

## CHAPTER SIX

### THE HUNGSHAN EPISODE (1915)

THE men working in the fields, the women who had gathered around the well to gossip a bit, and the children playing in the big open place where the grain was being threshed could all see high up on the mountains the coolies from other villages whom the foreigner had put to work. He had not succeeded in his first attempt to get workmen from Hungshan, the real village of the mountain, but coolies from villages farther away had gladly come in greater numbers than were needed, for the foreign gentleman paid well, even though the bailiff who came from the district town to keep order among the coolies did stuff a good deal of their wages into his own pocket.

Yes, it was easy to observe how they dug their deep straight ditches up there; from ten *li* away one could see the black stripes that ran sheer down the mountain slope, edged on either side by the rusty red of the earth that had been cast up.

It was such a remarkable sight that the travelers who proceeded along the dry river bed had to stop and inquire. And so the news spread far and wide that wonderful things were happening up at Hungshan.

Those who had gone up the mountain with planks, water, food for the coolies, or a chicken to be broiled by the foreigner's cook (one could not miss the chance of a little profit) related that the coolies were hoisting

#### THE HUNGSHAN EPISODE

up earth in baskets from the twenty-foot excavations and that the stranger's broad shovels and heavy picks were everywhere striking down there on the hard, blue-black, sparkling iron mountain.

The most remarkable thing of all was that the district magistrate in Wuan was not minded to take the village men's side against the foreigner's procedure. The headman of the village, attended by three others, had been in to the district town and expressed the village's alarm. There was no doubt, they had said, that this stranger had come to seize for base gain still another of the many treasures that were hidden in the mountains of China. Such things had been heard of many times before, and it was always foreigners who devastated and plundered the land.

So this question of the mountain was disturbing — this mountain that stood shelteringly above the village. Always, as far as memory could go back through past generations, the villagers had revered and guarded the mountain, performing their devotions in the temple just below the top. It had been said, to be sure, that once of old iron ore had been broken on Hungshan, but it was sons of the Middle Kingdom, not foreigners, who had labored there then, and moreover not much had come of the digging, it seemed, since it had not gone on. Should now strangers, who are more cunning in these matters, be allowed to carry off the treasures which the folk of Wuan had left untouched?

His Worthiness should graciously give heed to the villagers' fear: what if the top of the mountain should

## THE DRAGON AND THE FOREIGN DEVILS

be blown off and the mountain perhaps be offended? Might there not then be new misfortune, although drought, famine, robbers, and the terrible heavy taxes were surely enough to make life a burden? What might one not finally expect if this foreigner was permitted to desecrate the mountain at his own pleasure?

When the headman had finished his much-pondered speech, the magistrate answered, to the surprise and disappointment of all, with strange admonishing words:

“Only the ignorance of the village folk could excuse their silly idea that the government, which knows all and watches over all, would permit a foreigner to come and break for his own profit the ore on Hungshan, which is the pride and glory of Wuan.

“The stranger on Hungshan had at once put himself right with the local magistrate, showing his passport and order, both with the seal of the Minister of Agriculture. Although he had come from a little country, Jui Tien Kuo,<sup>1</sup> far beyond Tibet, he was no less than the magistrate himself a servant of the realm. He dared not do anything which he did not report to Peking, and besides the magistrate had sent his constable not merely to keep order among the coolies but likewise to report what the stranger was doing.

“It is a strange story about this work on Hungshan. The Great President, or Emperor as we may

<sup>1</sup>Jui Tien is the equivalent in Chinese phonetics of Sweden in English.

#### THE HUNGSHAN EPISODE

soon call him, who has his eyes on everything in the measureless Middle Kingdom and wants to make his own province of Honan the heart in the defence of the realm, has decided to build great workshops for the making of swords, guns and cannon to use against robbers and rebels or against the enemies of the realm. And, as much iron is needed for these workshops, he intends to open an iron excavation on Hungshan and has therefore sent this stranger to find out whether the ore is good and in sufficient abundance.

"Let this be said to dissipate the ignorance and foolishness of the villagers! The government is watching without cease over Wuan, and as the harvest is approaching, the folk of Hungshan's village should not waste time in silly prattle and debate about groundless suspicions."

The Hungshan episode had reached this stage, when I came on a visit to my friend Nyström, the "stranger on the mountain", who with much skill and tact was directing the large excavations. Some fifty coolies were working continuously in the narrow, dangerously deep trenches, whose perpendicular walls were lined as far as possible with planks.

We spent a week together with Mine Inspector Chang from Kaifeng in the temple on the mountain top. We had fine, fairly warm September weather with continual sunlight, which blurred the contour of the plain and the more distant mountains and made us feel more completely alone up there. Night

#### THE DRAGON AND THE FOREIGN DEVILS

after night the cloudless heaven sparkled above the crowns of the temple cypresses, and deep down on the plain glided pale and red glowworms, where the peasants were burning the dry grass.

Then Nyström departed on his way to Peking and I followed him a day's journey, during which we chanced to behold two contrasting pictures: P'eng Ch'eng, the sooty and swarming factory town, where the clay of the coal formation is made into pottery of all sorts; and, on the other side of a little mountain pass, Hei Lung T'an, a pretty village, with abundant cascades running down the limestone mountain, leafy groves and picturesque temples, a place ideally fitted for oriental meditation, where one may sit and drink tea, smoke a hookah and let the time glide away unsullied by the sweat and pain of toil.

In the swiftly falling twilight we parted, and I in company with two soldiers and a blacksmith had to negotiate a night march of twenty-five kilometers back to Hungshan. The light of two paper lanterns provided with tallow candles guided us through the dark, where the flaming furnaces of P'eng Ch'eng faded gradually in the distance. We rested a couple of times at small inns and enjoyed that usual refreshment of the traveler, warm water. After passing between the fortress-like houses of the fine village of Hotsun, we began to catch sight of Hungshan's dusky contour in the north, with a great light gleaming close to the summit. This was a light that my thoughtful boy had placed to guide us up the mountain. At 1 A.M. I ate my dinner and then slept the

#### THE HUNGSHAN EPISODE

deep, undreaming sleep of the weary till the new day, which was to be rich in unexpected events.

At ten next morning I was out with Mine Inspector Chang to look at the excavation. We stopped longest in the new trench on the east side of the mountain, where several huge boulders highest up toward the base of the mountain looked particularly threatening, for which reason we ordered further reinforcements of planks and props.

After lunch I went with a soldier up to the top of the mountain crest to make assays. Hour after hour passed in mechanical labor. The soldier, who soon found himself comparatively superfluous, lay dozing down on the slope, and I myself paused now and then to let my gaze run over plain and height to the mountain crests fading off in the sunny haze.

Then all of a sudden the soldier rose upright, screamed and waved his arms. The coolies popped up out of the trenches on the west side and ran singly or in small groups toward the east, where a cloud of dust was just floating off in the light breeze.

One of the trenches must have collapsed. I rushed down the slope and was in the midst of a crowd of coolies, who were running up the path to the eastern trenches.

It was the big new trench. Where it had just lain like a sharp elegant surgical cut through the rough skin of the mountain, now gaped a hideous ragged hole, from which projected stumps and planks and props broken and splintered by the landslide. The coolies crowded and swarmed around and over one

#### THE DRAGON AND THE FOREIGN DEVILS

another. Some hung over the edge and simply stared, others were down in the hole throwing aside earth and stones. A man was supposed to be under the rubble, and it was to get him out that they worked so desperately. There must have been, at a guess, two or three meters of earth above him, and along with it several big rocks of several tons weight apiece. It was hopeless, that was as evident to them as to me, but it was better to let them work than stand there doing nothing. Their zeal was really splendid; only a few of them could get into the hole at the same time. How the picks flashed, the spades were swung, and the rocks were rolled out at the lower mouth of the trench! After ten minutes the first relay was exhausted, the fellows staggered out of the trench and fell headlong to the ground, drenched with sweat. A fresh relay rushed in, shouts were exchanged amid the rapid motion of the implements.

Beside the trench a man lay prone, beating his head against the ground amid piteous wails. He was a friend of the victim, giving vent to his despair.

A little farther off on the ground lay a wretched bundle, a coolie who writhed from time to time and groaned heavily. I gradually learned what had happened. He was in the trench with the other man when the collapse came, but succeeded in flinging himself out so that he was only caught by the upper layer of the slide. Just before my arrival they had dug him out. On examination we found that no bones were broken; he had only been jammed and

#### THE HUNGSHAN EPISODE

partly stunned. He was carried back to the temple, where we laid him on a large *k'ang*, a stone bunk. When he asked for something to deaden the pain, I gave him some opium tablets, which was the best I had to offer, and he was then quiet and silent all the night.

I had just finished bandaging this coolie, when another came into the temple, half carried, half led by a couple of comrades. There had been a small second slide and he had been struck on the leg by a stone. Thank God! No break, but an ugly bruise. With a towel, a piece of oilcloth and one of my puttees we made him a wet compress, and after a couple of opium tablets this poor fellow too dozed off.

The dusk began to fall, and we hastened to borrow lanterns and candles from the village so that the work might proceed without interruption. Nothing was to be seen of the dead man as yet, and it became more and more evident that it would be a long job to find him.

I now learned that the mine inspector had, without consulting me, sent a special message to the magistrate at Wuan with a request for more soldiers to protect us. His idea was that the coolies and village folk would turn their indignation against me as a foreigner and a cause of misfortune. I believe his fears were unfounded; as I went about among the coolies on the scene of disaster I never saw an unfriendly gesture. I had, however, simultaneously with the request for more police assistance, taken other measures, which in my opinion were better



#### THE DRAGON AND THE FOREIGN DEVILS

suiting to the situation. As the coolies, in all probability, would have to work most of the night, they would need an extra meal, and I sent a messenger to the village to bring whatever he could get quickly in the nature of food. After a while the message came that in the poor little village nothing could be got so late in the evening, so there was nothing else to do but send a new message to the village of Hotsun, four miles away.

We worked on meanwhile by the light of lanterns and torches to find the dead man. As the trench grew deeper, the danger of a new slide increased, and only a couple of men at a time could get into the narrow working space. At last they got out the dead man's head and the upper part of his body. But then came another slide, and we had to begin all over again. After a couple of hours the body was again laid bare and an attempt was made to draw it free with a rope. It was an uncanny sight to see the corpse swing back and forth like a stuffed dummy with the rough jerks of the rope. But the legs were still caught immovably in the earth of the slide.

Then came a message that the food had arrived from Hotsun. It was now nearly two at night and I took the whole company into the temple and offered them an informal meal. Mighty heaps of bread and bowls of vegetable soup were handed to the sixty guests. The bowls were emptied and refilled, and it was a pleasure to see the delighted coolies squatting in small groups in the dark temple court, munching and chattering. The improvised meal was very

#### THE HUNGSHAN EPISODE

simple, but the mere fact that they could recklessly eat their fill made it a little feast for the poor coolies. "This is like New Years," they expressed it, which was assuredly the highest praise they could give the repast.

The coolies were divided into several shifts, of which one went back at once to work while the others rested. Only at eleven in the morning, after over eighteen hours' work, did they manage to get out the dead man's body, which was laid in a little chapel beside the temple.

According to Chinese custom it was not the wife but the mother who stood nearest to the dead. She had therefore been summoned at once and arrived on the mountain about noon. We offered her a rest in an armchair which was brought out in the temple enclosure, and she sat there like a picture of pitiful despair, with her sightless eyes helplessly facing the sunlight. The mine inspector and the dead man's friend told her what had happened and in between she mumbled out her grief with her toothless mouth. All about her was hushed, and the coolies who sat on the ground wept in silence.

According to the law of the mines, which in this case was our rule of conduct, the family of a workman killed in an accident is entitled to a small compensation, besides which the burial expenses must be paid by the employer. Strictly speaking, I had no personal responsibility. The formal requirement would have been to send a report to the ministry at Peking, from whom in time the small compensation

#### THE DRAGON AND THE FOREIGN DEVILS

would be sent to the magistrate at Wuan and then be transmitted by one of his emissaries to the family. But, knowing the uncertainty attendant upon matters of this sort, I thought, after conferring with the mine inspector and my boy, who was deeply affected by the affair, that the small sum due should be given directly by us into the hands of those entitled to it. We therefore united on the following plan: twenty Chinese dollars should be given for the funeral and sixty to the family, of which ten should be devoted to their support in the coming winter and the remaining fifty be used for buying a piece of land for their future maintenance.

The accident had now become known all through the neighborhood, and people streamed in, many only out of curiosity, but others, especially women, wearing the sign of mourning, a white fillet around the forehead, to pay their respects in the little chapel, where the body lay on a bier.

In the afternoon the magistrate from Wuan arrived in his own person, carried in a palanquin and escorted by six soldiers. He appeared on the mountain under a red silk baldaquin as a token of his official dignity, and it was a difficult matter for us to receive in any adequate way such a mighty lord. His visit was most welcome, nevertheless, for in that way our action in regard to the family of the deceased received official approval. The best thing of all was that he sent a policeman to call the headman and two others from the village concerned to be at the temple with the widow the following day.

#### THE HUNGSHAN EPISODE

With that, the exalted personage withdrew to his city, and the day after all parties of our transaction collected for a settlement. This, far from causing me any difficulty, gave me an interesting glimpse of Chinese business.

The widow was a splendid woman of the people with an ugly, scorbutic child. Both she and the village men first fell on their knees before the mine inspector and me, which was of course a reflection of the glory the magistrate's visit had cast upon our insignificant persons.

All parties concerned were then invited to sit down on the large *k'ang* in our kitchen. There were the blind old mother, the widow with the dirty child, the deceased's friend, the headman of the village and his two witnesses, the mine inspector, my body servant and yours truly. I was too much preoccupied with the proceedings to appreciate the ensemble at the time, but it later occurred to me that we must have made a remarkable picture, all these people gathered in the smoky, half-lighted kitchen, discussing in our various languages how to dispose of these few poor dollars.

With the inspector as interpreter, I rehearsed the statutes of the mining law and the somewhat more advantageous choice which, with the magistrate's approval, we offered the family. This explanation led directly to a new genuflection on the part of the widow, in token of her grateful approbation. The minor details as to the use of the money were also approved, the villagers praising particularly the

#### THE HUNGSHAN EPISODE

2. From the burial expenses there were five dollars left, which with the

3. land purchase fund of fifty dollars were to be credited to all those interested, and the whole, fifty-five dollars, to be laid in one of my blue strong double-sewn specimen pouches, which should then be sealed with the inspector's seal. This pouch should be turned over to the old blind woman with the following instructions: the pouch was not to be opened at random, but land should be bought for just the price of fifty-five dollars, and in the presence of all the witnesses the pouch should be delivered to the seller.

This arrangement was approved by all parties, and so concludes the story of the Hungshan episode.

May there have been no trouble afterwards with the blue pouch!