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opening extract from

King of the Cloud Forests

written by

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published by

Egmont Children's Books

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CHAPTER 1

I AM CALLED ASHLEY ANDERSON, ASHLEY AFTER MY mother's father so I was told, and Anderson after my father of course, whom I remember so well that I only have to close my eyes to have him standing before me. He was an American by birth, from New England, who grew up with one single-minded and determined ambition – to go to China and spread the word of God. Some people run away to sea, or to join the army. My father ran away to become a missionary when he was fifteen. By then he was already an imposing figure, over six feet tall and broad with it, and able to pass himself off as a twenty-year-old to the Missionary Society who were only too anxious to have someone of his youth and enthusiasm. By the time he was nearly twenty he was establishing his own mission outside

the town of Ping Ting Chow. With his own hands he built a chapel and hospital compound, and within a few years had become so successful that he had to send for help. There were just too many people flooding into the Mission, mostly for treatment and medicine and not for God; but as my father often said, how you bring a man to God is unimportant, just so long as he comes.

It was only a few yards from the hospital to the chapel and all the patients had to come to chapel in the morning if they did not wish to incur my father's anger; and no one ever wanted to do that. He stood fully a foot higher than everyone else and with his thunderous voice and obvious physical strength was not a person to tangle with. He was feared, respected and even worshipped by the congregation to whom he had devoted his life. I never once heard him preach a sermon to them. He always said Jesus had done that better than he ever could. Example was the only way to bring Jesus to the Chinese. That is what he said, but if example did not work he would resort to persuasion of almost any kind. He was not a man to be thwarted. So they came to the Mission in their hundreds and that was why he had to send for another doctor, and that was why my mother came.

I have no face to remember my mother by, but my father spoke of her so often that I feel I know her as well as if I had grown up with her. My father first saw her, so he often told me, at the railway station in Ping Ting Chow

when he went to meet her. She had been working as a doctor at the Mission headquarters in Shanghai for some years. She did not come alone, but with a Tibetan, called Zong Sung, soon to be known by all of us as Uncle Sung. My father adored her the moment he first set eyes on her. 'Sent from God,' were the first words he spoke to her; and she replied: 'Stuff and nonsense, Mr Anderson. Now you'd best help Sung with the luggage. Sung is not my servant, he is my medical assistant. There's a lot of it, Mr Anderson. It's very heavy and you're a lot younger than he is – Oh, and by the way, Sung is a Buddhist and he's staying a Buddhist so don't even try to convert him. If you do he's quite liable to convert you – I know, I've tried.'

'Perhaps you haven't tried hard enough,' said my father.

'She has,' said Uncle Sung.

'We'll see,' said my father. And that challenge was to make them allies in life from the first meeting. How often I was to witness their long, philosophical debates, understanding little or nothing of what was said, but sensing always their deep mutual respect and affection.

As the years passed Uncle Sung became the cement that held the Mission together. He was the tireless organiser, the foreman, the negotiator, the peacemaker. As the Mission flourished he became more and more indispensable to my father and mother, indeed it was Uncle Sung that brought them together. I suppose you could say I wouldn't ever have been born without Uncle Sung.

With Uncle Sung's help and encouragement my father courted my mother for a full year before she even realised it. All the while the Mission became more and more overstretched. The people poured in as news of the wonderful new lady doctor from Shanghai spread throughout the Province. Uncle Sung always told me that it was he who suggested that the two of them went out together into the countryside to take medicine to the villages, and so the two of them set off for the hills leaving Uncle Sung to manage the Mission without them for a few days. When they came back she scolded Uncle Sung for deliberately engineering the whole thing, but asked him to give her away at her wedding.

Uncle Sung told me there were nearly a thousand people crowding into the Mission the day they were married. He himself took over my father's old room in the hospital whilst the newly married couple moved into a house built up against the chapel wall. They only had one year of each other before I arrived. It seems I came awkwardly into this world and somewhat later than I should have done. I was my mother's death knell. The birth weakened her and in spite of all that Uncle Sung and my father could do, in spite of constant prayer, she died six months after I was born. My mother was a gravestone to me as I grew up. I passed her every day on the way from the house to the hospital, for she was buried in the centre of the compound with nothing on her grave but her name, 'Charlotte Anderson'.

In one sense though my mother never really died at all. She became the spirit of the place, its guardian angel. My father even named the Mission after her, and each year he would climb up and repaint her name in large black letters above the gate of the compound. Uncle Sung took her place as the Mission doctor and ran the hospital just as my mother had done. No problem it seemed was ever too difficult for him to solve, and my father came to rely on him totally.

As I grew up Uncle Sung became a second father to me, indeed I spent more time with him than I ever did with my father, watching him at work with the patients in the hospital and helping out when I could, making beds, rolling bandages and washing floors. It was not that my father was not loving towards me. He was stern with me certainly, and sometimes even distant, but he was loving nonetheless. It was just that he was always on his way to somewhere else and seemed to have little time for me. I remember him mostly striding off through the gates of the town or running up the steps of the hospital. Uncle Sung went everywhere more slowly, at a speed I could manage, and I could see he liked me to be with him. I was always made to feel wanted and useful. What's more, as I grew up he was more my size too and therefore less daunting to me than my father. A ready toothy smile always shone out from his copper brown face, a smile that never failed to radiate calm and warmth. He was never sour or short with me.

Only when he was meditating did I feel I could not approach him. This he did often and anywhere, sitting bolt upright, hands on his knees. It was the only time he ever looked serious.

The Mission school was as crowded as the hospital. There was no building. It was held in the open just inside the gate. There I learned to read and write in Chinese – difficult for me since I spoke English to my father and Uncle Sung was doing his best to teach me Tibetan – and my father would come each day just as we were about to finish and tell us a parable that few of us could understand, or a grisly story from the Old Testament that everyone preferred. I remember he told us once of the dry bones that got up and walked about again, and for days after that we were all walking skeletons rattling our arms and legs and chattering our teeth.

Lin was my particular friend. He did not come every day to school for his father was always keeping him at home as a punishment. He should have known better for punishment did Lin no good at all. To the delight of everyone at school he was always wonderfully wicked. One morning before school began he climbed the tree close to where the teacher always stood during lessons and lay hidden on a branch right above her making ludicrous faces at everyone below. He was only discovered when he fell out of the tree and landed at the teacher's feet. He got up, rubbed his sore shoulder and said, 'Sorry I'm late'. I cannot

remember the teacher's name, but I do remember Lin tormented her dreadfully.

Lin was the smallest boy in the class. I was already a head higher than anyone else and two heads higher than him. I took after my father it seemed. When we were alone I would often carry Lin on my back, because it was quicker that way, and anyway he said he could see better. We always used horses to get down to the river though and he rode with superlative ease as if he was attached to the horse's back. Lin loved to fish – he would turn exultant cartwheels whenever he caught one. He tried to teach me but I never had the talent or the patience for it so I was given the job of killing whatever he caught. He was more successful in teaching me how to swim. He taught me how to float. 'You just have to believe you can,' he told me and after that I found it easy enough to swim, although I never could speed through the water as he did.

I learned more with Lin than I ever did at school. It was Lin who first taught me that things are not always how they seem to be, how they should be or how I had been told they were. It was from him I learned for the first time that there were some Chinese that disliked and even hated missionaries like my father. There were even people in the town who would burn down the Charlotte Anderson Mission, given some encouragement. Lin told me too of the Japanese invasion and how their armies were marching through China from the East. He showed me with his

fishing spear how he would treat them if they ever reached Ping Ting Chow.

'But that's killing,' I said.

'So?' said Lin.

'You know what my father says,' I told him. 'Thou shalt not kill, remember?'

'We kill to eat, don't we?' said Lin, suddenly serious. And so we debated hotly until sunset not only whether it was ever right to kill, but also whether or not Jesus Christ could ever be wrong about anything. Lin was the first person in my hearing ever to challenge directly what my father always called 'the word of the Lord'. I knew he and Uncle Sung talked about these things but this was different. I worried more about that than the advancing Japanese army. I began for the first time in my life to find it difficult to say my prayers at night and mean them. I had begun to doubt.

Uncle Sung was reassuring about the Japanese. 'Do not worry yourself over the Japanese, Ashley. Between us and them is the whole Chinese army. They will not let them pass.' I dared not mention what Lin had said about Jesus for I knew he would refer me to my father about such matters. I kept my doubts to myself.

But it was not long after this that we heard for the first time the dull rumble of distant bombing and soon the town began to fill with tired soldiers. The first wounded arrived at the hospital and I found my father and Uncle Sung

working day and night alongside a Chinese army doctor who demanded that the soldiers always had to be looked after before the civilians. One evening I remember he insisted once too often. I witnessed my father's anger from the bottom of the hospital steps as he turned on the army doctor. 'Major, this place is for the healing of the sick and that we will do whether or not they are soldiers. We are all God's children in or out of uniform, whatever the uniform.' The army doctor looked hard at my father, his eyes blazing with anger. I was quite sure at that moment that my father would be taken away and shot, and I've always thought if Uncle Sung had not intervened that could indeed have happened. Uncle Sung led the army doctor away and pacified him somehow. I don't know what he said, but whatever it was it worked. After that although Father and the army doctor were never the best of friends, they at least tolerated each other.

There was no school any more now and Lin and I sketched out elaborate plans in the river mud for the defeat of the Japanese. They were coming from the south and the north now, Lin told me, and we knew from the soldiers' stories where the battle fronts were. 'Let them come,' he said fiercely. He was ready for them.

Then one day Lin did not come to the Mission and I was on my own. I rode down to the river bank, but he wasn't there. As evening fell I searched the narrow streets of the town for news of him, but no one seemed to know

where he had gone. It was almost dark as I walked back up the hill towards the Mission gates. A small figure came out from the shadows to meet me. He was wearing a uniform. He saluted and laughed. It was Lin. 'But you're only fourteen,' I protested.

He held up his rifle in front of me. 'I can shoot this and that's all that matters,' he said. 'And anyway I'm not fourteen, not really. I only said that to be the same age as you – I'm not so small if I'm fourteen, am I? I'm sixteen and I won't be much taller by the time I'm twenty. Make a smaller target, don't I?' We laughed and shared a cigarette before shaking hands solemnly. I watched him walk away and vanish into the smoky dark of the town.

The bombers came the next morning, throbbing and roaring above us. Father and I were in the middle of breakfast and we heard the cheering outside in the compound. I remember Father looking out of the window and saying, 'What are they cheering about? Can't they see they're Japanese?' Then he was shouting to them to take cover. He pushed me under the table and threw himself on top of me as the first bomb fell.