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## THE KOREAN COOLIE.

FEW subjects present more of interest to a foreigner in Korea than the coolie. He it is who exhibits in his person those peculiarities of race that have been smothered out of the gentry by fumes of Confucianism. The latter, having inhaled this teaching from childhood, have gradually lost their natural traits and have become more and more artificial, ever striving to mortify the man that they are by birth, and to put on for new man a ghost of antiquity. The coolie, however, is not in any such bondage, but exhibits a host of characteristics that make him in some respects the most interesting figure in the Land of Morning Calm.

From the first glimpse you have of him you recognize that he is a creature of repose. Nothing should be more restful to a nervous, impatient foreigner, than the sight of a coolie by the wayside, sitting on his heels, or as we say squatting, sometimes long rows of them, motionless as seafowl, indifferent to the heat of the sun, to the flies that congregate upon them or to the pestiferous gutters that crawl beneath their feet.

While other mortals are in constant commotion, fearful of this and that, yet aching for change, the Korean coolie continues throughout the ages to squat on his heels, never growing tired, sniffing all the while odors that would depopulate a western city, or by way of diversion, eating melon rinds and all in the face of cholera and other plagues of Egypt.

It is an atmosphere of repose, rather than indifference, that envelopes him. Indifference suggests an environment with which one is not in harmony, while repose indicates perfect agreement. Not only can he sit in a painful position for ages, but he can sleep with head downwards, and mouth wide open under the fiercest sun of the Orient, and rise as refreshed as though he had had a night on a spring mattress and a morning bath. This is proof that it is not a matter of indifference with him, else he should have had sun-stroke. The fact that he rises refreshed to enjoy his pipe, proves the repose.

Undoubtedly he is the greatest living example of the absence of all excitement or animated interest of any kind what-

ever. He can eat an astounding dish of *pap* (rice) and be asleep with his head on a wooden block, in less time than a foreigner would trim his tooth-pick. Nothing short of a bowl of *kuksu* (vermicelli) or the crack of doom, can create the slightest interest in him, or prove that he has nerves at all.

This characteristic, while highly to be commended in some respects, has frequently proven a source of difference between the coolie and the foreigner. The latter, proud of his watchword, action, runs full tilt into the coolie who sits heavy in repose. It is like the railway-train taking a header for a mud embankment, when newspapers announce next day, "Smash up," not of the embankment, but of the railway train.

In view of this danger to the foreigner, the coolie has, of late years, done considerable to change his ways, though of course, even in foreign employ, he still feels old sensations come over him, and falls at times into his native repose.

Only once do I recollect seeing marked animation in a coolie's eyes. It was at a stone fight such as they used to indulge in in the brave days of old. Several hundred of the best marksmen of the capital chose sides, and armed with stones, weighing one and two pounds, assembled for the fray. When I arrived, missiles were flying thro the air, any one of which, had it struck, would have done for a man as easily as a fifty pound projectile. They were all awake to dodge these, and the rush and scramble to escape was like a stampede of wild beasts. The throwing was magnificent. It seemed in truth a little war of giants. The fight grew fast and furious, Grimy with dust and sweat each side drew in the closer and sent rocks flying among the enemy in a way simply appalling. Then came a shock of cessation, and shout, as tho a goal were scored. One of the best marksmen of the enemy had been struck squarely and was killed. His body was carried off the field and again the fight began. Before evening closed one had fallen on the other side, and thus the score was even.

Such is the coolie, and yet a gentler, more lamb-like creature never lived. Apart from this one ancient custom he is peace itself, even his personal wars are merely threatenings. One of the amusing sights of the street is a fight, the combatants of course always being coolies, as no gentlemen would soil his garments who has a servant to engage for him. It begins usually in dispute, passes thro different stages, each marked by a special pitch of voice and rapidity of utterance, and at last ends in a climax of fury. A perfect stream of invective is poured forth, accompanied by appeals to men and angels to behold the object of depravity. The foreigner is horrified, convinced as he

is, that nothing short of one life can relieve the pent up condition of affairs, when suddenly the whole case collapses, and the combatants are seen on each end of the piazza, smoking as peacefully as if all within the Four Seas were brothers.

The question has often arisen.—Is the Korean coolie an ardent coward, or is he the bravest man alive since Jack the Giant Killer? Evidence is not lacking for the support of either supposition. On the first announcement of the Japan-China war, we saw him, with personal effects on his back and considerable animation in his feet making for the hills. We have seen him, too, in the capacity of trespasser, being whipped out of a compound with a small willow switch, and writhing under the blows as tho they had been sword cuts repeating with imploring look "Igo! You've killed me! You've killed me!"

A small foreigner of hasty temperament once resided in the Land of Morning Calm. I had the pleasure of seeing him marshalling his men on a journey. The coolies he had were noted for strength rather than agility, and as speed was the chief consideration friction resulted. Matters came to a climax at last, and the small foreigner made a round of those coolies with his right foot, spreading consternation at every kick. No great damage was done, as a Korean's padded dress serves much as a bird's plumage would under a similar form of attack. The group bowed to the inevitable, simply remarking, of the foreigner, that an offspring of that kind was a caution (*Keu nomeui chasik maknani*).

But there exists just as strong evidence as to the coolie's pluck. He will undergo a surgical operation without flinching, where a foreigner would require an assistant to administer an anaesthetic. It has been said that he has no nerves, and so does not feel it, but he felt the willow switch as keenly as you or I would. Considering his weapons, and opportunities, he gave a good account of himself in the old days, in the defences at Kangwha. Often still with a wretched flint-lock or fuse gun he will steal his way among the rocks and beard the tiger, capturing his game, and returning home in triumph.

Not being able to find a definite example of more than ordinary courage, I referred the matter to my Korean friend and he told me the following which in his mind, bespoke a heroism rarely seen among mortals. A number of coolies had imprisoned a huge rat in a grain bin. Now the question was, who would venture in, bare-handed, capture and despatch the rat. One stout looking fellow smiled broadly and volunteered to go, amid the admiration and applause of the on-lookers. He pulled his jacket tight, tried his fingers as if to see that all were in work-

ing order, and advanced to the attack, meanwhile the rat facing about, resolved to die game. The parrying lasted a few minutes, then a pass, then a rush of confusion and sudden leap into mid-air, all quick as lightning, and the coolie held the lifeless rat by the tail amid renewed applause. Your common cricket ball, says my Korean friend, is nothing, but to catch a live rat, which is equal to a cricket ball charged with dynamite, requires courage indeed.

Not only does the coolie exhibit at times surprising agility, but his strength is phenomenal. With a rack made of forked limbs fastened together, so as to fit the shoulders, he will carry a bale of piece-goods weighing four hundred pounds, or bring a perfectly paralysing load of deer-hides all the way from Kangge four hundred miles.

In Korea there are practically no carts, or wheeled means of transportation. Many of the roads will not permit of beasts of burden, so the strength of the nation has gone into the coolie's shoulders. With a load such as we often see he reminds you of the Titan Atlas lifting the world.

It has been a sorrow to many a foreigner that the coolie should be so slow in his mental movements, so obstinate about changing his mind, or responding to an order, but it is easily explained. Like his body, his mind moves under a pressure of from one to four hundred pounds, which accounts for all its showiness of motion. Run violently against his inclinations, and he goes obstinately along, feeling it in fact as little as if you had collided with him when carrying his load of piece goods. In disgust, and with all your timbers shivered, you resolve to avoid him forever, neglecting the one way to manage the coolie which is to take him softly and gently at first, but with increasing pressure as his being comes into motion, and you can run him this way and that, physically or mentally, as by the turning of a rudder, for his condition is not of obstinacy, but of inability.

Independence is a new thought to Korea, and a new word is coined to express it. The native has never dreamed of existence apart from that of others. In the Western world, a man may bear his own burdens, just as a house may stand by itself in a wide expanse of country, but in the Orient, men work in groups, and houses draw together into hamlets and villages. The great forces with us are centrifugal, marked by extension, separation, and the like; while in the East life tends toward the centre, and is characterized by contraction, limitation, the coolie being one of the largest contributors to this end. The sphere of his usefulness is so contracted in fact, that he will undertake nothing without an assistant. He eyes the simplest task with a look of hopelessness,

unless you will permit his friend to engage as well. Should it be the handling of a wood-saw, he must have a coolie at the other end, not from necessity, nor specially by way of ornament, but because it is established custom and convenient withal. His use of a shovel too is striking, with one man at the handle and one or two others on each side holding ropes fastened to the same, he creates a union of forces, that vividly explains why the sun and moon drawing at the same angle, and at about the same visible degree of motion should influence the tides.

No amount of money can tempt him to break faith with custom. He regards money as a convenience, but in no case as a necessity. Other things being satisfactory he will agree to accept of it, will demand more at times, or will regard with a look of scorn the largest amount you can offer him. He never descends to purely business relations. When you engage him for a piece of work, he comes simply with a desire for your convenience, while in the evening you present him with *cash*, expressive of your friendship and appreciation. Should the relations during the day become strained, he will probably demand more; should friendship be strengthened, he will accept less; should mutual disagreement break out he will not work for you for any money, and in all probability will have you boycotted by others of the village.

The coolie's religion consists in a worship of ancestors, and a hatred of all officialdom, not that he really loves the former, or dislikes the latter, but custom requires that he attribute success to the virtue of his forefathers, and failure to the depravity of the district mandarin, hence expressions of reverence for the one, and sworn hatred for the other.

In the first prefecture I visited, the coolies of the village spent a large part of their time, squatting on the heels, anathematizing the *wön*, prefect, who lived over the hills in the *yanen*. It seemed to me that they were on the eve of an uprising that would leave not even cotton wadding enough to tell of the fate of the hopeless magistrate. During the course of the season we became acquainted, and a more, sleek contented official it has never been my fortune to know, wholly oblivious he seemed to the storm brewing about his ears. The storm continued to brew, but never broke. Visits to other parts of the country have since demonstrated, beyond doubt, that this discontent is the normal condition of affairs in Korea, and that the *wön* would never be happy or safe without this centripetal force to keep him within a reasonable orbit.

While cherishing such hatred on the one hand, the coolie is quite emphatic in his loyalty to the king on the other. To him His Majesty is the peerless perfection of wisdom and benevolence,

one who cannot sin in fact, who tho as wicked as Nero, and unscrupulous as Ahab, would be spoken of as the Son of Divinity, the sinless jade ruler, etc. ; while the officials who surrounded him from ministers down are regarded as public goblins, veritable fiends of state.

The coolie's relation to his deceased ancestors, I have never been able to define. That he is devout in the performance of the sacred rites is unquestioned, but that he has a clear understanding of their purport is exceedingly doubtful. A proof however of his grasp of the situation is seen in this, that he can point you out every grave of his ancestors to the fourth generation, or can talk as familiarly of a great grandfather's second cousin as we would of a half sister. No spirit is forgotten in his round of yearly sacrifices. As to what it all means he leaves you in doubt. Prosperity in some mysterious way hangs on it, and there the subject rests.

I have often thought, tho my Korean friend says it is not so, that the native carries a grudge against his deceased parent, such as an accomplice might feel toward one who has turned queen's evidence. The parent departs this life, and in so doing commits a heinous breach of propriety, leaving his posterity to bear the disgrace, while he is picnicing with his seniors and other distinguished spirits of antiquity.

Calling himself depraved existence, unconscionable sinner, the coolie mourner wanders for three years, with a burden on his heart and the shade of a wide hat over his countenance.

The coolie's home life is simple, a mat or two on a mud floor with a fire underneath is comfort enough for the most fastidious. His iron-jointed, supple-sinewed wife keeps all in motion. The Korean would long since have been reduced to dust had it not been for her. While her husband sits and smokes she swings her batons, or makes the kitchen ring with cooking and the sounds of her voice. Tho unacquainted with the embroidered side of life, she is a faithful, decent woman, and does honor to the Far East. True to her husband, and kind to her children, in spite of her unattractive appearance and emphatic manner, she takes her part in the struggle of life bravely and modestly, and does credit to womankind the world over.

One coolie stands out prominently before me as I conclude this paper, a little man with brown face who accompanied me on trips into the country, keeping the way clear, and acting throughout in our interests. One evening after a bleak day of nearly forty miles, we entered quarters for the night, and were informed that they had no room, nothing to eat, and no use for a foreigner. All the town apparently had come out to tell us so. There I was

alone in the world, no one to depend on, but the little man with brown face and he had run forty miles already. Not wearied, but shortened in temper he spent about eight seconds arguing the question with the towns people, and when that did not avail, turned on the chief speaker, a tall lanky fellow, and taking a double hold of the after part of his garments, ran him down that street, as tho propelled by a locomotive. This was conclusive proof to the inhabitants that we were running the town, not they; so they yielded us a room, and strings of eggs and comfort for the night.

Many a day since, all my hopes have been centered in the little man with brown face, and never once has he failed me, but has carried me on his back over streams, stood by me thro rain and snow, ever forgetful of his own comforts, has been the life of the party, providing situations of amusement clear across the peninsula, trustworthy as one's brother and faithful as the sun; all for what? a few cash, that he could have earned with much less labour on his own mud floor at home; but down in his coolie's heart, it was for him a matter of friendship and honor.

It is long since a difference of location compelled us to separate, but frequently still, by post or courier comes a thick wadded letter, written in native script, on coarse paper, wishing long life and blessing to the recipient, saying that he still lives and is well, signed awkwardly and humbly by the little man with brown face.

JAS. S. GALE.