

THE HEART OF FORT TSCHEU

By HASKETH PRICHARD.

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Overlooking the blue waters of the China sea, and, in its turn, overlooked by a tropical sun, stands an ancient fortification, from the summit of which the British flag lags lazily in the still air. Away to the rim of sight the shallow swells wash among many sprinkled islands, where the dim life of the far east still dreams on, untouched by the centuries. It is a water junk haunted, and where it slips up into the mainland through long and tortuous inlets pirates are said to dwell in sun-smitten lagoons. Yellow pirates, blue amethyst seas, black and unhandy sailing, and, occasionally the long smoke-trail of a big steamer nearing the end of her run toward the rising sun. The site of the fort had been chosen by some long-forgotten strategist. Its natural powers of defense were remarkable, and a good deal of modern masonry engrafted upon these old-world beginnings still lifted an uneven yet solid front seawards.

Such is Fort Tschou viewed close at hand. From the home standpoint things look different. It is no more than an outlying post of the empire, about which we worry very little, although feverish Canton correspondents invariably mention it in connection with French interests. Yet we refuse to believe that the French have coveted Fort Tschou for at least a decade. Their gunboats and cruisers nose stealthily in and about the little bay under the fort to reconnoiter, their officers are entertained by Tschou's small garrison, and afterward long reports as to the strength of the batteries and outworks somehow find their way to Paris for the editors of the war office there. For it happens that a mile or so to the southwest, and almost out of sight behind the sheltering ridge, an island, rooted in with houses, its shores fretted with ship-splung, lives out its hot, busy life under British rule. The best of that island lives serves as a dream to the navies of the world.

During a certain war scare, not yet grown gray, a French gunboat of 1,000 tons, more or less, drew slowly up out of the bay, and the rattle of her anchor chains struck clear across the lonely morning water.

The French captain was on the bridge with his first lieutenant, gazing at the twin hills, at the right of one of which the old fort sat like a broken crown.

"My friend," said the captain, a short-legged Gaul, with a pointed beard, "we must not fall. Presently we go ashore, when you will carry the little camera. Sir Ronald Brail has given me a letter of introduction to Colonel Lennard. They say M. le Commandant has a daughter." He grinned significantly at the slender, handsome young fellow beside him. "You, Francois, will engage the attentions of this young lady and by some little ruse of a tender and a few more photographs of the defenses we have so long desired. To linger with mademoiselle on the roof after dinner—how natural! how delightful! You comprehend?"

Lieutenant Francois intimated that he entirely understood. He only deprecated the fact that mademoiselle must inevitably possess the teeth of Albion—so large, so in evidence.

M. le Capitaine shrugged his shoulders. It was not a question of teeth, but of photographs of the defenses, the strength and position of the batteries. For his part he had met several beautiful English women—here he laughed in a suggestively recent manner. For the sake of his lieutenant he hoped the girl was beautiful, but, if not, he urged upon Francois that the ugly ones appreciate flattery all the more. However, one would see. To begin with, Colonel Lennard would be invited to inspect the Loup-garou.

Francois remained on deck while the dawn changed into orange morning, and he reflected that after all in China even an English miss would help to pass the time, besides keeping his hand in for future success amongst the most desirable of his own countrywomen. As he thought over these things the chink of picks from the direction of the fort traveled to his ears and the watch of the Loup-garou came aft with sandstone, buckets and brooms to clean the decks in anticipation of an exchange of international courtesies.

Meantime the Fort Tschou garrison awakened to the fact that a gunboat had come up from the Tongkin straits. They had heard of the Loup-garou and of its commander, Captain Merovinge, before. He had been recently appointed and was proportionately full of zeal and curiosity.

"I know exactly what we shall all be expected to do," Miss Lennard said. "The fact is, Cordelia, the French want something. They never come here without reason. This time they have brought a letter from Sir Robert, and are to have a run of the bay for a week while they are waiting to fill their bunkers from the next collier that comes along. And that means incessant bother. I must send for Cannon."

Now, it happened that at this period Fort Tschou was credited with possessing a hoart for probably the first time during the variously calculated number of centuries.

Cordelia frowned from the bare desolation of the Wang-Tschou-Fung ridge. The explanation is simple. Miss Lennard had appeared at a few of the rare festivities given along the coast, and some British subaltern in an amorous moment had spoken of her as "the heart of Fort Tschou." The epithet clung as epithets will, especially since, for many reasons, it was considered a peculiarly happy inspiration.

Miss Lennard helped herself to fruit while she listened to the echo of rapid feet ascending the long flight of steps behind the veranda. "I hear some one coming," she said, as a young man in a white uniform appeared between the whitewashed pillars at the further end of the veranda. He gave her a quick look from his brown eyes as he came up to the table before he shook hands.

"Are the French officers coming ashore at once?" asked Cordelia with quite unnecessary interest. "How delightful! You know I like the French."

Colonel Lennard stared at this, but he had not been the father of a pretty grown-up daughter for the last ten months without learning that there are things in heaven and earth not dreamed of in male philosophies.

"Look at this, Cannon," Colonel Lennard handed a letter across the table. "Brail says the French are at us again, and that we must hurry them in one way or another. There is, it appears, a little soreness among them at present, and he thinks if we could give 'em a show in here and soothe 'em down a bit it might serve our interests at a moment when some blamed idiot has been saying that Fort Tschou is being placed on a war footing. How anything has leaked

out I can't imagine, but it's infernally awkward. I really don't see how we are to please them."

Cannon raised his alert red head after a moment's thought.

"Faith, I'd show them around, sir. That would gratify them anyway."

The commandant rose abruptly from the table.

"Don't be a fool, Pat," he said testily.

"I rather relied upon you for a suggestion. I tell you it seems to me just one of those

simple dilemmas that a little care should help one out of. Yet I can't see my way to it."

"Just so, sir. I wouldn't show 'em round all at once. I'd let them see things by degrees—round the northeast batteries, for instance."

"You don't mean. Why, they will see—"

"I can arrange all they will be interested in seeing in forty-eight hours, sir. They'll be off in a week—after that—"

Lennard suddenly burst into a great laugh as his subaltern's meaning grew clear to him.

"Glad! Yes, Pat—show 'em round."

Many things fell out as Cordelia Lennard

for, besides, some other things, which she had not—openly at least—predicted.

The formal visits were exchanged, the formal invitations to the customary dinner

were sent out to the Loup-garou by a yellow messenger in a little white boat. And meantime

Pat Cannon sweated and shivered and swore, and hardly gave himself time to

sleep while he worked continuous gangs of men along the galleries of the old northeast front.

The mound for three days was as busy as an anthill, although from the outside

it appeared empty and placid enough, and

Captain Merovinge remarked to Francois that nothing was more offensive about the

English than their arrogant folly, which allowed them to take matters with so easy

an indifference that they were absolutely

doing nothing to strengthen an important

station such as Fort Tschou, while the mob

in Paris were shouting "A bas Albion!"

"Compus Albion!" and the papers teemed

with hatred and menace. He confessed the

British fleet to be a sufficiently formidable

organization, but the army—what of that?

Contemptibly small, broken and fragmentary,

already dispersed to the four winds of the

empire—could not the gallant soldiers of

France pick them off the face of the earth

as a few swallows insects on a rainy day?

In these and many more telling similar did

Captain Merovinge indulge. In fact, had

Britain been preparing herself at all points

for war, she would not have given another

evidence of her ancient and inalienable pre-

judice; yet, since she seemed to be merely

going about her own business as usual and

with serenity, the imaginary insult flung in

the face of France appeared doubly bitter

and unforgivable in the eyes of the officers

of the Loup-garou.

But that is the way of Frenchmen.

Ignorance is the mother of a numerous

family of wrongs, thus Pat Cannon's en-

ergetic days and nights went by entirely

unappreciated by those who watchfully

waited in the bay under the very mounds

of the guns which claimed so much of his

time and sleep.

But whatever it might be to the others,

there was one person to whom the week was

a time of feverish pleasure and excitement.

Francois went ashore with Merovinge and

was agreeably disappointed to find that

the commandant of Fort Tschou, Sir

Blonde, and her teeth were not in evi-

dence except when she smiled and then—

Francois pressed one hand to his heart and

blew away a kiss with the other when he

recalled it. She was distinctly pretty,

and possessed of a soft frankness of manner

which is not to be met with on the southern

side of the English channel. He found that

his inclinations and his duty to France led

for once in the same direction. He paid

Cordelia the most adorable compliments

and admired himself prodigiously in the

process. In fine, he did everything to in-

terfere himself with Miss Lennard that

could be expected even from one of his gal-

lant nation.

The dinner party ashore was a grand affair

for the place and time. Old wines came

up from the bowels of the fort. Captain

Merovinge spoke wittily of the arts of Paris,

with an airy pointedness of Cairo, and then

passed on with a fine enthusiasm to dwell

on the twin services and their affection for

each other. While Francois, speaking into

a small, shell-like ear, dwelt at length upon

the sad beauty of the night, on music, on

song, on well-mannered problems. His origi-

nal desire to ingratiate himself into the

good graces of the English girl for a time

led to a resolve to win her favor for always.

It matters not at all that a Frenchman

is often bounded by the day after tomorrow.

Let it be owned, and at once, that Cor-

delia behaved outrageously. Colonel Len-

nard did not appear to notice Pat Cannon,

who had spent the whole night in part of

the day in his shirt sleeves working like a

navey with successive gangs of men behind

the northeast face of the fortification. If

he disappeared he did so unobtrusively, and

the French commandant beamed propitiously

around him. As for Francois, cold English

calibot convey they went up to the roof,

and the young Frenchman murmured in the

moonlight of loneliness.

"Yes, I am very lonely—sometimes," ad-

mitted Cordelia with a little air of sadness

which seemed from the heart.

"Speak to me of your loneliness, your

loneliness, Cordelia; I can feel for you. I

also have been lonely."

Mademoiselle merely smiled divinely. She

knew better than to inflict her thoughts on

Francois. With a woman's art she put the

next question.

"Do you know? You have compan-

ions, friends?"

"Companions? What are they?" he replied.

"The soul is lonely and full of longing until

the happy hour arrives when all the solitude

is made up for by the touch of that one

adorable sympathy a man has to dream of."

Cordelia gazed out across the shining

water where the spars of the Loup-garou

trembled in shadow on the tide.

"La recompense," she said, in a low tone,

then, shaking her head slowly, she added:

"But such meetings are rare."

"Rare, yes," he ventured to bend toward

her, "but not unknown. Say to me, I im-

plore you, tell me of your loneliness. The

glance from under her long lashes. "The

delight of such a encounter is enhanced by

its rarity," she continued. "Mademoiselle,

have you never met with one who could

understand you?"

Cordelia's fair face looked preternaturally

ad and smiled under the moon as she said

in a low voice:

"Have you?"

Francois afterward declared that he could

have died of that charming whisper.

"Tonight, mademoiselle!" he answered

rapturously.

And then, ah, evil fate! it was time to say

goodnight and depart in the captain's gig.

But even separation had its alleviations. He

passed the deck of the Loup-garou during

his watch and saw the daylight grow into

a pallid circle through the porthole of his cabin

while he still dwelt ecstatically not only

upon Miss Lennard's claims to admiration

but upon her hair, her figure, even her

pretty, hesitating French—although it was

the French of Montreux and Brussels—but

also upon the flattering response his atten-

tions had drawn from her.

In the morning Merovinge took occasion

to congratulate him on his success. "That

appeared to go there Merovinge winked in

a highly complimentary manner," "as the

Americans say—on veils!"

Francois replied with happy self-ap-

preciation, adding a warm comment upon

Miss Lennard's attractions.

"She is beautiful! Ah, yes! Have I not

said that there are English women—ah, the

most bewitching!" the captain sighed retro-

spectively. "Yes, yes, I know it!"

But Francois had little interest to squander

upon Merovinge's past triumphs.

"The back of mademoiselle's neck," he

went on, "white, innocent, exquisite—one

sees its counterpart only in a little child or

in the picture of an angel!"

Merovinge came back from his own tender

recollections with some dissatisfaction.

"Indeed?" he said rather coldly, he had

not observed the back of mademoiselle's

neck, but he was prepared to take its charms

on trust. Meantime, Francois could have all

the leave he found necessary to fulfill the

duty France required of him.

The party then for that came

aboard the Loup-garou for déjeuner in-

cluded Colonel Lennard, his daughter, and

a pink-faced young subaltern of marines.

Cordelia was handed up the gangway by

the incomparable lieutenant. He paraded

her about the deck, he spoke to her of his

hopes and his struggles, of his past, of his

future, of his ambitions, of his plans, of

making rapid headway in the girl's heart,

judging from the absorbed attention with

which she listened to his rhapsodies. She

pled him with such apt and intelligent ques-

tions, she realized, with a fullness of the af-

fections alone can teach, how great were the

dangers he must face in his career, the

storms, the fevers and the climate!

He perceived himself to be the envy of

his comrades in arms and glowed with a

racial exaltation of spirit. When Pat Can-

non came aboard later, smart, straight, alert

as usual, with many apologies for the delay

duty had forced upon him, Francois received

him with effusion. This kindly feeling was

yet further increased when he observed Can-

non go up to Miss Lennard and say a few

words, to which the young lady gave a short

answer and promptly turned her back upon

him.

"You can fetch your adorer and his monkey

gang along any time tomorrow," Pat Cannon

said, and, rather desolately, he admitted

for Cordelia's behavior toward the dapper