

CHAPTER FIVE

COOLIES (1916)

"THE lowest and most despised of all castes." Such, as I remember, was the picture of India's coolies fixed in my boyish imagination by Roth's good old-fashioned geography.

But now, since making actual acquaintance with their Chinese equivalent, I have learned to value their honesty, equanimity and endurance in labor, but above all the sunny disposition with which they sustain their low and often despised position in the community.

The international idea of the lower-class Chinese is, as far as I can discover, anything but favorable: a sullen and treacherous dog, who to satisfy his vices and need of employment will turn cunningly to any expedient, however dishonorable. This idea must have grown up in the great seaports, Hong-kong, Canton, Shanghai, where a mass of riffraff is concentrated magnetically, and something of this trait may possibly be discovered in the Chinese exported especially from the southern provinces, who are thrown ashore at many coast places around the Pacific Ocean.

But it must not be forgotten that China is not a country according to European measurements, but a section of the world, and that the Chinese are not therefore the same everywhere, any more than one

COOLIES

can find similarities between such Europeans as a Dalmatian, a Corsican, a Catalonian or a Berliner.

The Chinese have certain traditional methods of gain, such as brigandage and grafting, which by us are considered beyond the bounds not only of the law but also of honor, yet except for these ethnographical peculiarities I have found the northern Chinese surprisingly honest and reliable.

Apart from the fact that soldiers might on a suitable occasion, now as formerly, come to burn and plunder the city, I consider that security of life and property is greater in Peking than in Stockholm, a remarkable condition which can only be explained by the fact that the police control is better organized in the former place than in the latter.

I came to China with the impression that one must always have his coat buttoned tightly over his pocketbook, but I gradually fell into the nonchalance of leaving small sums of money around till needed, without ever losing a cent.

If I leave out the mulcting which normally takes place at the doors, which is part of the graft system, I have only two irregularities to note in my servants, one actual and one imagined.

During the first year, when we lived together as a little colony of four Swedes, it happened that time after time from one dinner to another we noticed a fairly regular lowering of the surface of our brandy flask. There was evidently a drink thief about, and we gave the five servants a collective ultimatum that within half an hour the guilty one should be found

THE DRAGON AND THE FOREIGN DEVILS

and dismissed, otherwise they should all go. In half that time it was made clear that the yard coolie had pilfered not only the brandy but two flasks of ale besides, which we had not put in question.

Here then was a striking case of theft, though the offence was not excusable but at least explicable, when I say that the object was something as seductive as Danish *aqua vitae*.

The other case of dishonesty had a most surprising sequel.

I had just had made a corner sofa with five stuffed cushions, a piece of furniture in which I may say in confidence I felt a certain pride. Then we had to shift to a new residence in another part of the city, and I decided in this connection to have packed what small collections I had of curios, such as bronzes, porcelains, etc., for forwarding to Sweden. Experienced workmen were required for this, and a row of packers were fetched. I showed them first the larger pieces and then the small stuff, which to make it more clearly visible I had thrown together on the big sofa. "Everything on the sofa is to be packed," were my instructions.

When we came to our new abode, I wanted the precious sofa put in order. The cushions, however, were not to be found. This was apparently another case of dishonesty among the servants, and they were given a thirty minutes' ultimatum to clear up the matter.

The answer came in ten minutes: the servants there present were all innocent, but there might presumably

COOLIES

be some doubt whether the old porter, who had been dismissed in the moving, might not have taken the cushions. I had even a full picture of how the man had probably made these somewhat unfamiliar stolen goods useful to himself and his family.

The affair was considered closed, and new cushions were made.

But fate would so have it that the packing cases with the curios, which could not be sent to Sweden on account of the war, were left standing in the rain and had to be inspected. They were three in number, of which the two large ones held all my curios well done up, while the third, smaller and much lighter, contained precisely five swelling sofa cushions.

These of which I have testified: viz., a few nips of Danish brandy and two bottles of Ny Carlsberg beer, which had been actually stolen; and five sofa cushions, which had not been stolen, are all I have to adduce as to dishonesty in the house in the past two years.

It is not unknown to me that other foreigners in Peking have had quite different experiences. A family of high social position was systematically plundered by the servants for years till finally one day the courageous housewife brought the whole robber brigade under lock and key with a most dramatic *coup*. Similar and no less dramatic experiences have been adduced from other quarters, and I for my part am mindful of the proverb: Praise not the day before the sun goes down.

However, I wish to add that Chinese servants, to

THE DRAGON AND THE FOREIGN DEVILS

judge by my own meager experience, are remarkable for application to work and for attentiveness to their masters, which makes it easier to overlook the manipulations of the porter before alluded to.

As an example I will not cite my trusted boy Chung, who is a fine gentleman and considers himself to stand as high above a coolie as in Stockholm a Strandvägen doorman would think himself above a Nybrohamn roustabout. I prefer to tell something of the lowest of my fine servants, the rickshaw coolie. The connection between him and me occurred, like so many more important associations here on earth, through pure chance; I hired him on the street on one of the first days and afterwards we continued together to our mutual satisfaction. He is quiet, willing and attentive, and has furthermore the merit of running with a steady persevering trot without ever falling into the life-endangering pace with which many rickshaw coolies vary their usual somniferous lope.

His routine is to pull me to my office in the morning, go home and get the cook with a warm lunch, take him back, and finally fetch me in the afternoon; that is to say to traverse the distance of three and a half kilometers six times daily, besides extra trips. For a time I wanted to have a little exercise and told him not to fetch me in the afternoon. But it sometimes happened that I would be delayed by my work and would take a rickshaw on the street. When my man saw that I came home pulled by another coolie, he lamented that I should thus give away money uselessly and offered to come and fetch

COOLIES

me as before. I, however, wishing to have my little afternoon promenade, declined his offer. It happened again that I took a rickshaw to get home quicker, but as I was afraid because of my rickshaw coolie, I stopped at the last street corner and walked home the last fifty meters. But one must never imagine anything can be concealed from Chinese servants. The following afternoon my rickshaw coolie stood outside my office with the guilty look of a dog that has been told to stay home but has run after his master.

As I turn from the narrow circle of my personal servants to recall all the chance helpers, guides, bearers, attendants, soldiers, mule drivers, etc., with whom I came into contact on my travels, my impression is equally good. One or two have been dull and awkward, many commonplace, of whom there is little to say, but many have been really splendid fellows.

First in the long list come the bearers on the first excursion to Chai T'ang, who went singing gaily across the mountains, ate their soup of leaves, slept in the first available shed, and went home contented with a wage that seemed ridiculously small. Then there is my little coolie in Chai T'ang, who every morning as a token of respect let down his pigtail when he came into the yard, who followed me wherever I went and understood me so well when we conversed, he in Chinese, I in Swedish. Or the mule driver in Kaifeng, who had so much trouble to keep in touch with us as we went over the mountains by dead reckoning, and who was all one great friendly

THE DRAGON AND THE FOREIGN DEVILS

smile every time he came up with us. Or my fine big coolie in Lung Kuan, who went and put up signals on mountain tops without ever mistaking the best places, who attended to my slightest motion as I stood at table, and watched over me when I took my midday nap. Or the little attendant on the trip to Shansi, a poor lad who smoked opium and had to give half his wages for some sort of suspicious Japanese medicine which was supposed to be an antidote to opium. He was the best of them all, diligent, alert, enduring and always naturally in a good humor.

Once when I was talking to a high-class Chinese and expressing my satisfaction with the coolies I had had in my service, he replied, "Yes, you naturally had every reason to be content with them, for you pay them so much more than they are used to."

With all respect for my worthy friend's experience and judgment I must, however, maintain that this is not the whole truth. The coolie is no time-server; he shows no evidence of false servility or insinuation. But what I find especially agreeable is the constant alertness and attention he gives to his foreign and accidental employer. When one is crawling up a steep cliff, invariably one feels a strong hand supporting one's slipping foot. Or the shadow has moved while one is taking one's midday rest, and one finds another protection set up in front of the sun. Or the rain begins to fall, and the coolie is there at once of his own accord to protect the table from the wet.

COOLIES

It is the sum of these countless details which combine to form a good impression of the Chinese servant.

It may now be asked, "Are not these guides, bearers, attendants and drivers, who prove so excellent, picked men, chosen from a multitude of less worthy individuals?"

This has not commonly been the case; they are figures that have fairly arbitrarily popped up and vanished in the course of the trip, an endless unfailing stream of *staffage* figures. My two or three best coolies were taken out of a casual group at our disposal ten or fifteen minutes before we were to break up our night quarters. Mule drivers were required by the police from among those who had servicable beasts, with assuredly very little reference to the personal qualities of the owners.

These men, with whom I lived during several trips in the northern provinces, are therefore very reliable types of the country population. There is surely no essential difference between them and the thousands we see every day working in the fields, or the crowds that continually thronged the miserable roads. Everywhere the same good humor, which seemed to be a loan from the beneficent sunlight, the same steady repose and tractableness, without a trace of the unconsiderate rudeness which is so common with, for instance, the Swedish unskilled laborer.

When a foreigner comes into the Chinese villages, he wonders how people can live in these stinking

THE DRAGON AND THE FOREIGN DEVILS

manure heaps. But here again it is the power of the sun, the continual sunshine, which burns off the microbes and preserves the lives of the children who swarm in the streets and are so dirty that they have the gray color of the dry soil.

One sees a disproportionate number of people who are blind or have diseases of the eye; in some regions many are afflicted with scrofula and many marked with smallpox, but outside of these a surprisingly strong and healthy race. I can give remarkable testimony as to the strength and endurance of the coolies, impressive feats of strength performed for the inducement of earning ten cents or so. Love for work they can hardly be said to have, that does not fit into the oriental's philosophy of life, but in that respect we all secretly cherish some more or less oriental tendencies.

The uncounted millions who cultivate the soil of China are assuredly one of the country's most important resources, with which a strong and clear-sighted government should be able to do great things. Hardy, docile, intelligent, the Chinese are splendid material for an industrial population, and under good command would doubtless become fine soldiers. . . . Such are the men; in conclusion a word as to the women.

When one sees in Peking the small thin dolls which are the wives, or "little wives", of the upper classes, one gets a very poor idea of the Chinese woman's physical development. But the woman of the country is a quite different type, which in spite of the

COOLIES

deforming of the feet and the diminished activity therefrom resulting is strong and well built.

I remember vividly a railroad journey through the province of Honan one day during the wheat harvest, when all the folk were out in the fields and one could for once get sight of the otherwise rarely visible women. It was like a popular festival, this eager harvest work, and one saw everywhere tall strong women with broad shoulders and full bosoms.

They have a generous share of the burden of toil, these women of the poor. They twist thread, weave cloth, dye and make garments, and sew shoes. Only the needle with which they work is bought.

Last but not least, they are strong and willing mothers, who give birth easily and, when the wished-for arrival fails to live, light their joss sticks before the goddess of fertility, imploring her to grant them a child, preferably a son of course, and so release them from the ban which always rests on a barren wife.