

The Poisoning in Hong Kong — An Episode of Life in China

Forty Years Ago

by Augustine Heard

written about 1894

Transcribed from a typewritten manuscript from the Special Collection of the Baker Library, Harvard Business School, Boston MA, 02163.

Heard I/Box: GQ-1 GQ-2. Folder GQ-2-1: Various Articles by Augustine Heard Jr.

Introduction by Robert M. Gray

Introduction Augustine Heard, sometimes referred to as Augustine Heard Jr or Augustine Heard II, was born in 1827, the son of George Washington Heard and Elizabeth Farley Heard and the nephew of Augustine Heard, the Ipswich sea captain, supercargo, and founder of Augustine Heard and Co. Like his brothers John, George, and Albert Farley Heard, he worked with his uncle's firm in China. Like his brother Albert Farley, he wrote a memoir of the great Hong Kong poisoning incident in 1857 during the second Anglo-Chinese war. The following is transcribed from a typewritten copy I found in the Heard papers at the Baker Library at Harvard University.

The Mail-Steamer was to leave at one o'clock. It was about half-past ten when my boy handed me, as I sat writing at my table, a "circular" – a half sheet of paper –, at the head of which was written in large characters, "The bread is poisoned. Take mustard [teaspoonful] in warm water; 1/2 pint & afterwards warm water; after vomiting freely, eat raw eggs." signed by Dr. Chaldecott a leading physician of the colony. I recognized the hand. The announcement was sufficiently startling. I threw the paper over to a friend who was sitting opposite. "Look at that, Dixwell. How do you feel?" and, turning to the servant, who was standing near, impassive as usual, "Where did you get that circular?" "It was sent up just now from the office, Sir." Dixwell replied, "I feel all right. How are you?" "So do I, but let us go down to the office and see what it all means.

It was about three months after the famous "Lorcha Arrow" incident which led to the second war with China. We were sitting in our new house I had just finished, high up on the hill side at Hongkong, and separated by a spacious garden, our "compound", from the office at a lower level. Half-way down we met the bookkeeper coming up, "What's the meaning of that circular you just sent me, Deacon?" "I don't know, Sir, what it means, more than

it says, but one thing is certain, the bread is poisoned, and there are lots of people down with it." Whose bread is poisoned? What bread is poisoned?" "I don't know for sure; but there's no doubt E-Sing's is, and you get your bread from E-Sing, don't you?" Just then Capt. Bussche came up, who was to leave by the mail, greatly excited. "Have you taken your mustard? No? Well, come on. There's not a moment to lose. There's no doubt about it. They're all down everywhere. I have just come from Endicott, who is at the last gasp; and at the Bank there are lots of them, catting. What are you waiting for? It's stupid to hesitate. It's nothing to take, and it may save your lives," and he forced us slowly up the hill again.

Neither Dixwell nor myself felt any qualms, but Bussche was so emphatic, that we soon found ourselves in the dining-room. "Send for the Comprador," I ordered; and in a moment he was there. "Comprador, what's all this row?" "Me no savey. Talkee that blead got spilum. My savey this hous blead all light." I don't know. They say the bread is spoiled. I only know the bread we have in this house is all right. "Why, we got our bread from E-Sing, don't we? and they say his bread is poisoned. "My no savey. My savey this house bread all right." Dixwell," said I, *sotto voce*, "This looks bad. We do get our bread from E-Sing, I happen to know. It seems as if our own servants were turning against us. I rather think we had better take our mustard." And we did, under Bussche's administration, but very reluctantly. The expected results speedily followed, and we were just recovering our equanimity, but very cross, when Lança rushed in. "It's all right," Mr. Heard, it's all right," he shouted jubilantly. "Who's all right? what's all right?" cried I, in my wrath, "What the devil do you mean?" "Oh, Mr. Heard, you havn't had E-Sing's bread after all. I cut off E-Sing three days ago, and since then you have had the Portuguese baker, who supplies the office. Lança was the clerk who had charge of the messes of the two houses — mine and the office — and on the last occasion of settling the accounts he thought fortunately it would be better to have one bill than two. Naturally he kept his own countryman, and cut off the Chinaman.

And so we had our mustard for nothing. We had had a happy escape. No one who was in the Colony that day will ever forget it.

E-Sing, the baker, supplied bread not only to nearly all the foreign houses, but to the Garrison, at that time consisting of about 1200 men; and he or his workmen had been induced to put in it that morning a large quantity of arsenic. The plan, which originated

with the authorities of Canton, was supposed to be – to disable the troops and a large portion of the Foreign Residents with the poison, and under cover of the effect of this to attack the town with an overwhelming force. But by some accident the bread did not reach the barracks in time for the early breakfast, and the large quantity of the poison was its own antidote. As you cut a loaf with a knife you could see plainly the sheen of the metal. All who partook of the bread, and there were many, were affected in the same way – by violent vomiting. Those who eat a little and those who eat a great deal, all had the same symptoms, and they were sufficiently alarming. Though nobody actually died that day, a great many expected to die, and could hardly believe that they were really alive when night came. Several succumbed later from the after effects, among others, Lady Bowring, the wife of the Governor; but when the steamer left at one, it took the news to India and Europe and all the world, that Hongkong had been poisoned by a Chinese, and half the Colony was dead and the other half dying. It was not till later in the day, that the failure of the attempt was recognized. My own brother, who was on his way from England to join me, met this news at Singapore, and was told that the last known of me was that I was dying on a couch in the parlor, drawing-room, alone in the house, deserted by all the servants; and as for friends, why they were in the same condition. There was no Ocean telegraph in those days, and one can fancy how the hearts of the passengers beat on board the next incoming steamer from the South, doubtful, as they came in through the Lyeemoon Pass, whether any friends, or indeed any town were left.

The occasion was tragic, but it had its comic side. An English neighbor of ours asked his Comprador, whether the bread were really poisoned, and received the reply, that he did not know, but he would very soon find out. Passing by the Comprador's room not long after, he saw him in his chair looking at a coolie, lying on the floor, and again inquiring, again received the same answer. "How are you going to find out?" insisted the master. "My have pay that coolie chowchow that bread. Littee time can savee how fashion." I have given that man some of the bread to eat, and in a few minutes we'll know whether there's poison in it or not.

The poisoning was an incident in the second Anglo-Chinese war, the occasion of which was the seizure of the lorcha "Arrow" by the Chinese Authorities on 8 Oct. 1856 as above described. I say "occasion", and not cause: the cause of the seizure was deeper, and lay in the smouldering condition of feeling between the two nations and in the desire of two men, Harry Parkes, English Consul at Canton, afterwards Sir Harry Parkes, and Sir John Bowring,

Governor of Hongkong, to show their importance and push themselves into prominence. For this purpose the "Arrow" was a sufficient pretext. She was held up to the world as an English trading vessel, whose flag had been torn down, and trampled on by the "minions of Yeh." In truth she was a priate, with a Chinese crew, and a captain who was English, but whose character was so bad, that he had been turned out of the Hongkong police, which at that time represented a depth, than which there were few lower. I recollect perfectly well walking on the Praya with Senhor Guimarens, Governor of Macao, a few days after the affair, and speaking of the "Arrow". "She was lying there," said he, pointing with his cane, "I knew her well as a West Coast pirate, and had ordered the Portuguese man-of-war in port to seize her. She was loaded with plundered cotton at the time. The Ship's boats were actually piped away, when the lorcha hoisted her sails, and ran up to Canton with a strong fair wind. An hour later, and all this business would have been stopped."

The history of it must be read elsewhere; I shall not undertake to tell the story here. I will give, however, some amusing correspondence which appeared in the London Punch of January 24th, 1857 called "About the English of it." A parody of course, but if not true, it was very like the truth.

Bowring to Parkes.

Dear Parkes,

I am afraid you have been in too great a hurry to punch Yeh's head. Yeh is a highly educated and very superior man; obdurate, especially when he is right. The plain English of it is, we haven't got a leg to stand on. So I have ordered up Seymour.

Parkes to Bowring.

My dear John,

I feel the full force of your letter. We are in a hobble. Yeh still refuses an apology.

Parkes to Yeh,

If you don't apologize in twenty four hours I will blow your house down about

your ears. It's all nonsense arguing the point about ownership of Lorch and the law of the case. Apologize or it will be the worse for you.

Parkes to Sir Michael Seymour.

My dear Sir Michael,
Yeh sticks to his case. If you can take the Bouge Forts it may convince him he is in the wrong.

Yeh to Parkes.

You tell me your admiral has taken the Bogue Forts. I know it and I am sorry for it, but the taking of twenty forts will not make black white nor force me to make an apology when I know I am in the right. You English pretend to revere Heaven and esteem justice. How can you reconcile taking the Bogue Forts with this?

(Private)

Sir Michael Seymour to Parkes,

I am really ashamed to go on pitching into these helpless Chinamen, especially when they are in the right and we are in the wrong. But if I must give them more powder and shot can't you find a decent excuse? Suppose you insist on Yeh's receiving my call? If he won't I don't mind blowing him and his Yamun into the middle of next week.

Can't you put in on the old treaties, 1842-46?

Parkes to Seymour

My dear Seymour,
You are our preserver. I am afraid the treaties are a little stale, but we can try it on.
Yeh says nay.

Parkes to Bowring.

My dear Sir John,

It's all right at last. I am sure you will be relieved to hear Yeh refuses to receive Sir Michael. We have a clear right under the treaties to insist upon it. The consequences be upon his head.

Bowring to Parkes.

My Dear Parks,

I am delighted that you and Seymour have got on legal ground at last, tho' I wish we had thought of the treaties a litle earlier. I am afraid we may be told at home the statue of Limitations applies in this case.

But we have gone too far to recede. Tell Seymour to blaze away, but kill as few Chinamen as possible. My heart bleeds for these unfortunate people. In an ancient Spartan or Swiss Yeh's conduct would be called heroic; in a Chinaman it is culpably obstinate, and cannot be submitted to for a moment.

The news on reaching England created intense excitement, and on the 24 Feby. 1857, Lord Derby brought forward in the House of Lords a motion comprehensively condemning the whole of the proceedings of the British authority in China. The debate would have been memorable if only for the powerful speech, in which the verable Lord Lyndhurst supported the motion and exposed the utter illegality of the course pursued by Sir John Bowring. The Lords rejected the motion, and two days later on 26 February, Mr. Cobden brought forward in the House of Commons declaring that the papers laid on the table failed to establish satisfactory grounds for the violent measures resorted to in Canton in the late affair of the "Arrow." This must have been a peculiarly painful task for Mr. Cobden, as he was an old friend of Sir John Bowring, but he followed his convictions as to his public duty in despie of his personal friendship. This motion brought together in voting men who were opposite usually in their political views. Mr. Cobden found himslef supported by Mr. Gladstone and M.r Disraeli, and by Mr. Roebuck and Sir E. Bulwer Lytton, by Lord John Russell and Mr. Whiteside, by Sir Robert Cecil (afterwards Lord Salisbury) and Sir Fred Thesiger, Mr. Milner Gibson.

In his "History of our own Times", Mr. MacCarthy says – "The truth is there has seldom been so frlagrant and so inexcusable an example of highhanded lawlessness in the dealings of a strong with a weak nation." Vol. III, p. 17.

This poisoning affair was the indirect cause of a great change in the relations of foreigners with the Chinese, inasmuch as it deprived them of the chief safeguard of their daily life. The Comprador to whom allusion has frequently been made was a most important element in the large China Houses. In these there was a Chinese Firm, subordinate to the Foreign, of which the Comprador was the Head. Nearly all of the mercantile transactions with the natives, buying and selling, passed in some shape through his hands, or under his supervision, and on very many of them he received a commission. In those days there were almost no Banks. Each House was its own Bank, of which the Comprador was Cashier. All the money was in his charge and orders, or cheques, were drawn on him, precisely as on a modern Bank. These were in one sense the more important of his duties, but, besides these, he had another function, which was perhaps of almost equal consequence. He engaged all the native servants and employees, and was personally responsible for their honesty and general good conduct. The foreigner of course had no means of ascertaining the character of his Chinese servants, and relied implicitly on the selections of his Comprador, who as implicitly accepted the responsibility. If, for instance, a robbery were committed in the house – a watch or money was stolen – the foreigner simply notified the Comprador, who was expected to find the thief and the property, or to make good the loss out of his own pocket.

The principle of responsibility is essentially Chinese, and is seen throughout the whole system of Chinese polity. On it we relied with entire confidence. Our Compradors were frequently men of wealth and always men of character, and an instance of failure in their trust was of exceedingly rare occurrence. Feeling his responsibility, we were sure that the Chinese would engage for our service were always respectable, belonging, if not to his own family, to his own clan or village, – persons whom he knew thoroughly.

While it was still doubtful what was to be the outcome of that eventful day, Mr. Robinet, an American of Peruvian descent, took the small steamer “Spark”, and, running over to Macao, the Portuguese town 40 miles distant, managed to find there, and get possession of Alum, the proprietor of the E-Sing bakery. He brought him over to Hongkong, and put him in jail to await trial. Great efforts were made to induce Sir John Bowring, the governor, who with his wife were among the sufferers from the poison, to declare the Colony under martial law; but for reasons of his own he refused. Alum was tried in an English Court with the advantages of English technicality, and, as was feared would be the case, he could not be proved to have mixed the arsenic with the bread, and was acquitted.

This was a great blow to the sense of all right-thinking and respectable Chinamen. They were quite disposed to believe that Alum had not personally taken an active part in the crime, might not even have been cognizant of it, but by all Chinese law and custom, he as Head and owner of the establishment was responsible for the acts of his workmen, and merited all the punishment – even unto death, – which might belong to them.

It is easy to see what a vast change was made by this decision in our relations with our Chinese employees. Before it we were under as complete a safeguard from their possible hostility as could be devised: after it we had no protection whatever.

A conversation I had with our Comprador, who was a most excellent man, and who before the trial looked upon Alum as probably innocent, but as none the less meriting death, will illustrate the situation better than many words of description.

On the afternoon of the poisoning, when we were still under the serious influences of the day, I sent for him to come to me. “Comprador,” said I, “who is the cook?” “He’s a good man, a connection of mine.” “Are you sure of him?” “Yes, Sir, I guarantee him. There is no fear of him.” “There’s no danger of his doing what has been done today, putting poison in the food?” “No,” with great emphasis and indignation, “He’s an honest man. He could not be bought. I secure.” “Now, Comprador, you know this is a serious matter. You are the responsible man here. You know if anything goes wrong, we shan’t look to the cook, but to you. You are the first. When we have done with you, we will take the cook. There are four foreigners living in this house, and it is not likely that we shall all be taken off at once, and I give you my word, that on the first symptom of anything of this kind, we’ll blow your brains out.” “All right,” he replied, “I understand,” and it was understood. Each knew that the other was speaking in earnest. It may seem absurd now in cold blood to believe that such a conversation could have taken place, or in any event acted upon. But the circumstances were grave. A man can fight, and kill or be killed in the heat of excitement, and think nothing of it; but poisoning is a different matter, and sends a chill down the back. There is no defense, and the feeling that one may be cut off like rats in a cellar without a chance for life, makes one solemn and stern. I certainly meant what I said, and I have no doubt the Comprador was equally serious. Some weeks afterwards – when Alum had been acquitted – I noticed one morning that the breakfast was late, and called by boy to inquire why it was not served. “The old cook,” he said, “had gone away, and the new cook had only just come, but breakfast would be ready in a moment.” “New cook,” I cried, “Where does he come

from? Who is he?" any change in that department exciting of course the liveliest interest. "Send me the Comprador." And the Comprador explained that the old cook not feeling very well, and afraid of his village authorities, had gone home, and he thought the new one would do very well. "Yes, but, Comprador, it is something more than a cook that we want. We must have in these times an absolutely honest man, a man we can trust. Who is this man? Where does he come from? Do you know all about him?" "Oh, I think he's all right. He comes from Gibb Livingston's House. Mr. Gibb's Comprador says he is a good man." "Yes, that is all very well. But do you secure him? You know it is your business." "No," he replied with a smile, which showed his consciousness that we had changed all that, "I can't secure him, but I think he's all right." And I was obliged to put up with that; and for some time afterwards we never all of us eat the same food at each meal.

That was an exciting winter. A price was put by the Chinese Government on all our heads, varying in amount with the status of the individual, and one morning a body without a head was found at our back gate. Apparently some poor sailor had been set upon during the night. We went out to dinner armed to the teeth, and a man put down his revolver with his hat. My house was on the extreme Western limit of the town, and more than a mile from the barracks. My friends were frequently warned not to dine with me, as they would be assuredly cut off on their way home at night; and we always escorted our guests on their return, unless they were numerous, pistol in hand, till they were well with safe limits.

It was generally supposed that the town would be attacked from the Westward, as there was on that side no obstacle to the landing of the Chinese from the Main land, and my house offered itself as the first on their line of march. Naturally our only hope was in making a sufficiently stout defense for assistance to reach us from the Garrison, who were a long way off. The house was of two stories, raised above a high basement, which was occupied by the servants. Over the staircase of the first story given up to reception rooms, trap doors were fitted, which were bolted down at night, and before going to bed blunderbusses were mounted in the veranda, arms overhauled, rope ladders in case of fire put in readiness, and all preparations made for immediate action. To the two regular Chinese watchmen, I added two Manilamen, who were armed and who were ordered to repeat on a gong, hung at the front door, the bells struck on board the ships in the harbor. By this means we could know in a few minutes on waking up in the night whether our watchmen were awake or asleep.

The winter wore off with one or two alarms of poisoning, which proved to be false, and,

although looking back from this distance it would seem as if life would have been hardly endurable under such conditions, in reality it was as gay as usual. Men accustom themselves to everything. Dinner and other parties were of constant occurrence, and there was no apparent pressure. It was only when I left the Colony in June, that I became aware of what a weight I had been carrying. The sensation of relief, as we steamed round Green Island, was immediate and decided.