CHAPTER XVIII

WITH THE REBELS

It soon became evident that I was very near to the Korean forces. At one place, not far from Chee-Chong, a party of them had arrived two days before I passed, and had demanded arms. A little further on Koreans and Japanese had narrowly escaped meeting in the village street, not many hours before I stopped there. As I approached one hamlet, the inhabitants fled into the high corn, and on my arrival not a soul was to be found. They mistook me for a Japanese out on a shooting and burning expedition.

It now became more difficult to obtain carriers. Our ponies were showing signs of fatigue, for we were using them very hard over the mountainous country. It was impossible to hire fresh animals, as the Japanese had commandeered all. Up to Won-ju I had to pay double the usual rate for my carriers. From Won-ju onwards carriers absolutely refused to go further, whatever the pay.

"On the road beyond here many bad men are to be found," they told me at Won-ju. "These bad men shoot every one who passes. We will not go
to be shot.” My own boys were showing some uneasiness. Fortunately, I had in my personal servant Min Gun, and in the leader of the pack-pony two of the staunchest Koreans I have ever known.

The country beyond Won-ju was splendidly suited for an ambuscade, such as the people there promised me. The road was rocky and broken, and largely lay through a narrow, winding valley, with overhanging cliffs. Now we would come on a splendid gorge, evidently of volcanic origin; now we would pause to chip a bit of gold-bearing quartz from the rocks, for this is a famous gold centre of Korea. An army might have been hidden securely around.

Twilight was just gathering as we stopped at a small village where we intended remaining for the night. The people were sullen and unfriendly, a striking contrast to what I had found elsewhere. In other parts they all came and welcomed me, sometimes refusing to take payment for the accommodation they supplied. “We are glad that a white man has come.” But in this village the men gruffly informed me that there was not a scrap of horse food or of rice to be had. They advised us to go on to another place, fifteen li ahead.

We started out. When we had ridden a little way from the village I chanced to glance back at some trees skirting a corn-field. A man, half-hidden by a bush, was fumbling with something in his hands, something which he held down as I turned. I took it to be the handle of a small reaping-knife, but it was growing too dark to see clearly. A minute later, however, there came a smart “ping” past