

## China's Inspector of Customs.

The greatest man in many respects and the greatest mandarin in China, is, or was, Sir Robert Hart, G. C. M. G., Inspector General of Imperial Maritime Customs. He is also the man whose name is probably least familiar on the China coast, far less familiar than that of half a dozen of his commissioners. That is because the Inspector General is not a person—not a mere Sir Robert Hart—he is, and has been for thirty years simply "the I. G." No one ever sees him; no one ever mentions his name in the newspapers; and from the standing desk in his little office in Peking, which he has scarcely left for twenty years he collects the revenue of the largest empire on earth, governs the municipalities of thirty or forty ports over a vast line 4,000 miles in extent, protects the shipping of that coast by a fleet of gunboats and a splendid system of lights, regulates the coming and going of great freight carriers, issues monthly, quarterly and yearly yellow books of statistics and reports which are unequalled in their excellence by any other nation, and controls a staff of over 500 Europeans and some 2,000 natives of the best systematized and most efficient civil service known. And he does far more, although he strives therein always to blush unseen; he negotiates all the big loans which bind China to Europe, advises the Tsungli Yamen on foreign relations, and when the latter body gets itself into a tangle dictates the only form of treaty which finds a way out.

With all this immense power thrust on his hands, Sir Robert is the most modest and least ambitious of men. He has never sought self aggrandizement or riches, although his economy and keen financial instinct have enabled him to save a private fortune which is frequently exaggerated, no inconsiderable part of which goes to sustain Lady Hart's handsome establishment in London. Sir Robert does not receive a salary from the Chinese Government. He deducts a fixed annual sum from the revenues he collects, perhaps half a million, perhaps a million dollars, from which he pays himself what he pleases after meeting the expenses of the service; and those who belong to the service know that that service is himself, never stinted, generously paid, a great machine of which he himself is the least conspicuous part. The salaries of thirty or forty commissioners vary from \$500 to \$800 a month, that of the hundred odd clerks or assistants, who are divided into eight grades, from \$100 for a beginner to \$400 a month, and that of the two or three hundred tide surveyors, examiners, boat officers, tide waiters, watchmen &c. from \$50 to \$300 a month. Besides these salaries, and those of a host of native interpreters, shupans, clerks, weighers, artificers, boatmen &c. he maintains half a dozen or more modern war vessels, or revenue cutters, with natives crews and foreigners, a score or more of splendidly equipped lighthouses and lightships, and an admirable system of buoys in all the port entries and river channels—Harbor and Coast Surveillance Departments, which all navigators acknowledge to be quite equal to similar public works in other countries. The work alone, when one considers the enormous extent of China's coast, is sufficient, one would think, to engross the life task of a single man.

Sir Robert Hart is a Scotchman of Irish descent, who joined the British Consular Service a poor and unknown youth, somewhere in the fifties. He is now getting on for 70 years of age, and has controlled the Foreign Customs Service of China for forty years. Virtually, although he was not its original organizer, he alone can claim the credit for building up the service to what it now is; an honorable profession for gentlemen, as lucrative and assured as the civil service of India. When he took it in hand the service, which extended only to five ports, was the most despised in the world, and composed of the worst class of stray adventurers, engaged on the spot. Now it is one of the most exclusive of services, eagerly sought after by the sons of Consuls and Ministers of different countries, difficult to enter, and forming the aristocracy of the foreign settlements in China. Candidates must first obtain a direct nomination from Sir Robert, through influential introductions, and then pass a rigorous examination in classical education; but, unlike the stereotyped civil service elsewhere, mere book knowledge will never pass a man whose appearance, as well as his connections, do not recommend him as likely to uphold the prestige and be equal to the duties of the

service.

Although, Sir Robert may naturally be supposed to have a personal predilection for Englishmen and Americans, and although it has been impossible for him altogether to avoid the accusation of nepotism, he resolutely adheres to the principle that such a service must be purely cosmopolitan; you therefore meet among its commissioners and assistants a number of French, German, Italian and Scandinavian gentlemen, who, however, are scarcely distinguishable from English in their language and habits. And, as before mentioned, these gentlemen, seniors and juniors, form, with the Consular officers, the aristocracy of the coast, as they are well entitled to, not a few belonging to the aristocracy of their own countries. But once in the service, neither title nor relationship to "the I. G." avails, nor even seniority; the secret of the marvellous efficiency of the corps is so anomalous a position is entirely due to the chief's watchful personal surveillance in selecting the right men for the right places. And yet not 10 per cent of the service has ever seen or been within 500 miles of its chief. Sir Robert rules by secret reports of the most personal and searching nature, which he weighs with discrimination approaching clairvoyance, and it is a common saying in the junior messes that you cannot flirt with a woman, buy a pony or play a game of cards without a "little bird" at once carrying the tale to Peking, and probably bringing down to you the famous "threatening letter."

These "threatening letters" consist of printed circulars, which all like bolts from the blue, and begin: "It having come to the ears of the I. G. that in certain ports there appears to exist a relaxation of that self-discipline for that sense of propriety,

(or that spirit of diligence and economy, or what not), which every assistant owes to the prestige of the service and to the articles signed on his appointment. Commissioners are hereby requested to call the attention of their assistants to paragraphs so and so of Circular No.—, Vol.—, 18—, and promptly to report any dereliction of behavior to the I. G., reminding their staff that disobedience to the rules entails immediate dismissal," &c.

These circulars referred to form the library of every Custom House in scores of volumes, and represent in themselves an astounding literary output for a single brain, consisting as they do of long printed letters on every conceivable subject, numbering a score or more for each of the forty years during which Sir Robert had ruled; they are annually reindexed, and every sort of technical question is decided by rules there laid down, often without need of further reference to headquarters. Some of these volumes, the early ones especially, are of absorbing personal interest, and were it not contrary to the unwritten law ever to divulge their contents, it would be a labor of love to the present writer to reproduce some of their passages which betray the man behind the spinn who dictated them. Sir Robert, of course has been frequently besieged by large publishing houses to write his memoirs; and should the present misery at Peking result in the loss of this invaluable life also, the world will have missed a true internal history of China during the vital last half of the nineteenth century which no other man than Sir Robert can possibly tell. Although half a century of finance and official documents has docked the I. G.'s style of its early vigor and self-revealings, the bare record of his unknown struggles at Peking would make a history far more absorbing than any novel.

This brings to the question—which, alas, may be fatally solved before these words are printed—is Sir Robert safe in the midst of the tumult at Peking? We have already heard that the Customs mess the quarters of the score of juniors annually sent up to come under the chief's "cold eye" have been destroyed and rumor has it that these

young assistants have been massacred along with the rest. I do not, however, think that the I. G. himself runs much risk, unless he has personal enemies in Prince Tuan's faction; although it must not be forgotten that a foreigner in such a position cannot avoid bitter and inveterate enemies among mandarins whose counsels he is often compelled to oppose. Sir Robert is not a foreign minister; he is a Chinese Mandarin of the first class, endowed with the yellow jacket, his ancestors posthumously honored by Imperial edict, his loyal and honorably record second to none of the high officials of the Empire, a man whom the most bigoted Manchu knows to be the prop of the dynasty, whom none would dare to accuse of secret partialities or suspect of political intrigue; and furthermore, the intimate friend of many of the most powerful officers. Add to this that Sir Robert is surrounded by a small native staff absolutely devoted to him and splendidly trained in watching and reporting everything that goes on, as you can see that the only risk he runs is that incurred by the native mandarins themselves, of having his house burned over his head by the fanatical and indiscriminating rabble which appears to have taken command of Peking.

Sir Robert's death would mean much more than the snapping of the mainspring of the great civil service he has organized. It would mean the loss of positively the only man who is fit, by experience, by position, by genius, to undertake the task or reorganizing the whole administration of China as the mandatory of the Powers should they decide eventually to take over the Government of China. Sir Robert has often been begged to leave the Chinese service for the office of Great Britain's Minister, but he knew that his potentialities for China's good would be far less as such. Also, his health has suffered much from his prolonged residence in Peking, and since the fatal facilitation of the British Government after the Japanese war, and Russia's consequent predominance, his influence has waned. None the less, he is the only man who stands as an individual in the competent but neutral position in

which the United States stand as a nation, and he is the man on whom the reorganization of China must devolve. His life's work is already done; all his ambitions are already satisfied, and an earldom awaits him whenever he cares to accept it—which could only be on his retirement, since British honors conferred on him now would seem to intimate a British claim to the customs. But the keynote of Sir Robert's life has been duty, conscientiousness, self-sacrifice, the good of China, and he would not shrink from the burden—if his conditions were accepted. These conditions would be the same as he demanded when he consented to organize the revenue department: implicit confidence, absolute independence, a free hand.

The employment of foreigners to collect the customs revenue began informally at Shanghai in 1853, when Mr. (afterward Sir Thomas) Wade assisted the native collector for a year during the occupation of the city by the Taipings, being replaced the next year by H. N. Lay. In 1858 the system was extended to the five ports then open to trade. In 1863 Horatio Nelson Lay got into trouble over the Lay-Osborne flotilla fiasco and was replaced by Mr. Hart, who had been in charge since 1861. Thereafter, the service was fastened upon China by the war indemnities, for which the customs revenue was hypothecated. The indemnities paid off, the service remained as the only instrument the government could rely on honestly to transmit the revenue to Peking. Since then, of course, this has been the guarantee for all foreign loans, and it is an immense tribute to Sir Robert's management that this revenue was considered so sure and stable under his collection that Chinese loans have, in spite of everlasting wars and rebellions, been the least fluctuating of such securities on the foreign markets.

Sir Robert's nominated successor is Mr. Boyd Bredon, long commissioner of customs at Shanghai. Sir Robert has often been on the point of retiring, but refrained under pressure for fear of the service lapsing under a foreign I. G., into an instrument of private politics. Li Hung Chang, while Viceroy of Tien-Tsin, did his best to thwart Sir Robert by setting up the German commissioner there, Mr. Detring, as his own creature, insisting on his selection after the I. G. had officially transferred him elsewhere. Detring, of course, fell with his protector in 1895. Sir Robert remained.



THE SECRET.