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Troubles of War Correspondent in Starting for the Front

Interpreter and Canned Goods

Jack London also Describes the Difficulties He Had in Obtaining a Horse, The Most Docile One Being Blind

February 26th —"Buy everything in sight and get ready to start for Ping Yang."

Thus was I greeted as I landed at Chemulpo. It was the first mouthful of white-man's speech I had had in eight days, during which time I had been traveling with a native crew up the Korean coast in a sampan, or open fishing boat.

The speaker was one of the two non-local newspapermen on the spot. I made the third. Fifty or more were expected at any moment from Japan, as soon as they could find a ship to carry them—hence the advice.

"I've been here two weeks and am all ready to strike out," he added, "horses, coolies, interpreters, everything."

War had been on for a week, though I learned it now for the first time. I had been badly poisoned with charcoal fumes, and my mind was in a daze. I could scarcely identify myself with people and houses and white-men's chow, yet I proceeded to outfit. The trip had to be performed on horseback. I did not know how to ride. Jones, who had advised me, and Macleod, the second newspaperman, proceeded to teach me.

Their method was illuminating—for the mob of mapus (grooms), rickshawmen, coolies and passersby, before the Grand Hotel. Jones and Macleod were mounted on mild, medium-sized Chinese ponies. For me they procured a stallion. He was splendid-looking. My heart thrilled as I looked at him. I felt very proud. I failed to see anything significant in the fact of the two mapus holding his head. I mounted. The mob laughed and scattered. The mapus loosed their hold, and away I went.

But I did not go like an arrow from a bow. Rather was my course that of a boomerang charged with unlimited energy and speed. I curved back and forth, circled about, plunged into snow banks, knocked other people's horses out of my path (which was a path other people could not divine), and cut up scandalously.

But it was not my fault. All I tried to do was to make the horse go straight ahead, and all I succeeded in doing was to stick on. Other horses bit at mine. He bit back, reared on his hind legs, his teeth snapping, striking with his forelegs and pawing the air.

"Say, old man, do it this way!" Jones shouted at me. I had no breath left in me to thank him, but my steed responded. His forefeet just missed the small of Jones' back. Jones circled his horse about. Mine followed, striking with his forefeet and biting. Jones beat him over the face and nose with a whip. I hauled with all my strength on the reins. I hauled vainly, for Jones ran away after Macleod. I followed, plunged off the beaten path into the soft snow, and flurried

about like a hailstorm. Two mapus made a rush and swung onto my horse's head, and I slipped off and got out of the way. I looked at my watch. The performance had lasted four minutes, yet I could have staked my life that it had lasted twenty minutes. Every bone and muscle was aching and sore. I was breathing heavily. My heart was going like a Waterbury. It was a cold morning —several degrees above zero—yet the sweat was starting from every pore; I could feel it trickling down my back, and my face was wet as from a shower bath.

"You take the horse," suggested Macleod to Jones, "and let him get on your horse."

Jones shook his head, and my stallion pranced back to the hotel between two mapus, who looked anything but happy.

"What you need, old man, is a mild, sweet-tempered animal," said Jones.

The remark was superogatory. It was the thing I had expressly stipulated just previous to beginning the lesson.

And all this preliminary to going off to sec the Russians and Japanese fight.

"Anyway," said I, "that horse is one of the things in sight which I shall not buy."

I engaged an interpreter—provisionally. I know not what happy thought led me to make the engagement provisional, for his conversation was excellent. He was a Japanese, and he had memorized it all!

When the bargain was concluded he delivered himself of his last sentence: "I wish to go with you to the war with all my heart."

He had reached the end of his rope, and five minutes later I had to borrow Jones' interpreter in order to understand what my interpreter was talking about.

"You need a mapu," said Jones, "also a boy."

A mapu is a groom, whose ordinary wage is four to six dollars a month and who finds himself.

I declined engaging a mapu until I should find the mild, sweet-tempered horse; but a boy was a necessity, and Mr. Emberly, proprietor of the hotel, said he had just the man. Manyoungi was his name, and he came to work for me for $17.50 and find himself—a liberal wage.

He dressed in European clothes, with a white shirt, stand-up collar, tie, studs, and all complete, and he talked English better, far better, than my provisional interpreter, and he was Korean. Not only did he know how to work himself and achieve results, but he possessed the miraculous faculty of getting work out of other Koreans. For the first time the hotel boys built a fire in my room and brought hot water before I was dressed and away. And for the first time the fires they built burned.

Having secured me such a gem of a boy, I concluded that Mr. Emberly was just the man to get me a horse—mild and sweet-tempered. So I listened to him and went off with him to see Mr. Brown, chief of the Korean Customs.

Mr. Brown had two horses. We looked at them. One stamped fierily. "I need a horse; I shall take that one," said Mr. Emberly. "Of course, he's too lively for you," he added.

I quite agreed. The second horse I fell in love with on first sight. The prettiest head and gentlest eyes I had ever seen in a horse. It allowed me to pet him, rubbed his neck against me, whinnied, and begged for more petting.

"Is he all right?" I asked. "You know I know nothing about horses."

"Just the horse for you," was the reply. I bought him. Next morning he was brought around to the hotel. Frazier, a gentleman jockey and steeplechase rider, took him for a canter. General Allen looked on.

"Splendid motion," said he. "The easiest riding horse of all, and the hardiest."

"Well set up," said Frazier. "Will endure more than either Macleod's or Jones."

Again I was proud over a horse. I mounted, and this time rode away. I rode into Seoul, and as I rode I noticed the horse sheered constantly to the right.

"Carries a weather helm," I said to myself and thereafter rode with the helm hard aport. The resulting course was approximately straight ahead, but it struck mc that the manner of obtaining it was not precisely the proper thing.

I determined to see how far this predilection to the right would carry him, so I hauled the helm amidships and waited. At once the sheer to the right began, and to the right yawned a ten-foot ditch.

"Surely he will give over when he gets to the edge," I thought, and steeled my soul to endure his daring. He dared the edge, the very edge. In fact he was falling into the ditch when I luffed him out of it to port.

And with helm to port I navigated the narrow, crowded streets of the capital of Korea. I marvel at it, when I look back upon it—bulls and bullock carts, trains of Korean pack-ponies, soldiers afoot and ahorse, a swarm of children, apathetic Koreans too lazy to get out of the way, blocked traffic, jams, plunging and rearing of many horses—most of them stallions, and never a collision.

It was not till I turned homeward that the first collision occurred. It was on Legation Street, just beyond the Palace, and it was deliberate. To the right, instead of a yawning ditch, was a frowning wall. I put the helm amidships to study the sheer. The horse sheered, plump into the wall, sideways, and brought up with a resounding thump. I passed my hand in front of his eye. It never fluttered. A minute later, walking, he butted head-on into a wall. He was blind, stone blind. I wonder if the derivation of the phrase "stone blind" had anything to do with horses and stone walls?

In the afternoon I rode in a rickshaw. Also I discharged my interpreter, who had become wholly unintelligible, and hired another. His name was Yamada, and he had been Jones' interpreter, but he had resigned because Jones addressed him as "boy." I engaged always to call him "Mr. Yamada," whereupon he looked very pleased and asked me for an advance of two months' salary.

"Macleod and I start on Monday," said Jones. "Will you be ready?"

It was Sunday. Likewise it was Japanese, Chinese and Korean.

New Year, and shopkeepers and artisans had given over work and were busy with a celebration scheduled to last anywhere between six days and as long as their money held out.

"Impossible," I answered. "I'll meet you in Ping Yang."

"We're all ready, you know," said Jones, "or we wouldn't mind waiting for you."

I saw Macleod. He said he was all ready to start.

I alone was unprepared, so I went off to be vaccinated, and not only was I vaccinated but I bought a horse from the doctor —one of the Russian minister's horses which he had left behind when he hurriedly departed. It was a splendid animal, had been imported from Australia, and was as cheap as a Chinese pony, while several times as large. In fact, the girths of the saddle which I had bought for my blind horse would not go half way around.

I returned in glee to the hotel to find that three Korean pack-ponies had been purchased for me. But before I ratified the purchase I assured myself that they were at least not blind. Also I learned that Macleod and Jones, who were all ready, would not be ready until Tuesday, whereupon I went out and bought a horse for my interpreter—I beg his pardon, I mean Mr. Yamada.

I was now the owner of five horses, and two mapus were engaged to take care of them. Then came the rush, in which Manyoungi, the gem of boys, was my savior. He worked like a demon, and had everybody else working. Everything was to be bought—saddles, bridles, blankets, hitching straps, nose bags, rope lashings, spare sets of horseshoes all around, horseshoer's tools, pack-saddles, extra girths, canned goods, rubber boots, mittens, caps, gloves, clothes, flour, cooking utensils, shoes, candles, and all the thousand and one articles necessary for a campaign which might extend into Manchuria. And it was New Year's!

Tuesday found Macleod and Jones not yet ready, and Wednesday found Jones outfitting from canned goods which I was lightening from my packs, and Macleod delayed and unable to start until Thursday. So my pack-ponies were the first to take the highroad north through Peking Pass; and that night, at the end of fifty li, found Jones sans boy, sans mapus, sans everything and dining with me.

But I am proud possessor of the horse of horses. It is a little Korean pony scarcely larger than a Newfoundland dog. I verily believe I could tuck it under my arm and walk away with it. The first day I found it loaded with the heaviest pack. Under the mountain of luggage I could see only its tail and its patient little feet which went pit-a-pat, pit-a-pat throughout the day.

"This will never do," I said. "It is cruel. To-morrow, Man-youngi, you must put a light pack on that little pony (you see it is the smallest of the lot), and ride it yourself."

It is the wise custom for the boy to ride, so that at the end of the day he will be fresh enough to make camp and cook dinner.

Next day Manyoungi rode the pony. He weighed 120 pounds and he rode on a pack weighing 130 pounds, while the pack-saddle weighed at least twenty pounds more—270 pounds in all. The pony weighed possibly 350 pounds, and yet all day it kept up with our riding horses. Whenever we broke into a lope, it loped after us, whinnying all the while. Nor could Manyoungi hold it back. He tried with the reins and his strength, and he tried with the Korean language and his imagination, but the pony trotted, loped, or walked always at our heels.

Jones and I decided that it would be dead by the time we made camp. But I changed my mind that night at feeding time, when it kicked and plunged and bit the other larger ponies till it had its own food and half their share to boot, to say nothing of the best place to sleep and the most room. Jones is now trying to buy it, and I am trying to decide whether or not I shall ride it if something happens to my own horse. Jones' principal objection to this is that both my feet will drag on the ground, and I half believe him. To-morrow I shall mount it and find out for myself. Perhaps I may be able to tuck my feet up a little.