

# Houseboat Days in China

by  
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With a New Foreword

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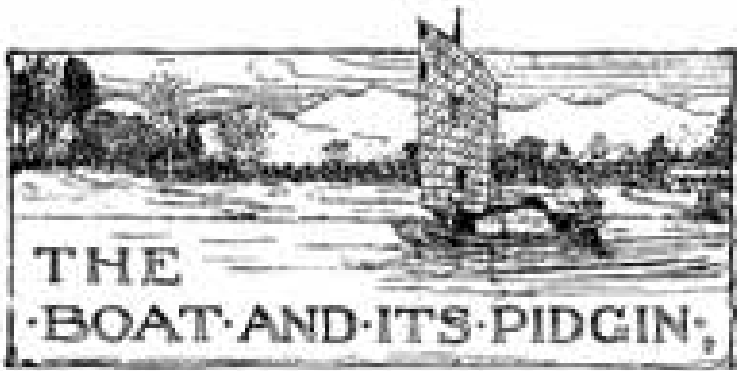
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## CHAPTER I

"We are what suns and winds and waters make us."—LANDOR.

"Perpetual devotion to what a man calls his business is only to be sustained by perpetual neglect of many other things. And it is not by any means certain that a man's business is the most important thing he has to do."—STEVENSON.



OR those to whom the Yangtze is but a name, the existence of the European's houseboat thereon requires explanation; for, like many another feature of life on the fringe of Eastern Asia, it is an exotic growth, slowly evolved as the white man has adapted himself to a new and medieval environment. To most people the word will no doubt call up visions either of those unwieldy floating parlours which line the comfortable banks of Thames in summer, or that more navigable but cheerless craft discovered by Mr. Bangs on the cold tide of Styx. But to us in China the houseboat is become as much and as intimate a factor of existence as Tao-tais, the chit-system, or any other of the parochial matters which

differentiate our lives from those of Upper Tooting. And so, though I may be tedious, I shall explain matters for the benefit of the uninitiated.

Imprimis, however, a word to the enlightened reader, the old resident (bless his querulous ways!), who, rightly enough, asks to be informed of your book's *raison d'être*. A record of Idleness, my dear Sir, trivial things set down in garrulous mood and chiefly for the delectation (if so it may be) of fellow-Idlers. Herein you shall find little geography and even less science, except it be such as all may take, by favour of the gods, from "pleasure trips into the lands of Thought and among the Hills of Vanity." A little chronicle, Madam, in memory of glad sunlit days, of cheery companions, and the joy of living. No great matter at best, and yet, to those who, smoking tolerant pipes, perceive through the haze something of relative values, our boat and its affairs may, from a philosophic standpoint, be as worthy of attention as any of the world-shaking matters that reverberate from the House by the River at Westminster.

The houseboat of the lower Yangtze regions owes her existence to several causes, of which the first is the *wanderlust* inbred in the Anglo-Saxon, and, second, the absence of all roads, except waterways, in China. She is the embodiment in canvas and timber of European ideas adapted to Celestial ways and byways, ideas of accommodation, watercraft, and common humanity. This for the general; but beyond this, of necessity, lies the expression of individual identity common to all ships, so that, crossing the gang-plank of the *Water-Baby* or the *Mighty Atom*, you shall say at a glance what manner of men their owners be.

In the beginning of things the houseboat of Shanghai, such craft as the gentlemanly opium smugglers used in the days when the Eight Princes held their tinsel Court at Nanking, were nothing more than the native *wusieh k'uai*, equipped with camp beds to keep down vermin, and curtains to keep out the winds of heaven. And in remote spots one may yet fare right well in these native boats; of which more anon. But your Chinese ship,

big or little, is an unwieldy craft, built on the principle common to the life of this people that there is always room for one more, and indifferent as to how or where he shall bestow himself. It is eminently adapted for a race which travels as a matter of choice in the patriarchal manner, which cooks its food in the helmsman's bunk and eats it on the cabin floor; but British ideas of "ship-shape" as well as the exigencies of racial division aboard called for gradual amendment of the type. Therefore, our boat was brought to a form combining the qualities of house comfort and ship speed; Chinese rigging gave place to English sails; lee-boards were added, and finally brasswork, awnings, and a coat of paint made the thing complete. Its evolution, which may be traced in old photographs, has taken forty years, and the last word has not yet been spoken.

Philosophers are agreed that the common fate of all noble and great devices of man, unless restrained by abiding virtue or an energetic police, is to fall away from the first ideal state, and this by reason of the cankerworm of luxury. It is an old-world struggle this, of Stoic and Epicurean, to be found for the seeking at every turn of the grim human comedy. In the matter of houseboats one may see clearly its evidences and portents. Let us say nothing of such elephantine freaks as Simeon may build, whereon to give his Gargantuan feasts, *al fresco*, on summer nights; tavern-ships with pianolas and plush fittings, happily unseen beyond harbour limits or, at their worst, disturbing the stillness of the nearer hills. Nor need I refer to those boudoir boats, lace-curtained and mirrored, whose owners must needs find a way to spend their money, and whose chief use lies in up-river picnics, entertainments wherein gramophones, parasols, much food and some gallantry combine to relieve the dullness of Whangpoo scenery. In another place, if I find myself in a proper and delicate humour, I shall refer to the question of the fair sex in its relation to houseboats; as for these vessels of the Sybarites, let us leave them at their moorings. For they are excrescences, of their nature ephemeral, unworthy of serious regard. Let us not

speak of these, but only of houseboats *pour le bon motif*, and even here honesty compels the admission that there exists evidence of the insidious cankerworm aforesaid.

It is a curious fact that as the flesh-pots of the white man in China have waned in their fatness, as the conditions of his life have gradually come to conform more closely to the standards of the lands which sent him forth, as the profitable hazards of the game have grown less, so has the candle of his comfort's needs waxed ever greater. The fact scarcely calls for demonstration; its evidence meets us on the threshold of every villa residence, protrudes itself in all our dining-rooms, in our clubs, and on our backs; and the houseboat, compared with the craft of twenty years ago, affords proof of the advances we have made in comfortable materialism. The thing was at first of its nature simple, a fitting answer to the call of the wild; but now, when transcontinental railways are making us one of London's remoter suburbs, and the voice of Israel (*via* New York and Moscow) is in our ears, our boats are becoming finicky things, tricked out with marble baths and gold paint. 'Tis an easy descent, its impulse the same which leads many a good woman to turn her house into a restaurant, but its results are unpleasant. To give you an instance: I have lately been told of a boat built to contain four persons in luxury, a thing in itself so contrary to the philosophy of up-country wanderings that one can only explain it as due to continental influence or the yellow peril at our gates. This monstrous invention has folding beds of full size, a bathroom with hot and cold water laid on, dining-room for six, and a patent card-table; moreover, she is provided with a petrol motor-engine which drives her through the water at six miles an hour, with hideous noise and stink. True, this is an extreme case, and Grandison, her owner, is the sort of man who goes to the theatre with his comradore; but the germ of an unholy competition is abroad, and there is need for us, the brotherhood of Idlers, to walk home carefully in the paths of simplicity. The cigarettes of Egypt are well enough in their place, but on the hillsides give me the honest briar.

It is not given to the works of man to combine all the virtues, and the reader will observe that our houseboat, being useful, is not a thing of absolute beauty. Those who desire an exact description of her build and equipment will not find it here, for, in the first place, your technical details are but dry stuff, and, in the second, this is a matter on which, as with feminine loveliness, we do not all agree. Let me therefore but roughly outline the *Saucy Jane*, so that those who have never crossed her gang-plank may know something of her interior economy and uses. The houseboat, like all Gaul, is divided into three parts—the white man's, the yellow man's, and the dogs'; and since the object of its being is that all these should dwell together, for days or weeks, in such good content as may be, the proportion of space which each enjoys is a matter on which much depends. I speak of the boat for two, whose, average length is forty-five feet, with an eight-foot beam amidships. In such a one a cabin twelve feet by eight should suffice for any decent pair of Christians and sportsmen; all good fellowship and much peace of mind can travel easily in a smaller space. For your free-moving man, who in his waking hours must have room to swing a cat, or indeed in any event, it is an excellent thing to have bunks which fold and fit nicely into the walls, for not only do you thus avoid during the day that dormitory aspect which has been known to offend sensitive minds, but these bunks being provided with locks, you can enjoy the pleasant certainty that no unsavoury native will sleep on them during your absence.

Forward of the mast the ship is decked some three feet higher than the level of the cabin floor; in this place is the kennel, as ample as possible, while leaving room in the house for a chain locker and those mysterious depths where, under our protection, the lowdah carries his smuggled salt and other perquisites. Bluff bows of the Chinese type are best, affording grateful space above and below; as our journeyings are usually on pacific inland waters, we can cheerfully take the risk of an occasional bumping in a head sea. Much of the joy of houseboat days depends on

good deck-room forward, which should give place at least for two cane chairs. There, smoking the sunset pipe, your body tingling with the health of a long day in the open, and your mind at peace with gods and men, you may watch the soft sinking of twilight to dusk, and dusk to night, deriving a very human sense of added ease from the contemplation of the coolies' labours; or, as the dawn comes up over the edge of your flat, sail-dotted world, you may here fill your lungs with the morning breeze, blowing sweet-scented from the rape fields, and thank God that you are alive. All of us, if we stop to think it out, would sooner share



*The Dingy.*

what Whitman calls "the cooling influences of external nature" with a congenial friend or book on the quarter-deck of our wandering boat than sit in the busiest money-mill on earth; the pity of it is that we go on, nevertheless, most of our days, groping in our subterranean ways, while, far overhead, larks are singing and the sun is shining on God's wonderful world; and so the swift years pass, un-

til from our narrow path we emerge to find Charon waiting for us by the cold stream. Every day that we rescue from the gloomy routine of our counting-houses and gas-lit streets to spend under the open sky is a day of grace; this is a truth which even Chicago may recognise, as its spasmodic cult of the 'simple life' bears witness. All of which digression comes from the memory of hours fortunately spent beyond the frontiers of fancy on our houseboat's foredeck.

Aft of the cabin belongs to the yellow man; seeing the space he occupies, a stranger would be surprised at the number of our Aryan brothers and the manner in which they dispose themselves and their impedimenta. Ten Celestial souls, at least, jour-

ney (without sentiment) in our company—the boy, the cook, and the crew,—and each has his allotted place for work and sleep. In a well-ordered boat the space between cabin and kitchen is generous; partly because one is thus spared many of the unsavoury harbingers of dinner which arise from the frying-pan, and partly because the boy and cook have no other sleeping-room than that which the "pantry" affords. I know that there exists a theory, widely held, that a native can sleep anywhere, and that to concern oneself for his comfort is foolishness; many good people quarter their Chinese servants worse than their dogs. No doubt that the Oriental survives bad treatment and that he accepts it, like other sublunary happenings, with stolid patience; at the same time, there is an old saying about the merciful man which comes to mind when one sees the "boy" sleeping *en pelotte* in a cupboard five feet by three, while the cook lies uneasily curled between his stove and the water-kong. Humanity apart, these people would better appreciate our excursions and sorties, and render us, therefore, a better, because a more willing, service if their necessities were a matter of more concern to us.

Of other matters on which depends our boat's wellbeing, that of light and ventilation in the cabin is immediate. To get both in plenty, without the thousand natural ills that come of draughts; to avoid gloom and glare by day; to prevent on wintry nights those swift alternations of stuffiness and cold, wherefrom spring rheums and vapours,—these are problems to which the complete answer still eludes us. Yet there are certain principles of universal acceptance. Our windows should be wide, and one of them on a level with the bunkhead, so that, without moving from the pillows, the silent message of the kindly stars may reach us as we turn to sleep; that, waking, we may see the wonder of rosy-fingered dawn come, soft heralded by twittering of birds. As to fresh air, tastes vary; I have seldom known two men, and never a woman, to hold a reasonable and temperate view of the subject, and I have journeyed pleasantly enough with a German who would have none of it. The question is greatly simplified,