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The Five-Dragon Cave.

By J. GRIFFITH.

THE Five-Dragon Cave is a place of great fame in Honan. Superstition has invested it with miraculous powers. Water brought from the gloom of its deep and dark recesses can cause the brazen Honan sky to be quickly overspread with clouds, and drop down refreshing showers upon the thirsty earth. Hidden among beetling mountains, in a lonely ravine, its difficulty of access has only served to invest the place with greater awe and mystery. One Sunday morning last Spring found me in a town among the lofty mountains which separate North Honan from Shansi Province. As my Chinese helpers and I left the inn to begin our day's preaching among the crowds on the streets we encountered a deputy from the magistrate in Changtehfu just leaving the town. He was borne in a sedan chair and accompanied by an escort partly mounted and partly on foot. Beside him was the carefully-protected bottle of water which, the day before, had been secured from the Five-Dragon Cave and the efficacious power of which would, it was hoped, still the rising murmurs of discontent among the farmers on the parched Honan plains. That afternoon the rain began to fall and drove us off the street. Next morning was cold and threatening and, as there seemed to be no one on the streets, I confessed a desire to spend part of the forenoon in walking to the famous cave which was said to be only five miles away. The three preachers were keen to go too. So we started. About three miles from the town we visited one or two mountain villages, the people of which devote themselves largely to silk weaving. Upon enquiry there we were told the cave was still five miles away—across a towering mountain right in front of us. We had been among the mountains for two weeks and did not feel like showing the white feather over a paltry five miles. So we all voted to go ahead. There was a track over the mountain and hope placed the cave somewhere near the summit on the other side. But a lonely shepherd herding his goats and sheep on the mountain top soon undeceived us. We must descend that mountain and ascend another. We were getting impatient but it seemed too bad to toil so long and then to abandon the enterprise. So again we voted to go ahead. But, alas! the road was becoming muddy and treacherous; I lost a shoe in a quagmire but fished it out and plodded on. Difficulties multiplied and it seemed as though we all should lose our way. One man pulled himself up and shouted "I repent," but he gave in to the evident determination of the others and plodded on. Then we got lost and after looking for a human habitation found on enquiry that we were still nearly a mile from

our goal. Up a desolate ravine, devoid of road, and full of boulders, and we should soon be there. But we were becoming fagged and our companions had to encourage one another with recitals of the difficulties overcome by Christian in the "Pilgrim's Progress" in order to keep up their spirits. But what is that trail leading up the steep face of the cliff? A long, rough, rocky staircase to be sure. And up we hurried willing to expend the last of our failing energy if only the resting place could be reached. The last pull—about fifteen feet almost sheer up and with just niches cut in which one could get a foothold—brought us into what was clearly the entrance to a cave. Our muscles trembled with weakness. O bathos! is this small hole the wonderful cave, reputed to contain an elaborate temple, which we have toiled so long to see? The others looked ill. Disappointment and fear were written on their faces—fear, loudly expressed, that their trembling legs would fail and precipitate them to the bottom of the ravine if they ventured a step outside our giddy resting place. But from our perch we presently made another discovery. A few yards below us the road runs farther on around the mountain. We have mounted too high. Perhaps there is another cave and this is only a side show. New hope and a rest steady our muscles and one after another ventures down. A few rods more on a track which makes you instinctively lean toward the mountain and avoid looking down and we discover a stone parapet looking like a section of a city wall. It is our goal. Through a short tunnel into the famous cave and our weariness is half forgotten in examining the place in which centre the superstitions of a million people on the Changteh plains. It really contains two temples—one quite small (perhaps eight feet square) and the other of medium size. The latter contains five large and highly-ornamented images of the Five Dragons in human form and the walls are resplendent with Dragons in gold and in colours. Incense urns stand in front, and the presence of several pairs of small shoes prove that the place is visited also by women who go there to pray for sons. At one side stands a polished marble slab recording the fact that a certain Changteh magistrate, who held office during a time of great drought, made two personal visits to the cave and also subscribed a considerable sum to help in repairing the road leading to it. The cave in its main part, of which I have been speaking, is perhaps seventy feet long, fifty or sixty in width, and the same in height. It is lighted from the roof, in which is a circular opening communicating with the outside world.

However, it is not from this main cave that the efficacious water is secured. From the entrance to it branches off another cave which is low and narrow but which the Chinese declare to be a full *li* (one-third of a mile) in length. I had taken the precaution to carry a piece of candle, but it proved insufficient to light us far into the cave and we had to grope our way back to daylight by lighting matches, without having satisfied ourselves as to whether after all there is really water there.

Our journey back to the inn was more comfortable in one respect than the journey out, for we knew the road and how far we had to go. But we were thoroughly tired. It was almost dark when we arrived and we had tramped all day without a

bite of food or a drink of water. Still we did not regret the way we had spent the time. It provided a change after two weeks of daily preaching and helped to harden us for the many weeks of tramping and preaching that were to follow. It gave us a chance also to talk, with some degree of knowledge should the occasion demand it, of one foolish and hurtful superstition which enslaves the people.

How universally superstition binds high and low in China, let the following Imperial Decree, just issued, bear witness. "Owing to the continual drought in spite of Our prayers for rain, We hereby command Chen Pi, Governor of Peking, to proceed to the Dragon Temple at Hantanhsien (about forty-five miles from Changteh) and bring from thence to Peking an Iron Tablet possessing rain-producing virtues, which we will place up for adoration and thereby bring forth the much-desired rain."

