

## Lien-Ki.

('Dawn of Day.')

It was midwinter in north China. The flat country was a waste of snow, the distant hills lay wrapped in chilly grandeur. The few scattered villages were apparently deserted, but this was because all the people were huddled together inside the houses, trying to keep warm by sitting close against each other on the k'angs (brick beds), under which the fires were lit. All the doors were shut and every window plastered over with paper, instead of glass, which is the way in China.

In Nantasao's little mud cottage there was no fire under the k'ang. She was a poor widow with five little children. Her husband had deserted her and gone to Corea, and then she had heard that he was dead. Nantasao was very poor, and had a hard struggle to keep herself and her five children.

In the summer they managed pretty well, because she was able to earn money by working in the fields, and Lien-ki, her eldest son, was ten years old, and also made a few cash by gathering grass and picking acorns. But now it was winter, and winter in north China holds the land in an icy grip.

Nantasao had not earned a single cash for many weeks, and the little hoard which she had treasured from the long summer days, was getting very low.

She and her children had eaten nothing lately but tigua, a kind of sweet potato, and but scantily of these. Till the frost broke she had no hope of earning money. Then she would be able to earn a few cash by washing neighbors' clothes in the stream outside the village, and with those cash she would buy a little stock of rice and some wood.

But the stream was hard-frozen now, and it was bitterly cold. The fierce north wind was sweeping over the country, and it howled and rattled against the paper windows. The k'ang in Nantasao's cottage was quite cold. There was no fire beneath it. The five children huddled upon it could get no warmth. They shivered and complained till Nantasao felt desperate. She was rough and hard in manner, but circumstances had made her so. She had a kind heart and she loved her children. She had loved her husband, but he had left her, and she only thought of him now with a dull indifference. She was entirely occupied with keeping body and soul together for herself and her children.

This bitter winter day she was very downcast. She looked at the little empty fireplace under the k'ang, but yesterday's ashes would not rekindle, and there was no more wood in the cottage, neither could wood be bought in Ninghai city to-day, for there was no market. As to picking up sticks, the fields had been stripped bare, even of grass, before the snow fell. Were there not many poor people in the villages around Ninghai by whom every available scrap of fuel or fodder had long since been gathered.

Nantasao's mud cottage was on the outskirts of Shing-t'an, a little village three li away from Ninghai city. Charcoal could be bought in the city, but charcoal was so dear. Still, a small quantity of charcoal would heat the k'ang for many hours, and there were enough sticks in the house to light the charcoal. Nantasao took out her bag of cash from a hole in the wall, where she kept it for safety. She counted the money. There were still two hundred cash. For fifty cash she would get a small basket of charcoal, and they would all be warm for one night. The future must take care of itself.

If they must all die of want and cold, then they must.

She took fifty cash out of the bag, choosing the smallest and most worn. Just as well to use them first, she thought, though really of the same value.

The five small figures on the k'ang watched her eagerly. Their blue cotton garments hung limply on their angular little forms, for Nantasao had not been able to buy wadding with which to line their clothes for the winter, and without it, one is terribly cold in North China. Lien-ki, the eldest boy, said, 'We are cold, mother. We need the fire.' Nantasao slowly tied the fifty cash on to a string and replied, 'Go into the city and buy six kin (lbs.) of charcoal. Puh kan tiao ti hsia (Don't dare to lose any of it).' Lien-ki's heart sunk. He had thought that his mother was going herself. As a matter of fact she would gladly have done so, to save Lien-ki the cold journey, but her soft Chinese shoes, made of cotton material, were quite worn out. She could not be seen in the streets of the city till she was able to make new shoes for her tiny feet, of which as a girl, she had been so proud.

It was certainly cold inside the cottage, but outside it was much worse. Lien-ki felt that he would prefer to remain huddled on the cold k'ang to facing the bitter wind across the fields on the quest for charcoal, but he dared not disobey his mother. He got slowly off the k'ang with a dismal face, and drew on his shoes of pigskin, upon which the original black hairs of the pig still remained. They made his feet look like animal's hoofs, but they kept out the wet. He took the basket and the cash, and went drearily out, his mother shutting the door quickly after him, to prevent the warm air there was inside the room, engendered by the human heat, from escaping.

Oh, how the wind blew! tearing and shrieking over the desolate fields, with nothing to intercept its course or break its fury. Lien-ki stumped along, the mud-tracks were hard frozen, that was a mercy, and though the snow had drifted deeply in places one could walk safely over it. Lien-ki thought of the hot summer days, and wondered how long it would be before they came again, but at ten years old, the seasons seem very far removed from one another. He had not very far to go to reach the city; three li is only



LIEN-KI STUMPED ALONG.

about a mile in distance. He came to the moat which ran all round the city wall, and crossing the stone bridge, looked down on the ice beneath. He enjoyed sliding sometimes with other boys, but there is not the same joy in movement and exertion to a

Chinese child that there is to an English one.

He passed through the grand old city gate, but this time of year, except on market days, there was but little traffic. Even old Sing-t'ai, who usually sat here with a little stall selling hao-shao and huna-sung (cakes and nuts), was absent. Doubtless he was keeping himself warm inside his house, sitting on a hot k'ang and smcking his pipe. Lien-ki plodded on up the city street. He was disappointed, for old Sing-t'ai, knowing that Nantasao's poverty was great, would probably have given him a stale hao-shao. He reached the end of a long street without meeting a living creature, except two or three hungry, wolf-like dogs, who snarled outside their master's door. He turned a corner and found himself at the pu-t's'i (shop) where the charcoal was to be bought.

It was an open booth, and Lin, the owner, sat within, muffled in long wadded garments, his ears protected with fur lappets. Lien-ki asked him for six kin of charcoal and received it in his basket. He then proceeded to count out his cash, but at this point trouble awaited him, the string had become loosened, and during his walk, eighteen cash had slipped off and been lost in the snow. Dismay filled his heart. He counted and recounted the cash that remained, and Lin also counted, but to no purpose, eighteen of them were missing, one end of the string had been fastened to his girdle beneath his outer garment and the cash had been secured by a knot at the other end, which had become loosened, with the result that eighteen cash had slipped away. Lien-ki wept. He was numbed by the cold, and now, to add to his misery he would be beaten. Nantasao was not unkind to her children, but to lose her money would be more than she could bear without wreaking vengeance upon the unfortunate little messenger. Lien-ki knew that she might even suspect him of having spent the money on hao-shao, and refuse to credit his tale. He looked helplessly at Lin, who with stolid yellow face was waiting to complete the transaction. Lin was not a rich man and could not afford to lose his money nor to give charcoal for less than its price. Finally, pitying the boy's dilemma, he consented to wait for the amount missing and to let the boy take the six kin of charcoal home with him. Lien-ki suggested that he might possibly find the money strewn along his homeward path, but this they both knew to be a fallacious hope. The only way out of the dilemma seemed to be for Lien-ki to go home and to tell Nantasao what had happened. Doubtless she would beat him but she would certainly refund the money to Lin.

The little boy now picked up the basket, now heavy with six kin of charcoal, and disconsolately retraced his steps down the street. All was white except for the touch of color made by the red placards on the walls of the houses and for the massive black signboards inscribed with large gilt characters which hung outside the shops.

Half-way down the street stood the foreigners' house, the Jesu T'ang (Hall of Jesus.) The foreign ladies lived here, who taught a new religion. Iang-knei-tsi they were called (foreign devils), and often worse names. Lien-ki had heard many reports about them in his village, and once he had been taken by his mother into their house, to see Song Kuniang, the foreign devil who visited sick people and gave them medicines. Lien-ki had had a pain in his stomach and could not eat. Nantasao full of grief had taken him, reluctant and terrified, to ask Song Kuniang to cure him, who had given