open fishing-boat with sails made of grass, or straw, and with sails and running-gear so rotten that even a cat's paw is bound to carry something away. Tuesday night found me in Kunsan. The naval battle had been fought at Chemulpo, and at that port I arrived six days later, in another sampan. The masts and funnels of the sunken ships greeted me as I entered the harbor.

The naval fight was a week old. War had been declared for about the same length of time. It had been preceded by fifteen weeks of preliminaries, and yet I found in Chemulpo and Seoul but three correspondents, Lewis, of Nagasaki; Mackenzie, for the London Daily Mail, and Dunn, for Collier's Weekly. I made the fourth. And there were no more arriving. The only ships coming in were war vessels and transports. And none of us would have been on the spot had we heeded the advice of the Japanese officials.

Next, as we lingered in Seoul, we were advised by the Japanese Minister and generals to remain there until the Headquarters Staff should arrive. Daily soldiers passed out through Peking Pass and took the road to the north toward the seat of war, and daily we were importuned and warned to remain. But the Headquarters Staff did not appear, nor did our permits to accompany the army appear.

The only thing to do was to go, permit or no permit, and three of us shoved on 180 miles to Ping Yang. On the way we overtook and passed General Sasaki, who begged us to remain with him.

At Ping Yang the acting Japanese Consul sent for us individually and warned us against continuing northward. General Sasaki arrived and he insisted that we should not go on. Yet from neither could we get anything definite, while we had in mind always the Chino-Japanese War, wherein, by similar tactics, all but two or three men were inveigled into missing about everything that happened. The few that succeeded in seeing anything, had succeeded by virtue of the fact that they had shoved on. Also, they must have had a fair comprehension of the Oriental mind.

Mackenzie fell by the wayside. Most anxious of the three of us to push on at once north to Anju, he allowed himself to be persuaded by General Sasaki and departed on a side-trip to the seaport of Chemulpo. Dunn and I persisted. The Consul said that the Japanese feared for our safety. We replied that we had come to see the fighting. To this the answer was that the Russians had fallen back from Anju and were retreating upon Wiju, nearly a hundred miles farther away. If this were so, we demanded, how could there be clanger on the road to Anju? The Consul smiled and talked about other things.

General Sasaki—and a splendid, soldierly man he is—said it would be better if we remained with him until he started north. When would he start north? He did not know, but if we would travel with him we would be afforded every convenience, such as food for ourselves and horses, extra pack animals, spare riding horses if anything happened to ours, and information galore. He even promised me fresh horses along the way to Anju in case of fighting at that point, and information the moment he received it of said fighting. Anju was 190 li away, and he told me I could make it over the bad road in a day and a night of hard riding. Meanwhile, I wondered how much of the fight would be left for me to see by the time I got there.

At another interview we asked straight out if he would give us permission to go on. This he declined. "Then will you order us to remain in Ping Yang?" was our next query. This he refused to do. And there we were—nothing definite.

"Then we shall start today," we informed him.

"If you do, I shall not be responsible for you," was his rejoinder.

We explained that he need not worry about our safety, and that what we were worrying about was our responsibility to our employers; that if he did not command us to remain in Ping Yang it was our plain duty to start northward at once.

And so it ended—or shall I say, began? Before we had the packs on our horses an urgent summons was received from the Consul. And while the packs continued to go on we threshed the whole thing over again with him. Would he command us to remain? He would not. Then we undertake to be responsible for our own lives. But scarcely had I passed out of the West Gate than my interpreter overtook me with a letter from the Consul. It was as ambiguous as all our interviews. Nothing definite. We were neither permitted to go on, nor commanded to stay back.

The day, Tuesday, was nearly gone, and we camped at Poval village 25 li along the road. Wednesday morning I received a letter from a Korean messenger. He had left Anju on foot. The letter stated that a body of Cossacks had appeared at Pak Chun, 30 li north of Anju, and that a fight with the Japanese scouts was imminent.

Ten li farther on we were held up by an infantry captain in this half-deserted village of Sunan. He had received orders by field telephone from Ping Yang to detain us. And here we are, with orders for the pack horses to be ready at seven tomorrow morning and wondering if we are to be allowed to proceed.

Incidentally, I had my bit of fun with the captain. He informed us that the Japanese and Russian scouts had had a brush and that one Japanese had been killed. Where he did not say, and, true to Asia, he was quite indefinite about it.

"Tell him it took place at Pak Chun," I told the interpreter to say to him.

And he was wide-eyed with astonishment. He had just received the news himself by the field wire. He knew we had no means of getting information over the wire. No messengers could have traveled the intervening distance on foot. Then how had we learned it. We did not inform him, and I guess he is puzzling about it yet.

Such is one phase of the trouble of traveling in Korea in wartime. Another, for instance, is the finding of accommodation at night, and the farther we win north the greater it becomes. The villages are nearly deserted, the few remaining inhabitants frightened out of the little wits they ever happened to possess. Scouting Cossacks have passed through, taking what they needed. The Japanese have passed through. And we arrive, a totally different and remarkably wonderful breed of which the very worst is to be expected.

Last night at Poval is a fair example. We rode in with our ten riding and pack horses. Dunn (who has hitherto figured as Jones), and myself, with our followers, making ten persons. There were ten houses in Poval, but not room for a single horse, we were told. Ten li more we would find a horse stable. "Ten li more" is a red flag to Dunn, and at once turns him into an angry bull—a very angry bull. His charge is directed against the nearest entrance to a walled enclosure, and in a trice he is inside in the midst of a stable the existence of which seems to have never been known to the inhabitants. But there is no horse food.

"Paw-ree isso!" we shout.

"Paw-ree oopso!" they reply.

"Paw-ree auso!" we rejoin.

The which dialogue is as follows:

"Have you any barley?"

"We have no barley."

"Get barley quickly."

It is a dialogue which we have conducted so often that we can now say it backward in our sleep or begin at the middle and repeat both ways at once.

Leaving Dunn to extract twenty-five pounds of barley from the baggy trousers worn by the nearest man, I start off with Manyungi, my Korean factotum, in search of sleeping quarters. By this time the inhabitants are shouting "Ten li more," in every mood and tense. Doors have to be brushed open, owners thrust aside, and interiors inspected. Withered, naked-breasted beldames shriek curses at us. Men, old and young, do everything except fight, and a multitude of dogs begin barking and growling at us.

"Son of a toad," is the most frequent appellation I receive, and to the Koreans it is a pretty bad one, for they are ancestor-worshippers and it smirches my ancestors.

Pandemonium reigns. Interpreters are in search of houses themselves. The uproar is deafening, the chin-chin endless. Every mapu has a dozen quarrels on his hands, while the villagers are desperate. When we have hit upon the houses of our choice the packs are carried in. The cooks take possession of the kitchens.

And then, presto, all is changed. The villagers learn that we pay for what we get. Barley and beans appear, enough for a cavalry regiment. Brush wood and charcoal arrive. Chickens and eggs are resurrected from all manner of hiding places. And the villagers, amiable and smiling, surround us, anxious to do small sendees and content in return to satisfy their curiosity by staring at us. In the morning they are loath to have us depart, and are left somewhat richer by having known us.

In every country in the world money is a vexatious problem. Likewise in Korea, but with this difference: in other countries the vexation is to get the money, in Korea the vexation does not arise until after the money is got. Without money, all is serene, as soon as it arrives, one's troubles begin.

To commence with, one arrives in Seoul. His money is in American gold. One dollar of it will buy two Japanese dollars —yens, they are called. He is elated. His capital has doubled. One thousand dollars has become two thousand dollars. He makes purchases. His Japanese paper and silver are taken everywhere. And then one day he awakes to the fact that half his purchases have been price-listed in Korean coinage, and that he has been paying Japanese dollars for Korean dollars, which is to say that each transaction of that nature has involved a loss of roughly 33.6%.

No one ever saw a Korean dollar. Nevertheless, a Korean dollar is worth less than a Japanese dollar; and though one does not handle Korean dollars, one loses money by them. One hundred Japanese cents will buy, or would buy, say, 150 Korean cents. When I was in Seoul, 100 Japanese cents would buy one 140 Korean. I sent my interpreter down to Chemulpo to buy. Had he bought the evening he arrived he would have received 154. He waited till next day for a better price, but the market slumped and he bought at 148.

Japanese coinage can only be used in the treaty ports and capital. Outside these half dozen cities Korean coinage must be used. The unit of Korean coinage is the Chinese cash. It is a round piece of copper with a square hole punched through it. The square hole enables it to be strung on strings. A stout pack horse can carry about fifty American dollars worth of cash. An afternoon's shopping would require a couple of coolies to carry the money. To pay a debt of two or three thousand dollars would require several pack-trains, while all that a robber could carry away on his back would not constitute a serious loss to the one robbed.

But the nickel saves the day, or partially saves it. Several months journey in the country would be impossible without it. Five cash make one 5-pun piece—a round copper coin, unpunched and rarely seen. Five 5-pun pieces make a nickel. This nickel is the largest coin in circulation. All nickels are counterfeit. Everybody knows they are counterfeit, but only the clumsy counterfeits are rejected, and then, only by the poorer people. In fact, the nickel itself makes so bulky a coinage that it is counted as infrequently as possible. The way of the country around Seoul and Chemulpo is to wrap it up in rolls of paper of 50 nickels each. If you owe a man five dollars you give him two rolls. You do not count it. He does not count it. You did not count it when you received it, nor will he count it when he pays it out.

When I left Seoul for the north I took with me fifty dollars (American) worth of nickels for my traveling expenses. Fifty American dollars bought 100 Japanese dollars, which, in turn, bought 148 Korean dollars. The 148 Korean dollars, in bogus nickels, weighed forty pounds. And with the forty pounds of nickels, I took with me the satisfying conviction that I had mastered the mysteries of Korean coinage.

Alas and alack, I had just entered upon my novitiate. At Ping Yang a missionary, Mr. Koons, proved it to me.

"What do you mean by Korean dollars?" he demanded. "I do not understand the term."

"A Korean dollar," I said proudly, "is 100 Korean cents. One and forty-eight-one-hundredths Korean cents makes one Japanese cent. Two Japanese cents make one American cent. Q. E. D."

Mr. Koons looked at me pityingly. "Sit down, old man," he said, "and let me explain it to you. To commence with, you're all wrong and must begin all over."

I sat down.

"The unit of Korean coinage is a yang." "By yang you mean cash," I interrupted, with laudable desire of expediting matters. He shook his head sadly.

"Then what is a yang?" I asked humbly. "I am at your feet. Elucidate." He elucidated. "A yang is 4 nickels."

"Twenty Korean cents," I again interrupted.

"I tell you there is no such thing as a Korean cent." His voice slightly rose, and I could see he was irritated. "A yang is the unit, and henceforth, if you wish to get along you must use only yang, speak only yang, think only yang."

I was anxious to show that I possessed some intelligence, so I said, "Yes, I understand now if 4 nickels make one yang, 5 yang make one dollar."

He threw up his hands in despair. "How often must I tell you there is no such thing as a Korean dollar?"

I subsided, and begged him to proceed.

"That is all," he said.

"Four nickels make one yang," I recited. "The yang is the unit, the yang is everything." He nodded his head delightedly.

"Can I buy nickels farther north than Ping Yang?" I asked.

"No," was his depressing reply, "and furthermore, that stuff won't be worth a cent up there. Nobody will look at it."

By "that stuff," he meant the Japanese paper money in my pocketbook.

"Then what am I going to do?" I queried helplessly. "I may be gone with the troops for months. I have two mapus, a cook, and interpreter. I have five horses. My daily expenses are heavy—in nickels. I shall need a dozen ponies and half a dozen more mapus to carry my money for me and that will increase my daily expenses, so that I shall have to get still more mapus and pack horses."

"In the south, your situation would be just as you state it," said Mr. Koons. "But in North Korea it is different. You must buy silver dollars."

"But I thought there were no Korean—" I began.

"Hold on, old man, take it easy. These are Japanese silver dollars. Just listen to me. You buy them and they will be taken in all the large villages in the north—if there are any villagers left to take them."

"How much do they weigh?" I asked.

"Let me see," he calculated; "100 silver yen weigh six pounds." "Then will you buy me 18 pounds of them, and a few pounds of nickels?"

I handed him \$300 in Japanese paper. He looked at it in amazement.

"Just now," he said, "it will require 430 paper dollars to buy 300 silver dollars."

"But the paper dollars are gold dollars," I protested. "They are backed by gold."

"But the silver dollars are not money at all," he retorted. "They're so much silver, that is all. They're bullion. Besides, you don't lose anything."

"Hold on," I interjected. "I have followed you carefully and closely. I thought I understood and now you tell me that when I pay 430 gold dollars for 300 silver dollars that I am not losing anything. Let me hold my head and think for a while."

"But don't think too long," he smiled. "This war is depreciating Japanese paper. You are losing money every moment that paper remains in your hands."

"I do not understand, but I believe you," I said. "I have faith in what you say. I put myself and my money into your hands. Buy, and buy now, 300 silver yen."

"You'll have to buy at about 750," he said.

"Seven fifty what for what?" I asked.

"Why 750 cash per paper yen for each silver yen which is rated at 1000 cash."

"But I thought the yang was the unit," I said, "I had just begun to speak yang, to think yang and dream yang, and now you hurl me back to cash."

"But never mind," I added hastily. "Don't try to explain. I know I am a dunce. Buy, and buy now, before this paper becomes worthless."

And he sent out to a Christian money-lender to buy. It was evening, and I departed to my quarters. My interpreter met me with a beaming countenance. Had I heard the news. What news? Why that an order had been issued from Tokyo commanding that the army note should circulate at 10 yang to the yen, which was equivalent to 1000 cash.

"But how about the gold paper?" I demanded.

"Eleven hundred and twenty-five cash to each yen," was the answer. And I was selling 430 yen at 750 when I could be receiving 1125!

I wanted to stop the deal, but it was too late. "You haven't lost anything," Mr. Koons explained to me. "I trust—I believe—I have faith—" I murmured sympathetically. "Just wait and see, old man," he said sympathetically. I waited. I waited five days. And then, in spite of the government's fiat, Dunn bought at 620. "So you see, I was right," said Mr. Koons. And then we went to dinner.

"You were lucky in buying when you did," said Dr. Moffett. "Last January I bought at 1180. You bought at 750; Mr. Dunn bought at 620; and between you you have bought so much that if you tried to buy any more the yen would fall to 500."

"That is all the army note is worth now in Ping Yang," said somebody else.

"There are notices posted on the gates of the city," said another, "that the army note will be redeemed at Pong-san at 10 yang to the yen. —Which is 1000 cash," was added for my benefit.

Pong-san was but fifty miles south, yet the same note, in Ping Yang, was circulating at 500 cash.

"We do not know—cash or yang at Un-san," said an Englishman just down from the mines at the place, which was about ninety miles north of Ping Yang. "We reckon Korean money in dollars and cents."

Mr. Koons looked at him, and he looked at Mr. Koons.

"I have faith—I believe," I found trembling on my lips, and had just time to shut them and keep the words in.

So I left Ping Yang with 18 pounds of silver yens and 30 pounds of nickels in my treasure-chest. Every time I heft the weight of it, I feel rich, but how rich I cannot tell for the life of me. I do not know what anything costs me—at least in intelligible terms. I pay 15 Korean cents for three eggs. I know that that means 3 nickels, three-quarters of a yang, or 75 cash. But what three-quarters of a yang, or 75 cash are equivalent to in terms of American coinage is beyond me. I am short on writing paper and dare not sit down to figure it out. Besides, I don't think I could figure it out in a paper factory.

And anyway, I have faith and believe, so what's the good of figuring it out?