

MOST THRILLING STORY.

NARROW ESCAPE OF COLONEL MAN AND HIS SOLDIERS.

Told by a British Officer, who was Afloat on an Ice Floe—Aval Experience of a Party Who Were Caught on the River When the Ice Broke.

Of the many stories of the perils of the frozen North and the perils of that region at the time of year when the ice in the rivers begins to break, Colonel Alexander Man, of the British Army, relates one of the most thrilling. It is best told in the language of the Colonel:

It was back in the Seventies that I found myself in Yingtze, the port of Manchuria. On passing the bar of the Sira Muren, on the way to Yingtze, one is impressed by the solitude that reigns on every hand. It is not until the steamer has steered north for about an hour to a point where the stream, after making quite a sharp bend westward, returns on an eastern course, and then starts almost due south again; it is not, I say, until one reaches this spot that one sees anything denoting the presence of human life—save, perhaps, a stretch of nets, or the tent of a fisher family standing on the beach, or perched on some knoll overlooking the river. But the scene changes suddenly. Across the horse-shoe marked out by the course of the river there looms a forest of masts—scores of junks and lorchaes ranged four and five deep off the rough wharves. Beyond lie the European craft in double tiers, with struck yards and in-rigged booms. As the ship is brought up into the berth which is left vacant for her near the imperial custom house one turns naturally from the setting sun and glances toward the well-built jetty to realize that at length one has reached this little known country, which stretches away for a thousand miles—mountain and valley, lake and desert, until it touches the mighty Amur, face to face with the

GRIM FRONTIER OF SIBERIA.

Yingtze, referred to contemptuously by the Shanghai people as a "bean-cake paradise," is certainly not imposing. It is a kind of scratch collection of flat-roofed, somber-colored, single-storied buildings; and yet it contains banks, shops, and warehouses of far more aggregate value than many more pretentious settlements seen on the way out.

The mile-wide river surges past—a turbid stream, hemmed in by high brown banks of bare alluvial soil, relieved by straggling trees and tiny villages surrounded by walls of earth. The strange stillness of the air suggests the Egyptian desert, or the wilds of Saskatchewan. Such is the summer aspect. In winter, however, Yingtze is entirely changed, and the almost Arctic situation of the place makes itself known. The mighty river ceases to flow, and becomes transformed into stupendous masses of ice 40 feet thick. These great masses, piled up in ridges at the bend of the river, stretch right out to the ocean, and are only arrested there by the serried ranks of foam-topped breakers. In these terrible winter days the erstwhile dusty plain receives a vast silvery pall, and the low-pitched cottages, with their gloomy walls, look mere patches in the gleaming landscape. Of course, river traffic disappears altogether; even the light vessel outside the bar sends her spars aloft, casts off from her moorings, and speeds away. All influx of water-borne merchandise, whether foreign or Chinese, ceases entirely; and yet the activity of Yingtze is in no way abated. The barque and the schooner are simply replaced by the cart and the wagon; and now from Mergen and Putana on the west, and from Ninguta and Kirin on the east,

HUGH CONVOYS OF GRAIN.

Skins, opium, and ginseng struggle through the northern passes and go forward to their destination in the Yingtze inn-yards. It happened one day that a Government consignment of specie had to be dispatched westward, and as there were rumors of brigands on the watch the responsible officials suggested that an escort of military police should accompany the party. Accordingly at day-break one morning a quartet of open carts left Yingtze, having, in addition to a couple of Manchurian troopers perched on each and a small contingent of their comrades riding alongside, two files of smart auxiliaries sitting on the shafts. An hour later this cavalcade was followed by the commandant, accompanied by a European subordinate and a good specimen of the native noncommissioned officer. Being well mounted they overtook the carts before they had gone very far, but not until the Government consignment had crossed the river and its protectors were approaching a village, said to be the probable location of the reported ambuscade. Nothing, however, was seen of the bandits; on the contrary, the road was declared perfectly safe by an advance runner, and we started on our return journey. In less than an hour our patrol struck the river at a spot where in "open" weather there is a ferry, but where during winter is found the necessary paraphernalia of a crossing. Half way down we

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heard an excited cry, and the ferryman came rushing to intercept us. BREATHELESS WITH EXCITEMENT.

"Your Excellency cannot proceed! Long before you are across the ice will break up, and you will be overwhelmed. Turn back, sir. Turn back. My humble abode can accommodate the soldiers and cattle, as well as Your Honor's, and to-morrow I may be able to get you over in one of the punts."

These words were accompanied by much gesticulation, and were uttered in a tone which admitted of no doubt as to the speaker's earnestness. Indeed, I knew him, and had much faith in him. He was a veteran, long past the allotted span of life, and little presents bestowed upon him, though received with the Celestial's apparent want of appreciation, were never forgotten when his special knowledge of the crossing could be useful to his patrons.

On this occasion, however, those he addressed were in no mood to be balked, if any chance remained of seeing the inside of their own comfortable quarters that night. For what was the alternative? It was to sit during the long, cold hours of the night in a room packed to overflowing with "the Great Unwashed"—many, as likely as not, from the wildest parts of the country, and as evil-smelling as only the sheepskin-clad Tartars can be. At any rate, I turned a deaf ear to the veteran ferryman's counsel, and that, notwithstanding that his warning was respectfully repeated at the last moment by my own trusty Sergeant. I committed myself and those with me to a cruel and unjustifiable risk. Our cart was restored to its owner, and our three horses

INTRUSTED TO THE FERRYMAN.

Not 10 minutes elapsed from the time we left land before a dull roar, like the firing of heavy cannon, announced that the peasant's prophecy was amply verified. The ice had broken up! The great platform of ice on which we stood, and which stretched from one bank to the other, was split and riven from end to end, and from side to side, and became in a few moments a mere collection of enormous floes, dashed hither and thither by the tide, and left struggling in a turmoil in which the smaller floes were ground to pieces by the larger ones. It was a fearful sight. The extraordinary width of the river must be borne in mind, also the immense thickness of the ice and the irresistible force of the newly awakened river. I remember seeing the great floes bearing down upon us, and curling over on top of each other with the most appalling and deafening sounds. Almost before we realized our position, we found ourselves prisoners on what, by God's grace, proved to be the strongest floe in our immediate neighborhood. This great floe was some hundred feet square, and by virtue of its size and weight, it asserted its superiority as it charged irresistibly forward to take its place amidst the whirling, contending masses.

Seeing how matters stood, I leaped to the highest point of the floe, where snow and rubbish had been heaped up beside the ice roadway. From this point of vantage I surveyed the awful prospect that surrounded me on every side, and tried to think out a means of deliverance. At first, I remember, the men ran excitedly to and fro, with smothered cries, and a little slackening of outward discipline.

A few sharp words in their own tongue, however, were at once heeded, and from this time forward nothing could exceed the steadiness and good conduct of these fine fellows.

All this time we were whirling down the river toward the settlement, and our only hope lay in being able to make ourselves heard as we were swept past it. Night was fast coming on, however, and it seemed in the last degree unlikely that we should be observed. Only too well I knew that should our great land of ice be carried below the harbor, we must inevitably be carried out to sea, where death assuredly awaited us.

You may, then, judge for yourself the inexpressible relief I felt when, just as we approached the northernmost building of Yingtze, I heard the voice of my Scandinavian officer above the deafening din of the crashing ice. There was an unmistakable stoppage and rocking and rumpling of the floes ahead of us, and a few moments later the mad career of the one on which we ourselves were was checked, and it took instead a round and round course which caused it to remain practically stationary.

As we were but a cable's length from the customs station we felt our chance was now or never. Together we fired round after round, and shouted lustily in unison. But the wind had risen as the sun went down, and the terrifying roar and crash of the giant floes as they were ground together by the swirling tide defeated our puny efforts. Just as we were beginning to fear the worst and had actu-

ally recommenced our ghastly voyage our salvation came. The irresistible force behind the ice had evidently broken up the jam ahead. Suddenly our Corporal cried out that he saw signals. I sprang to the hillock once more, and shouted with the desperate energy of a man whose life and the lives of many others depended on the power of his lungs. It seemed that the ice bed had been riven asunder and subdivided below, as well as above, the town, and the check that had brought us to a temporary standstill had been caused by the central mass itself, released but unbroken, jamming helplessly in the

BEND OF THE GIANT RIVER.

The advancing up-river floes were thus arrested until some portion of the obstruction had come away. It seems that one of my staff in the town itself, going on night duty, thought he described human figures on one of the floes as he was gazing from the jetty at the appalling war of the ice masses in the river. He could not recognize individuals, of course, but he saw fellow creatures in sore peril, and he acted with promptitude and skill.

Without a moment's delay he dashed off to the barracks and called out the men. In a wonderfully short space of time he had our lifeboat ready for launching. Now, before joining the Chinese service, Mr. T. had been an officer in the mercantile marine, and his nautical training certainly stood us in good stead that night. He calculated that the career of the floes would soon be blocked again in the big bend, and he felt sure that a back current would be set up under the near bank. It turned out exactly as he had anticipated. His boat was then carried over a rough region of ice to the lane of water made by the eddy aforesaid, and soon eight stalwart rowers were pulling in our direction.

Will my readers try to imagine the feelings with which I and my half-dazed comrades suddenly heard the sound of oars in the rowlocks, almost instantly followed by a cheery English hail, "Ice ahoy?" Now began the final struggle. Our rescuers were within 150 feet of us, and between us and them lay three or four huge masses of ice—smaller, however, than the one on which we stood. These smaller floes were necessarily more sensitive than our own to the action of the eddies, and they were now tossing and whirling in wild confusion. And the darkness of night began to envelop this UTTERLY INDESCRIBABLE SCENE.

Under these desperate circumstances I don't suppose that any sane man would have attempted the passage to the boat on foot, but the thing had to be done. Anyhow, where I and my hardy Norsemen went my stanch Manchus unhesitatingly followed. We ran we jumped and we slipped; we swayed like drunken men as we stepped from floe to floe, which rose and fell and swirled and crashed round and round beneath us; but we never actually tumbled down. At last we reached the boat and flung ourselves into it, speechless and almost fainting. Mr. T. wasted no precious moments in words of congratulation; no sooner were we all over the gunwale than the oars swung to work once more, and the sturdy galley shot down the open passage up which she had come. We were carried into the town, for we could not walk, and, under careful treatment, no member of the party was permanently the worse for an experience which is deeply graven on the hearts of all.

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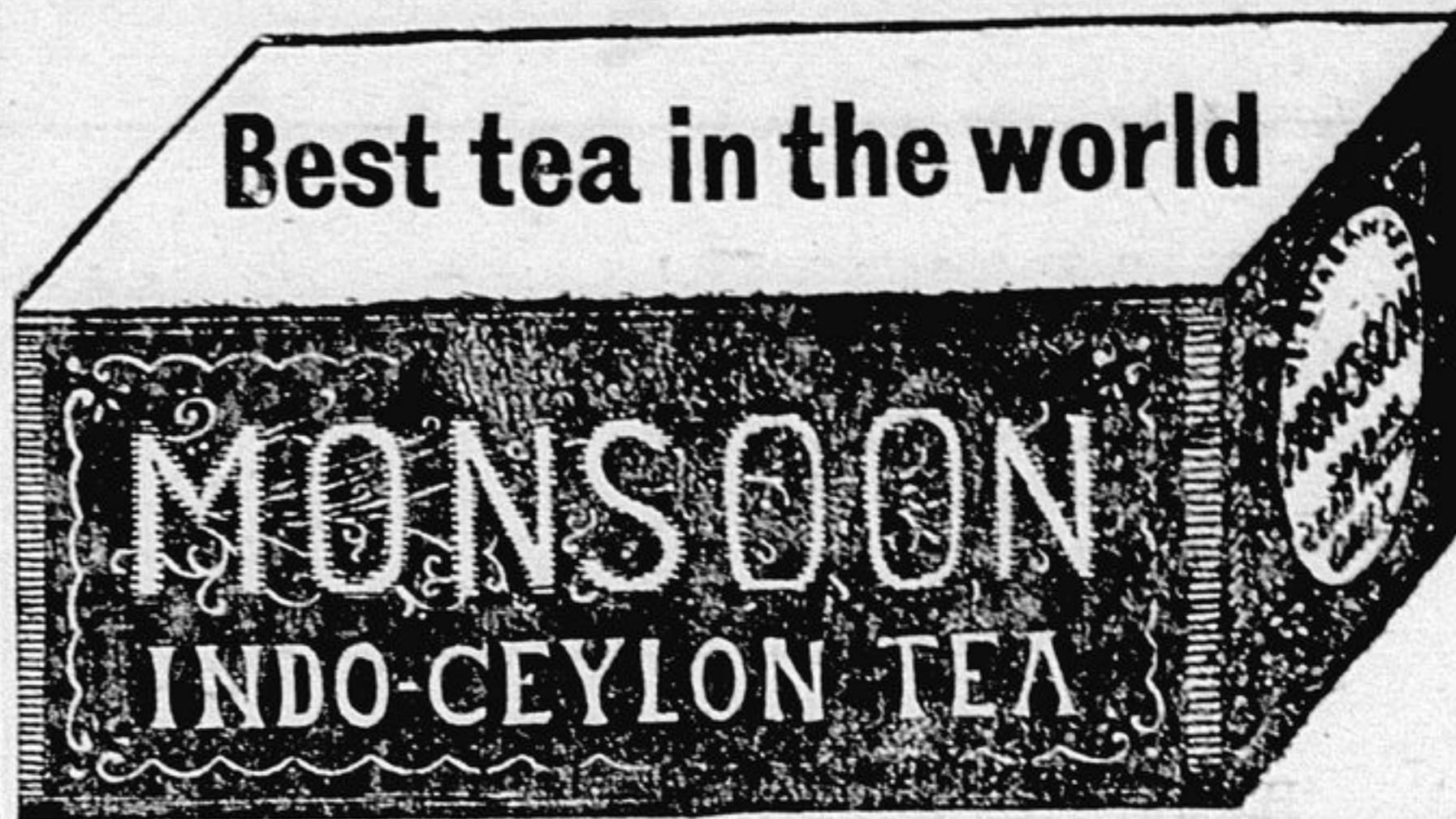
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