

My Mountain Experience: An Episode I Cheated Death

By Chi-ko Lu

Father graduated from Union University in Fu-zhou and he was offered a good job at the YMCA in Shanghai because of his excellent work with the Sunday schools, but unfortunately in July 7, 1937 the Japanese military decided to invade China; so because of the war he could not go to Shanghai and so he returned to Zhang-zhou to fulfill his obligation to teach at Talmage College at half the salary because the college board had provided a financial assistance for his university education. Talmage College was a mission school founded by the Reformed Church of America which also provided the major funding for the operation of the school. Since the war prevented the funding to come from the United States, the school's funding would only come from the tuitions paid by students. Also because of the war, the school was forced to move to Hua-an. Under the circumstances the teacher's salary would be limited by the funding availability.

As father was on half the salary, and mother had to forego hers when she gave up her position as a kindergarten teacher to go to Hua-an. We were very poor; the money from father's salary was barely enough to buy rice let alone anything else. To cope with the situation, mother and I found a small plot of land to raise vegetables. Since we were so successful with plenty of vegetables, we decided to have a big bowl of vegetables with a small bowl of rice for each person. But we still had a problem; we had no money to buy charcoal for cooking. When I saw the village women going to the mountain to harvest a type of ferns for firewood, I asked them to take me along and teach me how to do that job. I did this out of my own initiative when I realized the family needs. Unlike my older brother who was a book worm and he always ranked number one in his class, while I liked to get involved in family affairs and eager to learn anything coming my way. After I carried my first load of ferns home, I realized that I needed a stove to burn it. And so I asked the villager how to build a stove suitable for that. First, I learned to make bricks out of red clay soil. When they were ready, I started to build a stove like the ones the villagers had. There were two chambers, the upper one for burning ferns and firewood,

and the lower chamber separated by grids to provide air flow for burning and to allow ashes to fall through. I went to the dump to collect some broken pieces of floor bricks to cover the top so it would be water resistant. After I completed the task, I cooked my first rice with the ferns I carried home from the mountain. I must say the satisfaction was the greatest reward for a nine-year old.

Next, I wanted to learn from the village men how to cut trees, a much tougher job than harvesting ferns. This was why this job was mainly done by men. I asked the men to take me along. For the first time, they helped me in every step. I cut down some small trees, trimmed off all the side branches, and one of the men helped me bundle them together. To do that he cut down four young small bamboo trees, split their stems into two halves, tied the two tail ends together and used them as ropes. Wow, that was fascinating! It looked so simple, but when I tried it, it broke off within an inch or so. I tried and tried again, I could not make it work. After I went home, I was determined to learn that skill before I dared to venture into mountains again with these men. By persistent trial and error, I finally made it; I felt so good when I learned the trick to split a bamboo stem into two equal halves.

The village men carried their knife on their back in a knife-rack tied to their waist so that their hands were free to do any job. It was a piece of wood about 2-inches high by 6-inches wide and one inch thick with a quarter inch slot chiseled out to accommodate the knife. I gathered these were made by a carpenter. Since I did not have any money to buy one, I decided to make one myself. I found a piece of wood and cut it to size. But to chisel out the slot was hard as I did not have a chisel. So I found a very large nail and made it into a chisel. To do that I burned one end of the nail in a charcoal fire until it was red hot, and hammered it until it became flat. I learned that from watching the blacksmith doing his job. The last step was to grind it into a sharp cutting chisel. It was rough and primitive but it worked; and so I made my knife rack. I drilled two holes one on each side so that I could string a rope through to tie around my waist. Now I was ready to venture into the mountains with the village men.

One afternoon, two grown-ups asked me whether I would like to join them to cut some small trees for fire woods. I was happy to go along. It was winter time when the day was short. We walked miles through the winding trails until we arrived at a site where plenty of young trees were over-crowding for space. These trees had their main stem of about 1-2 inches in diameter, perfect for burning in a kitchen stove when they were dried. We each picked an area to harvest trees we liked, but we had to use a common clearing area for our final packaging. By the time we had cut enough for a load, the sky was falling dark, and we were afraid of tigers as they were night creatures. Each one of us had two piles of trees, all the stems were trimmed and lined up together into two bundles; each was tied in two places with bamboo strings. When both bundles were ready, a carrying stick was made of a tree stem about two inches in diameter with both ends sharpened which was inserted between the two bundles at the centre of the balance so that they could be carried on the shoulders horizontally. Finally, the leafy branches at the top of the trees from both bundles were tied together to form a triangular load. When all three of us had done that, we lifted the tree load to an upright position, the stems on the ground and the tip branches in the air so that we could position our shoulders under the carrying stick to lift up the load. It was very dark now that we could hardly see each other and we were in a hurry.

“Ah-ko, you go first” one man shouted, “O.K.” I responded lifting my load not knowing that I was looking down the mountain cliff. As my load was shifting from an upright to a horizontal position, my friend also lifted his load; unfortunately, his back was facing my back. As his load was shifting positions, his tree tops pushed mine and down I flew off the mountain cliff facing down with the heavy load on my back. As I was flying down from the mountain, the bulky load of trees became my wings. Luckily, the bottom of the cliff was a rice paddy and the bulky loads became the cushion when I hit the ground. I was muddy but unhurt.

“Are you alright?” my friend was horrified; he dropped his load and ran down the mountain to see whether I was hurt, only to find that I had already picked up my load. “I am fine” I yelled back, running as fast as I could down the mountain trail. “You are

amazing!” my friend exclaimed, “If you had died, I would not know how to explain to your mother.”

It was very late when I got home. My family was having their dinner. I was all wet and muddy and hungry. I went to the kitchen to get my rice, I could not find a rice bowl and so I took a soup bowl instead. Since there was only half a bowl of rice left, I assumed that every one had theirs already, so I took all that remained. When father went to get more rice, there was none left.

“How dare you use a large bowl so that you can get all the rice? Have you ever considered that others might want some?” He accused and scolded me of using a large bowl deliberately to get more than my share. “.....” I was speechless and I was stung by my father’s anger. He was the father and he was supposed to provide for us. It was not my fault when there was not enough rice for all of us. And I am only nine years old.

“Come on now!” mom asserted. “He is growing up and he worked so hard all day in the mountains; naturally he is hungry.” It was true that I was hungry; I walked miles and carried a heavy load of woods home. I was hurt deeply and started to cry. “He should never have used a large bowl” father snapped. “I did not take the large bowl deliberately,” I gathered my courage and protested, “I took it because there was no rice bowl left. In fact, there was only half a bowl of rice left in the pot when I came in” I could not control myself as I was choked with tears. I left the table to sit outside, crying. Mom came to sit with me and to comfort me. “Mom,” I looked up to her kind face with teary eyes, “I wish I had died so you would have one less mouth to feed.” Mom cried.

Up until now knowing that we were poor, I was happy to help out with all my might to do chores, working the fields and mountains, raising ducks, pigs, washing rice bowls, hundreds of them, at the school mass hall to get kitchen scraps for my pig, cooking and doing laundry etc etc. Now, I felt so very sad, not only my work was not appreciated but I was not even allowed to eat rice. A question entered my little mind, “who am I, a son or a servant?” Even a servant should be allowed to eat rice, I answered my own question. As I

was writing this passage 70 some years later, I still choked back my tears wondering how it was possible. He was my father, and I was only nine years old.

The following morning, I still got up at dawn, dutifully, to cook watery rice for the whole family, so that my father and my brother could eat their breakfast and go to school. After that I disappeared to the mountains. The mountains were my refuge.

Many years later when I was successful as a professor at the University of Guelph with an international reputation for my research on mushroom chromosomes, father and mother came to visit. Father wanted to know whether he still had a second son. I surmised that, in his mind, I came to Canada to get away from him. During his visit, I treated him with love and respect as a son should. I wanted him to have peace of mind in his old age; after all he is my father.