CHAPTER III
THE COMING OF THE FOREIGNER

"WHEN I first entered Korea," said one of the earliest foreign residents to me, "it seemed as though I were stepping out of real life into the veritable wonderland of Alice. Everything was so fantastic, so very different from any other part of the world, so absurd, so repulsive, or so bizarre, that I had to ask myself, time after time, whether I was awake or dreaming."

In many respects Korean institutions, as seen by Europeans and Americans when they first arrived in the country, resembled those of China some five or six hundred years back. The government was an absolute monarchy, the King being assisted by a Prime Minister, two associates, and the heads of six departments, the Lord Chamberlain's, Finance, War, Public Works, Justice, and Registration. The country was divided into eight provinces, with a governor for each, and under the governor were magistrates in charge of districts. To keep these officials in order, the King had the equivalent to the "personal representative" of the American millionaire manufacturer, secret agents who visited various
parts of the country, examining everything on the King's behalf, and reporting to him direct. The prisons were an abomination, torture was freely employed, periodical jail clearings were made by hanging scores of prisoners at a time, and justice was bought and sold. The two main curses of the Government were the farming of taxes and the granting of concessions at the cost of the common people. Under the farming of taxes, the governor or the magistrate was given a free hand to collect as much as he could, and he made his profit according to the amount he could squeeze out of the people above the sum required by the central government. Any man who was sufficiently prosperous became at once the victim of magisterial zeal. The magistrate would come to the farmer who had been cursed with a specially good crop and beg a loan. If the man refused, he would promptly be imprisoned, half starved, and beaten once or twice a day until he consented. There were good magistrates and bad, but generally the power of the yamen was dreaded by every working man. "Why do I not grow bigger crops and cultivate more fields?" a Korean farmer once asked me. "Why should I? Bigger crops means greater extortion from the governor." The power of the magistrates was modified by the unwritten right of rebellion, and by direct appeal to the King. When the governor became too greedy the people would rise up and kill him, and the central authorities would think that justice had been done. There can be no doubt that under this system individual enterprise was