Morning Walks around Hanyang.

By W. Arthur Cornaby.

III.

If there be any just reason for a walk abroad in China, it is the triple beat of the fire-gong. Let but that ominous sound be heard, and the most sedentary habits of the most stay-at-home Chinese are broken-off at once. No one who has not lived in a native wooden-walled house, crowded in by other such houses, can realize the shock produced upon native nerves at such times. That “most accurate writer on Chinese topics,” as Professor Giles describes the author of “Chinese Characteristics,” devotes a chapter to Chinese “Absence of Nerves,” and does so with characteristic accuracy. But the embryonic “nerves undergo a sudden evolution under the magic spell of that bang-bang-bang bang-bang-bang arousal. There is, perhaps, but one historical reference in the whole range of Chinese literature to what we call a “constitutional*” but at the sound of a fire-gong everyone rushes out of doors. It may be a question of dear life.

*In the year 265 B.C. an aged statesman approached a Queen Dowager on the forbidden subject of her favourite son being sent away as hostage to another State. In the course of his preliminary remarks he said: “Your aged servant having lost his appetite, forces himself to walk a mile or more a day, and finds it helpful to his digestion and of benefit to his constitution.”
A Chinese fire is never a comedy, and full often is a tragedy indeed. And that tragedy may be enacted at any hour in the most dead-and-alive city or town. A windy night is the likeliest occasion for such a disturbance of a whole neighbourhood; and then the excitement is at its intensest, and all the sights and sounds at their weirdest.

But now, in the daytime, the sound of the triple gongs is heard. The sun is shining, and the hand-camera in readiness. In less narrow streets a snap-shot of the firemen pulling or pushing the “water-dragon” would form a striking picture indeed. We can only catch their backs as they rush by. But in an open space is the indispensable standard-bearer for another engine that has not yet arrived. The crowd has passed on, and the standard-bearer’s portrait is obtained. Night or day, his banner must be adorned or either side with lanterns. While, down the centre, runs the “strange device” of the particular benevolent institution he represents. His banner serves to label the merit of that particular institution, lest it should be reckoned to the wrong account in the world of the unseen. Also the pullers and pushers of the “water-dragon” are labelled on chest and back with the name of the institution, for the same purpose, and for their identification among the crowd. Of all Chinese things in China, such a standard-bearer and firemen surely take the palm.

On this particular occasion, the fire being a distant one, we content ourselves with a snap-shot of a small crowd of sightseers, reserving a visit to the scene of the fire till another day. And, as a relief from the excitement on a hot autumn morning, proceed to take a stroll in the country instead.

Here on a stone beside a lotus-pond is a girl diligently washing clothes, by the beating process, as though nothing had happened. The clothes have to be washed, or there will be “something said.” Her duty is clear, and she does it, which, after all, is just the essence of Confucian teaching. Local or political excitements may agitate the minds of many; gods and goblins may be supposed by the many to cause or avert calamity, but one thing is clear—thy duty. That is the point where Confucius and Carlyle coincide.
Dealing with the universal, they both became Sages. Confucius, however, dealt especially with the renovation of hearts, and the washing clean of national institutions, which from of old have a tendency to become defiled as surely as indigo-blue garments do, and which might be made a trifle more presentable were those concerned to emulate the maiden by the lotus-pond.

Pondering over that maiden’s own condition, as our walk proceeds, it is probable that the process of washing which she was adopting will not soon give place to the soap and wash-tub process, as far as many are concerned, for decades to come. The act of beating something is a relief to any pent-up feelings that so often accumulate in these pent-up lives. It forms an outlet for energy which find no other form of expression. An adopted “daughter-in-law,” reared in the household till of marriageable age, may be completely at the beck and call of her mother-in-law, who may even add blows to words. Clothes-washing by the beating process thus forms a safety valve. It exercises the muscles, and affords some relief to the feelings. And the clothes certainly look rather better for it than they did before. So it seems to be thrice blessed.

We have not yet done with the element of fire, however. Over yonder, in the plot of land belonging to a Buddhist monastery, is a hexagonal structure, painted red, and suggestive of an embryonic pagoda. The archway door is roughly bricked up, and the débris of other bricks lie close at hand. It is the crematorium of the monastery, where the bodies of defunct monks are washed by the fire-process of all remaining earthly defilement, after such vacuity of mind has been cultivated as may be supposed to have destroyed all human passion within their souls. One has watched the process from a distance on former occasions. The dead monk is placed within in a sitting posture; wood is heaped around him; his comrades perform a circular march to the sound of droning masses and tinkling cymbals; fire is applied; and the soul is supposed to pass through the flame and smoke into the “Western Heavens,” that improved substitute for Nirvana which the Chinese
Buddhists have adopted for the last fifteen hundred years under the then popular Nestorian teaching.*

Visits to the monastery itself prove that there are four hundred monks in residence, who exhibit what is rarely found elsewhere—the spectacle of Buddhist reverence, at least twice a day, during the prolonged chanting of "grace before meat." Sitting on forms before narrow tables, with eyes closed and the palms of the hands placed together, a weird chant arises, kept in time by the tinkling of a bell, until the attendants have filled all the bowls with rice and vegetables. That and the cremation form the only impressive sights which modern Chinese Buddhism can furnish. But on either occasion the man with the camera has little opportunity of reproducing what he sees.

A special hall has been built in this monastery of recent years. A wealthy traveller from these parts, having been caught in a storm, vowed that if only life were spared, he would enrich the Hanyang Monastery with a new set of Lohans (or Buddhist saints). And he kept his vow on his return. So that there are now five hundred gilded images, arranged in a building which it is impossible to photograph, but in their varied postures and shining array are supposed to be well worth a visit. Some are quaint, others comical; some suggestive of doctrinal disputations, and others of more attention to food than garmentage. Nestorian influence is conspicuous as regards two images in glass cases whose heads are adorned with mitres such as may be seen at mass-time in any Roman Catholic cathedral.† Also the legend

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* Nestorian missionaries came to China in the year 635; were received at Court with great favour; set up the famous Nestorian Tablet at Sian in 781 and remained in China till a wholesale destruction of monasteries in 845; thus exerting a modifying influence upon Buddhism for two centuries.

† In Abbe Huc’s Travels (1844-1846) he relates that among Tibetan Buddhists he found much that struck him "with their affinity to Catholicism. The cross, the mitre, the cope of the grand Lamas: the service with the double choirs, the psalmody, the exorcisms, the censer suspended from five chains: the benedictions given by the Lamas by extending the right hand over the heads of the faithful: the chaplet, ecclesiastical celibacy, spiritual retirement, worship of saints, the fasts, processions, litanies and the holy water, all these are analogies between the Buddhists and ourselves."
“Western Bishop” (西方教主) is inscribed on a tablet over one of the more gigantic idols, the same characters (if in a slightly different order) as are now used by the Roman Catholics.

A granite-paved path runs behind the monastery past some old-fashioned barracks erected on an elevation (the only military camp that Hanyang used to possess before modern developments came in), and on every side the view consists of numberless graves, except where the low-levels make farming possible.

And as if to prevent our forgetting the calamity of fires in Chinese cities, we are confronted by a granite stone, commemorating the great Hankow fire of the eighth month of 1898, when it is supposed that some thousands perished in the flames. Residents will not soon forget that Saturday night. A furious gale was blowing from the north; a paraffin lamp was upset in a gambling dispute, and then, as in a Chinese poem:

The winds became the fire’s attendant troops;
Urged by his might, they fought their deadly way.
Oh, furious, roaring blaze borne on the blast!
Oh, blast of terror, on to vict’ry led!

From early evening all through the night and the next forenoon, dry wooden houses blazed and fell, and the flames only stopped at the bank of the Han River.

But pursuing our walk over some rising land to the left, we reach a creek running inland a full mile from a string of lakes, and the busy scene on its banks brings a pleasing change of thought. The snap-shot taken there is not artistically interesting. It consists chiefly of a rough raft of poles from Hunan, managed by two men with the characteristic Changsha sun-hat. But there is some poetry in the suggestions which the scene calls forth. These poles are going along the creek into the broad lakes, to be towed behind a sail-boat to some distant homestead. There has been a good harvest, and
out of his gains of the year Farmer So-and-so is going to build a new house. What anticipation there has been! What cogitation and bargaining! What discussions as to the exact price of timber! And now the bargain has been made, the poles are already in process of being launched. And the excitement among the dwellers of that hamlet, when they arrive! And the congratulations of kinsfolk! And the merry-making among the youngsters—of all ages, for all will become merry children when the new house is erected—there is some poetry here, surely.

Youngsters (bless them!) whether Chinese or Western, belong to the one universal realm of Youngsterdom, and, turning homewards, we find half-a-dozen of them having a grand time “tobogganing.” True there is no snow and they have no sledge. But an upturned bench, and a sun-browned bank, afford sufficient opportunity for their purpose. Could Canadian youngsters shout more lustily or enjoy themselves more with their improved apparatus?

“Don't tumble!” has just been shouted, when over goes the whole party. But happily that is part of the fun. And, more happily still, the foreigner is regarded as no intruder. A hearty laugh all round, and we proceed, feeling that national distinctions are after all very unnecessary affairs. An old woman along the path is counting her cash as she trudges along. She is smiling, too, for they seem to be more than last year. How many folks are gladdened by a good harvest! May they learn to lift their eyes beyond the heavens and away from the idols, to meet the kindly gaze of the all-generous Father of us all!