

THE RED HILLS: A DOCTOR'S DIARY

KIM DONG-IN

Translated by W. E. Skillend

It was when I made a journey through Manchuria. I had wanted to look at the customs there, and at the same time to make some investigation of the spread of diseases amongst people who had not yet received the baptism of civilization. I had set aside a year for this, and gone right into the wilds. I shall try to record here what I saw in a tiny village which I shall call 'Xx'.

It was a small village of a couple of dozen households, where all the inhabitants were Korean tenant farmers. It did not even have a name, and was set in the middle of the vast Manchurian plain. Look where one might, there was not a single hill to be seen.

I had been round all the villages of Manchuria on a mule, with one Mongolian with me as an attendant, and when I reached Xx, autumn had already gone, and the furious winter had arrived.

There was nowhere in Manchuria without Koreans, but I was glad to come upon such a remote place where the whole community was made up of Koreans only. Moreover, the people there were only tenants. But they were comparatively gentle, honest and sturdy, yet at the same time all at least partly educated. Manchuria was bleak, and Manchurians and Koreans alike led a bleak life there, as I had seen in my travels

over nearly a year. Now I had come upon this comparatively peaceful community. I might have been glad even if it had been a community of foreigners, but to find that they were all my own people! For a fortnight or so I visited the houses every day, and spent the days chatting, revelling idly in the feeling of peace which I had not experienced for so long.

It was here that I saw a person called Chung Ikho, who had the nickname 'Wildcat'.

No one in Xx knew where he came from. His accent seemed to be that of the home counties around Seoul, but at times, when he chattered rapidly, one could detect a southern accent too, and then, when he was in a mood to fight, one could detect a northwestern accent as well. So there was no guessing where he came from by his accent. He knew some simple words of proper Japanese, and a few Chinese characters. Of course he could speak Chinese fairly well, and he could say some simple Russian phrases. This suggested that he had scraped a living in many places, but no one knew his background for certain.

He had apparently drifted into Xx empty-handed, like a neighbour dropping in, about a year before I had got there. In looks, he had a face like a rat, and sharp teeth. His eyes always had a crafty and baneful appearance, and in his bulbous nose the nostril hairs grew so long that they even stuck out and could be seen. He was a short man, but nimbly made. One could put his age at anywhere between 25 and 40. Which-ever way one looked at him, his body and face gave one a feeling that he was a repellent fellow, hated by everyone.

Admittedly he was said to have some gifts: to be a habitual gambler; and to love fighting, picking quarrels, brandishing a knife; and being rough with the girls.

His looks told that he was the sort of man who was hated by everyone, and his whole behaviour in the village had been so repulsive that there was no one there at all who welcomed him. All the people avoided him. He had no house, but if he went to somebody else's house for a bed for the night, the man of that house would just have the bedding ready for him to sleep, and insist on making off to another room. So Ikho would sleep on until broad daylight the next day, and then, taking his time about getting up, just as if he were in his own house, would order breakfast and leave without a single word

of thanks. And if anyone should not accede to his demands, he would start a quarrel and a fight, always with a knife.

From the time he had come into the community, the girls and young women had been uneasy about going out and about. Several had unwisely gone out and got into trouble.

'Wildcat': goodness knows who gave him that nickname. It just happened that no one called him Ikho, only Wildcat.

'Whose house did Wildcat stay at?'

'Mr Kim's.'

'Any mention of more trouble?'

'Luckily not, I believe.'

Instead of 'good mornings', they asked what Wildcat had been up to.

Wildcat was a huge cancer in the community. Because of Wildcat, even at times when they were most short of people for the fields, several young men had to stay in the village to protect their young women. Because of Wildcat, even on the hottest summer evenings the women and children could not step outside and get a breath of fresh air easily. Because of Wildcat, the community had to have someone up all night to protect the chicken coops and pigsties.

There were several meetings of the elders and youngsters to discuss the expulsion of Wildcat from the community. Of course there was agreement, but there was no one who would take the first step to expel him.

'If you'll take the first step, I'll be responsible afterwards.'

'Don't worry about afterwards, you speak to him first.'

Each one of them avoided being the first to tackle Wildcat. In spite of the council's agreement, Wildcat stayed on in the community as if nothing had happened.

'Has their girl cooked my breakfast?'

'Has their boy got my bedding ready?'

Wildcat moved from house to house just as if everyone in the community was his relative.

If anyone died in Xx, instead of condolences, no one ever forgot to say, 'and it wasn't Wildcat who died.' If anyone fell ill, they said, 'Ay, let Wildcat catch it from him.' A cancer: no one felt any sympathy or love for Wildcat.

Wildcat himself was a man who could do without sympathy or love. However anyone treated him, it meant nothing to him. If he could see that he was being given a cold reception, he

would pick a quarrel and even wave a knife, but whatever was said behind his back and even if it came to his ears, it meant nothing to him.

'Hm!': that one word was his main philosophy in life.

He often used to go to the Manchurians' haunts in the next village to gamble. Sometimes he got beaten up and a back covered in blood, but he never complained about it. Even if he had, no one would have listened to him. However badly he had been beaten up, he would bathe his wounds in a spring, limp out, and the next day he would be out and about again the same as ever.

It was the day before I left the village. An elder, Mr Song, loaded that year's harvest on a donkey and went off to the village where the Manchurian landlord lived. He came back a corpse. He was beaten up because his harvest was said to be no good, and his broken, bent body was tied on the donkey's back. He just made it home, and as his shocked family took his body down off the donkey, he breathed his last breath.

The youths of the community were all outraged over the brutal murder of Mr Song. They shouted for revenge, and each seemed ready to set out that very moment. But that was all. No one could be found to take the lead. Perhaps, if there had been anyone to do so at that time, they would have raced off to the landlord straightaway. But no one could be found. Each one looked to the next man.

They stamped their feet. They shouted. They pleaded the agony of the ill-treated, and they went. But that was all. Perhaps they hesitated to throw away their own livelihood by turning on their landlord when it was somebody else's affair, but no one was found brave enough to step out in front.

In my professional capacity as a medical doctor, I examined Mr Song's body. On my way back, I met Wildcat. He was a short man, and I looked down at him. Wildcat looked up at me.

'Miserable man! Leech of a man! Worthless man! Weevil! Parasite!' I said to him. 'D'you know Mr Song's dead?'

Wildcat had been looking up into my face, but at these words he lowered his head. Then, as I went to walk off, there flashed momentarily on Wildcat's face a pathetic expression which I could not miss.

I could not get to sleep that night for thinking of the pitiful

state of people who were being ill-treated a thousand miles away from the homes they had left. I could not prevent myself weeping for thinking of us Koreans, with nowhere to plead our anguish.

It was next morning. I got up at the sound of someone coming to wake me – it was a reflex action. Apparently Wildcat had died, covered in blood, just outside the village. I frowned at the word 'Wildcat'. However, I was a doctor, so I picked up my bag at once, and ran to where Wildcat had fallen. Several people had gathered for Mr Song's funeral, and they ran after me.

I saw him. Wildcat was bent at the waist, in the shape of the first letter of the Korean alphabet, like a figure seven. He had fallen on a furrow in a field. I ran to him and looked. He was still slightly warm.

'Ikho! Ikho!'

But he did not regain consciousness. I gave him some emergency treatment. His limbs jerked terrifyingly. After a while his eyes flickered open.

'Ikho, are you conscious?'

He looked up at my face for a while. His pupils moved.

'Doctor, I went.'

'Where?'

'To his landlord's house.'

I was astonished. I forced my eyes shut, or else would have wept. I grasped Ikho's hand, which was already growing cold. There was a short silence, then a terrible incessant jerking in his limbs. It was the death throes. A tiny sound, barely audible, left his lips again.

'Doctor!'

'Yes.'

'I want to see, I want to see...'

'What?'

His lips moved, but no words left them. He looked as if he did not have strength enough. After a little while his mouth moved again. Some sound left his lips.

'What?'

'I want to see – the red hills – n' white clothes.'

Facing death, he must have thought of his homeland and his own people. I had closed my eyes tight, but now I opened them gently. Just then Wildcat's eyes flickered open again. He

was trying to raise his hand, but it was already broken and would not rise. He tried to turn his head, but he did not have the strength. He gathered his last ounce of energy onto the tip of his tongue and opened his mouth.

'Doctor!'

'Yes.'

'Those – those –'

'What?'

'The red hills over there – and the white clothes – Doctor, there they are!'

I looked round. But there was only the vast Manchurian plain unfolding.

'Doctor, please sing me a song. Last wish – give me a song. The East Sea and Mount Paekdu may drain and wear away...!'

I nodded and closed my eyes. Then I opened my mouth. The song flowed from my lips. I sang gently: 'The East Sea and Mount Paekdu...' Following my gentle singing the solemn chorus rose from the lips of the others standing around.

'Rose that dies not, lands that end not,
Splendid rivers and hills...'

In one corner of the vast wintry Manchurian plain, the solemn song gradually grew to full dignity, consolation for the dying weevil, Ikho. Ikho's body steadily grew cold.

SNOW

HWANG SUN-WON

Translated by W. E. Skillend

From nightfall it began to snow. At first there was just a sprinkling, like white ash, outside when I opened the door, but suddenly it started to snow with flakes as big as magnolia petals. When the neighbours shivered as they stepped into our house, the snow glided down on their backs.

That night I went down again to 'Six-Fingers' Grandfather's shack. Since I had returned in autumn the previous year to what was after all my home, it had become a habit with me during the two winters to drop in at this shack whenever I had a free evening.

Everyone who assembled there was very well known to me since childhood, except for a man they called 'Sambong's Father'. He had moved here some time ago from somewhere in Hamkyong Province.

We sat there together, but had nothing particularly remarkable to talk about. At that time of year, we usually discussed the quota for taxation. We talked about everyone else's worries as if they were our own, and our own worries as if they were everyone else's.

As I stirred up the dying embers in the brazier, I sought in the conversation of these familiar people for something of the spirit of my farmer grandfather of half-farmer father, that might still be in some hidden depth of myself. My head sank