This excerpt is taken from Stephen Krensky's The Iron Dragon Never Sleeps. Winnie and her mother have traveled to Cisco, California, to visit her father who is working on the transcontinental railroad. While she is there she befriends a young Chinese boy named Lee, who is also working on the railroad. Through her observations and her interactions with Lee, she begins to see that the Chinese workers are given the most dangerous jobs, the longest hours, and the least amount of respect.

“Eli, what are you doing here?”

Marjorie stopped pinning for a moment. She was making a new dress for Winnie, who was standing on a stool next to her. Winnie was draped in burgundy calico.

The cloth was almost as red as her father’s face. Eli Tucker looked about ready to explode.

“It’s an upside-down day, Marjorie. No, worse than that. It’s an inside-out day, too!”

“Can I get down, Mama?” Winnie asked. Clearly the dressmaking was going to be delayed.

“All right, Winnie. Now, Eli, calm down. Tell us what’s wrong?”

“There’s a strike, Marjorie. Two thousand Chinamen are on strike. Can you believe it?”

Winnie could. This was what Lee was hinting about, she thought.

“I mean, we expected trouble on Saturday. There were a few men holding up signs. But this morning the tunnel drillers refused to work. Mr. Strobridge must have choked on a cigar when he heard the news. And Mr. Crocker, he probably swallowed one whole.”

“Mr. Crocker and the other railroad owners may be getting what they deserve,” said Marjorie. “You’ve said the Chinese are paid twenty-six dollars a month while the others get thirty-five. And the Chinese have to pay for their own food, too.”

“It’s strange food, Marjorie, you have to admit that.”

“Strange to us, Papa,” said Winnie. “Not to them.”

Her father folded his arms. “Well, that may be. But don’t try to confuse the issue with facts.”

“And what is the issue?” asked Marjorie.

“That strikes are not allowed. If the Chinese aren’t happy here, they can leave.”
“Can they?” Marjorie wasn’t so sure. “I heard two men on the street bragging about the deserters they brought back to the railroad. They talked of beatings and whippings.”

Her husband chewed his lip. “Some of the boys may have gotten a little out of hand. That still doesn’t make a strike right.”

“What are the Chinese demanding?”

“They want the same pay and work hours as white workers. Mr. Crocker won’t stand for it. He’s coming out to take charge of the situation personally.”

“Do you think there’ll be trouble?” Winnie asked. “Could anyone get hurt?”

“The strike is already trouble, Winnie. If you mean dangerous trouble, I honestly don’t know. So far there’s been none. Most of the Chinese are holed up in the camps. They’re just lying around, drinking their tea. Our orders are to leave them alone for the present.”

“And if those orders change?” asked Winnie.

Her father sighed. “Then trouble will follow for sure.”

Two days passed with no outward change in the situation. The Chinese stayed in their camps. There were meetings between Mr. Crocker and the strikers, but no progress was made.

“They know we need them,” her father told Winnie at supper. “So they’re being stubborn. But they have nowhere to go. In a way they need us, too.”

“I just wish it were over,” said Winnie. “Even the air feels tense.”

The next morning Winnie rode Handsome\(^1\) out to look at the tracks. There were scattered non-Chinese crews trying to keep busy. Still, everything seemed very quiet.

The trail took her past a trestle\(^2\) bridge spanning a ravine. The crisscrossed wood supports rose like the top of a cherry pie on its side.

“Winnie!”

She turned in the saddle. Lee was approaching. He walked slowly, and she thought he looked tired.

“Hello, Winnie!”

Winnie dismounted. Part of her was glad to see Lee. The other part was mad at him and all the other Chinese, who were causing problems for her father.

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\(^1\) The name of Winnie’s horse

\(^2\) braced framework of timbers, piles, or steelwork for carrying a road or railroad over a depression or valley
“Why are you here?” She said. “I thought you were on strike.”

“I am. That is why I can be here. There is nothing else for me to do.”

“You should be working to settle this strike. You should be helping.”

“I wish to help,” Lee admitted. “But my words go unheard.”

Winnie paused. She knew what that was like. “My father says it’s not right to strike,” she said finally.

Lee sighed. “Right and wrong can be heard to tell apart. Is it right that we are up before the sun and do not rest until dark? Is it right that last winter the snow fell so deep we could not walk over it? We had to dig tunnels under the snow to go from place to place. Is it right that we had to dig holes through the snow for air?” He shivered at the memory. “The iron dragon3 never sleeps, Winnie. It is always waiting. Always wanting more. There were some days when we didn’t see the sky. But even in the tunnels we were not safe from the rumbling snows.”

“Avalanches?”

Lee nodded. “One of them swept away twenty men. They were buried so deep they could not be dug out until spring.”

Winnie shuddered.

“Again and again we have asked for changes. The railroad does not listen. Maybe they will listen now.”

“The strike is still wrong,” Winnie said softly.

Lee sighed. “Not so wrong as being buried alive in the snow.”

Handsome snorted.

“He’s hungry,” said Winnie, glad to change the subject. “And impatient, too. I brought him a treat.”

She took two apples out of her saddlebag. She offered one to Handsome, who quickly gobbled it up.

“Do you want to feed him the other?” she asked Lee.

Lee took the apple and looked at it thoughtfully. He turned it over. “It is a fine apple. Very round.”

“I guess it is,” said Winnie. She watched Lee closely. “Do you want to eat it?”

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Lee brightened. “Yes, please.”

“Go ahead. I’ll get more.”

Lee almost choked on the apple because he bit into it so fast.

“Slow down,” said Winnie. “Why are you so hungry?”

“We have had no food since Tuesday. Mr. Crocker, the big boss, cut off our supplies.”

Winnie blinked. She knew the Chinese paid for their own food. It wasn’t fair for Mr. Crocker to starve them into working for him. That makes him nothing more than a bully.

Winnie didn’t like bullies.