

Diary of a Martyr

IT is not often that one can handle an actual manuscript written by a brave man facing almost certain death at the hands of cruel and barbarous enemies. The time-worn pages before me are covered with neat handwriting. It is in ink until, on page six, one reads "ink in pen is finished" and the rest is in pencil. The time is 1900. The place the far-off wilds of North China. The writer the Rev. Herbert Dixon, one of those who died at the hands of the savage "Boxers", the notorious secret sect organised by reactionary elements to exterminate foreign influence from China in the most cruel manner imaginable.

The last 25 years of the 19th century had been a time of eager outreach by the Churches in Britain towards the newly-opened-up interior of China. Ministers, teachers and doctors went forth convinced that this ancient civilisation was eagerly awaiting Christianity. Herbert Dixon belonged to the Baptist Mission, working in the North West province of Shansi. Everything seemed set for a long period of useful activity for these stalwart pioneers. They had become the well-loved friends of the people. They wore Chinese dress, ate Chinese food, spoke and wrote fluently in the language, and by their sincerity, humility and interest in their welfare, had captured the hearts of all. Then suddenly the storm broke.

On 21st June, 1900, the fanatical Empress Dowager Tzu Hsi declared war on the West. Three days later she sent telegrams to the governors of provinces saying, "Slay all foreigners." Fortunately there were some who refused to obey, but in Shansi the governor was himself a hater of foreign missionaries. He determined to carry out to the letter the fateful decree he had received. The first entry in the diary reads: "June 29th, Friday. Last night had letter saying very bad rumours about but could not say if there was any foundation for them." It is obvious the news came as a complete shock to the defenceless group of eight British missionaries, of whom Dixon was leader, living isolated in the city of Hsin Chow, forty-five miles away from their colleagues in the provincial capital. The rumours proved all too true. "This morning at five o'clock," the diary continues, "a messenger came in saying our premises (in the capital) had been burnt down and a woman missionary killed."

Dixon decided the only course open to them was to try to escape to the hills. There were four women in the party, so that any idea of armed resistance was ludicrous as the countryside was by this time over-run with militant Boxers. That very evening Dixon led the others out by mule cart from the city. "After an hour's toilsome march," he writes, "we pushed up into a deep gully, dismissed our two carts and hid our luggage while we awaited in the dark the arrival of some Christians with donkeys. At last they came and we started up a wide riverbed about midnight. An awful march through alternate water and deep dry sand. Dared carry no light, neither dared we call out. Lost our bearings. At last hit the entrance up a narrow pass. Then a terrible climb over a rough path. Arrived near village at daybreak. Could not go in for fear of bringing trouble on the villagers. Went up a glen and lay out all day. Rained heavily and we got soaked through in a lonely torrent bed until near midnight. The Christians came with lights and with infinite trouble took us and our things into village about two miles off. No sooner there than the men had to be marched away over the mountainside to hide in a cave, while the ladies were put down in a tiny cellar and the lid shut down. It almost cost them their lives."

Dixon's hope of rescue must have been sorely shattered when on 4th July news came that all their colleagues in the capital had been killed and that Boxers were approaching the very village from which the Chinese Christians had been supplying them with food. He decided they must find an even more remote hideout. At the same time he sent further messengers to the coast, to Peking, to adjoining provinces.

"Friday, 13th July. The cave is a mere hole in the bank-room for all to lie down. Water a mile below but we have two buckets full. Have to keep strictly in the cave by day and no talking allowed. Villagers all fled so cannot get food. Must economise our biscuits and tinned milk. All seems hopeless as our cave is known to at least one outsider. Should we be killed don't forget to recompense the villagers who have given their all for us." It is reminiscent of Captain Scott at the South Pole. The circumstances are different but there is the same cool courage, the same refusal to give in. "Saturday, 14th July. We have come to the end of our oatmeal bread and have had a special prayer meeting to ask for food and guidance. This cave is horribly damp. Just after the prayer meeting three men came and offered to take us to a more secluded spot, bringing with them some bread. It was indeed welcome, though it was of the roughest. It is awfully good of them as they have nothing themselves. [Famine was widespread at the time]. We are worse off than Mafeking and have no Baden Powell!"

"Saturday, July 21st. About 9 a.m. heard shouting of 'Pastor, Pastor', then silence, then saw men on top of the mountain evi-

dently watching our cave-mouth. At 2.45 p.m. an attack was suddenly commenced by men over the cave hurling immense stones. Fearing we should be blocked in we dashed out and amid a hail of huge stones commenced firing with a revolver and a gun at the most prominent leaders. They began to run up the hill and left us the field. They numbered probably 50-60. We may not be able to add more to this account. But we are still in God's hands and hoping for possible rescue . . ."So the diary ends.

From later accounts we know that the besieged missionaries were induced to give themselves up, having been promised safety by the Boxers. It was, of course, a trap. They were kept in the city jail until 9th August, forty-two days after they had first heard of the rising. On that day, before daybreak they were allowed to leave the inner gate of the city, believing they were to be given safe conduct to the coast. As the gate closed behind them the outer gate was shut, leaving them helpless in the intervening courtyard. Armed men sprang out and brutally beat them to death. Thus it was that they joined that extraordinary total of 135 Protestant missionaries, 53 children, 47 Roman Catholic missionaries and 32,000 Chinese Christians who perished during one of the most ghastly of Christian martyrdoms.

The annals of missionary adventure contain many pages of heroism and devotion but for sheer courage and endurance the worn yellow pages of Herbert Dixon's diary would be hard to equal.

S. L. HENDERSON SMITH

(By courtesy of *Huddersfield Examiner*)

Dover General Baptist Church. The first Minute Book is now in the Dr. Williams's Library. It has been located in Records of Nonconformity (38.208) and appears in section 6 of the *Guide*, p.14, with an index reference under "Dover" on p.25, and also under "General Baptists" on p.26. The entry gives its dates as 1645—1792. Mr. Twinn, the Librarian, points out that this book is not chronological but that these two seem to be the "end" dates, although matter between 1645 and 1661 was probably copied from elsewhere.