

CHAPTER SEVEN

AN OLD WOMAN BY THE WAYSIDE (1916)

It is early in the morning and I am cross with good reason. The night has been cold, my bunk hard, and the police who have been coming in and out have always begun to chatter just as I have succeeded in falling asleep.

But the cause of my irritation is more remote and much more impressive; viz., the lord magistrate of Wen Hsi Hsien. He is anything but dependable, this smooth and smiling representative of the law. Ever since we arrived at his residence five days ago, he has treated us to the most wonderful stories about a band of robbers who are supposed to be rampaging in the mountains we have just left and to which we now wish to return contrary to the lord magistrate's will.

The robbers are said to be now a hundred, now two hundred in number. One time they were fighting the police soldiers in Chiang Hsien, another day they are going to plunder Yuan Chu Hsien (just as if they had given the lord magistrate a time-table), and a couple of days after we spent the night in the little temple of Ma Chia Miao they are reported to have sacked that place. We are quite worn out with the magistrate's talk, but he has the idea in his head that it is risky to let us return to the mountain.

Day before yesterday we had a great altercation with him, with the result that after many "ifs" and "buts" he promised us a free departure with the

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escort we required. But yesterday morning it turned out at starting time that none of the promised preparations were made, and that instead he had in all secrecy sent a message to his superior, the *taoyin* in Yungcheng, to ask for orders to detain us. It was a cunningly laid trap to hold us fast, and unless we were willing to be so kept for an indefinite time, we had no other choice than to depart before the message arrived from Yungcheng.

We, that is myself and my Chinese assistant, Mr. Cheng, therefore made off on foot early in the morning, after sending the magistrate a letter explaining that we relied upon him, according to his original promise, to supply the necessary riding and baggage animals for ourselves and our servants.

There was a fearful commotion at the magisterial mansion. The magistrate's chief servant came running after us on the street, the hairtufts fluttering around his worthy head, trying with tremulous tones to induce us to return to the Residence. But a bright silver dollar in his hand and an injunction to hurry with the saddling of our ponies caused him to saunter slowly and hesitatingly back.

After half an hour we were come up with by two soldiers with horses, then came another soldier and a bit later the officer of police was sent to command our escort, and finally the guide.

So we proceeded all day without an idea what was going on at the Residence as to our servants, and on toward evening we halted in a little village in the hope that our baggage might possibly catch up with

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us before night should shut in. But no word came, so there was nothing else to do but to eat a little Chinese food and lay us down to rest on a wooden bench in the police house.

I have now got up at five o'clock, made a slight toilet at the brook and watched the sunlight spreading across the delicate vernal green of the mountain crest. I am sitting here on the balcony of the police house, pondering over the lord magistrate's acts of commission and omission. Did he yesterday get together the necessary mules or has he done nothing but let everything lie in the hope that we should give in and return?

As I am thus airing my bitter morning humor, my interest is caught by a phenomenon down in the courtyard, an old woman whom I noticed last evening, who makes a very pitiful appearance as she stumps quietly along or sits on a stone and dries her watery eyes. It struck me yesterday that she was always talking eagerly to some one, now this person, now that, who stood listening beside her, and that she illustrated her discourse with the beautiful and expressive gestures which one often sees out here in the East.

There she is sitting again, talking without cessation, while from time to time she wipes away the tears. Now a muleteer, now a policeman, now one of our soldiers stands a while and listens to her, but they never stay long, and as they go away they often nod to each other with a furtive smile which indicates that they do not take the old woman very

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seriously. Mr. Cheng, who has also lent the old woman his ear, now comes up and tells a little about her. It is her family griefs that she talks about for days or for years. She is now an old unhappy mother-in-law who cannot quite win the respect of her son's wife. Her son is the tall brisk policeman who does all sorts of work down in the courtyard and now and then helps the old woman to go to a new seat or busies himself about her in some other way. The family lives in one of the neighboring courts, but early every morning the old woman wanders in to the police station and stays there all day, content with always finding new listeners to her complaints. The son is the least attentive of them; he helps her patiently in all her little whims, but her words go unheeded past his ear.

Now he has helped her to a place in the sunlight, where she takes off her wadded coat and begins her morning search for vermin. Her poor old body looks thin and angular, the skeleton shines everywhere through the withered skin, but one sees by her resolute finger motions that murder is being done. It is evident that the small vermin of China have the same careless and hardy genius for multiplying as have the human beings, dogs and swine.

Right under my balcony is the police cook in process of preparing breakfast. He breaks whole armfuls of dried twigs and stuffs them under the smoking saucepan, while in between he forms lumps of dough with his nimble hands and tosses them into the oily water.

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Beside him stands a little girl of about five, less dirty than the average, with a couple of jolly little pigtailed around her ears, a bright rosy face and the finely chiseled eyes which one sees seldom in Chinese of the present day but everywhere on the soft figures of the old pictures.

She is a little coquette, quick and ready for whatever may come, with arms that are poised in a thousand-fold play of line. Whether she clasps her chubby hands behind her thrown-back head to look at her friend the cook, or breaks a twig to help him with the fire, or tries to catch an early morning butterfly, she is always the village beauty with a pretty delight. She smiles on all and chatters with every one, but when the big policeman comes into the kitchen, she snuggles confidently up to him. He is her father, and she is thus the granddaughter of the garrulous old woman. Her grandmother's beautiful gestures repeat themselves in playful extravagance, and one may perhaps trace a little of the child's beauty in the withered woman's fine features, even if the little one probably got a good inheritance from her unseen mother.

The food is now ready, and with the communal feeling whose principles I can never penetrate, a little wooden platter is set for the old woman. It is the child who is to carry it to grandmother. She finds the old woman dozing, puts the platter on the great wooden block beside her, and goes hurriedly back to her favorite place beside the cook.

The old woman wakes and begins to stir the food

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about interestedly. With ravenous appetite she eats a kind of pancake, but with that she sees something that is amiss, and her shrill old voice insists on attention. Her son comes to her and silently takes away the platter, but one sees by the old woman's excited gestures and her spying about for a victim that she will detail to the first listener this new occurrence in her imaginary history of ill usage.

Now comes the longed-for interruption. A soldier, warm and breathless, enters the courtyard and tells us that our caravan is approaching. A bit later the merry bells tinkle at the village gates, and at the entrance to the police station shine the gaudy red head-tufts of the first mule.

After Chung, my boy, has dispersed the remainder of my melancholy by a solid breakfast, we proceed, glad at heart to be fully free, over new mountains to new valley villages, new vexations and new smiles.

But the old woman by the wayside sits in her old place with her old sorrows. And while one traveler after another stops to give her the alms of his attention, her eternal flood of words runs ever on toward the great silence.