

THE MESSENGER.

a mellow beauty clung to the hill-slope and ruined temple wall. Even the barren ancestral mounds, half hidden in groves of evergreen, took on the charm of the impenetrable, the unsearchable.

If Tsui Ching had looked he could have seen from his perch on top of the Au Ting wall the green tiled roofs of the Temple of Earth and the repaired breach in the Temple wall, where, in the early sixties, the English once placed a cannon with the laudable intention of battering down the north wall of Peking. Farther to the west, the yellow roofs of the great Llama temple flamed through yews, centuries old in growth. Stretching towards the Llama temple and immeasurably higher, rose the beautiful western hills, the eastern continuation of the Ala Shan range; their slopes shrouded in the pale mist of distance, a soft, intangible mist which half concealed the rugged outlines and charmed the sight it baffled.

A train of camels passed below by the wall and took the narrow path leading to the Llama Temple. Their masters, journeying down from Mongolia for purposes of trade, did not wish to miss the opportunity of burning incense before the shrine of Buddha. The broad, soft feet of the beasts sank deep in the dirt path, clouds of dust arose at times hiding from view the rough Mongols on their backs. These riders were dressed in gay silks, satins and dirty furs; rough Mongol hats flared away from coarse, bestial features, tanned to a mahogany hue by the eastern sun. They laughed and chatted loudly with each other, swaying back and forth on their camels, like small boats out at sea. Now and then one of the proud nostriled beasts uttered a plaintive cry, the bells on their necks struck resonantly. But only the echoes reached the great height of wall where Tsui Ching sat.

The cavalcade passed on and out of sight, over undulating swells of yellow earth with which the tawny hides of the camels blended almost indistinguishably. The merry tinkle of donkey bells floated up from the city streets, birds twittered about on the wall, and overhead, whistles fastened in the tails of pigeons gave forth a whirring moaning, musical sound, now near, now far, but ever insistent. Above the pigeons, three cloud-ships lay at anchor in as languid a sea as ever becalmed a mariner, three belated ghost ships overtaken by the day, motionless, untouched by passing wind and with the sunlight sifting earthward through their porous sails. All this rare loveliness was above and about Tsui Ching, but China has yet to produce a Wordsworth. Tsui Ching could not be expected to notice anything so materially unprofitable as beauty of sight and sound.

By-and-by he dropped from his seat on the high outer balustrade and walked back and forth in deep thought. There was no danger of his falling, for in addition to the balustrade that flanked each side,—the wall at its narrowest was forty feet broad—at the buttresses set every sixty feet in its length, seventy or more. An incline of brick, stone and dirt ran from the ground to the top of the wall. Up this the man had climbed. His donkey, tied to the old gate which enclosed the incline below, pricked up his ears occasionally in anxious anticipation. But his master's thoughts were far from ill-used donkeys and the little animal coming to this or like conclusion, browsed about among the rocks and dirt, catching at dry grass blades and

munching upon them with eyes closed in relish over such tit bits.

He was so occupied with this that he took little notice of a boy who crawled through a hole in the gate and walked up the incline. The boy was followed by a black goat that disdainingly this humble entrance to elevation clambered up the side of the wall almost the entire distance of fifty feet to the top, then changing his course, ran along the side of the wall, his tiny hoofs striking and clinging to the narrow, shelving bricks in a marvellous manner.

The boy climbed the height for the special purpose of ascertaining Tsui Ching's business on top of the usually deserted city wall, but the man's glowering face and powerful figure turned him from his inquiries, and he immediately fell to gathering the dried weeds sticking in the dirt between the bricks.

Tsui Ching observed him and moved slowly, threateningly in his direction. The boy became suddenly convinced that his object on top of the wall was accomplished, for he turned, clucked to his goat, and ran pell mell down as he had come, spilling his load on the way. At the base of the wall he turned to look back. The man was following silently, the boy's fears increased, and with a terrified cry, he vanished through the broken gate.

Tsui Ching smiled. Men sometimes trusted Tsui until he smiled. This smile—what was it? Rare certainly, as from one who knew his betraying trait; a slow drawing back of thin lips from jagged wolf-like fangs, an almost imperceptible dilation of cruel nostrils and the narrowing of eyes into dark slits through which the very devil gleamed suddenly forth. His laughter rarely followed, wordless and soundless it sometimes writhed within him contorting his body and face strangely, twisting his features into demoniacal likeness. However, few but his wife had ever observed his laugh. She, poor woman, dreaming of it, often awoke shuddering in the night.

Tsui Ching walked on down, took his donkey by the bridle and turned his steps homeward. He did not think long on this last pleasant little episode for his own affairs had reached a serious crisis. He was in sore straits. Having never done a day's honest work, it was hard at the age of forty to contemplate the possibility of labor with anything like equanimity. But now turn and twist as he might, there seemed to be no alternative without great risk of personal freedom.

In his younger days he had been properly ambitious in the line of his profession. When but nineteen years old, in company with a band of highwaymen, he had, in broad daylight, helped to storm and rob a bank of considerable importance. But the fool-hardiness of youth made him careless of discovery and he was soon caught, identified and placed in the Yamen or prison.

Tsui had every reason to fear a death sentence, in fact he wished for it. He was forced, among other punishments, to lie face downward while two huge Manchus beat him with bamboo staves across the back and legs. Raw and bleeding from this, he was cast into a filthy dungeon with many older and worse criminals. Here he was half-crazed with vermin, and when able he snatched what food he could from the common trough into which it was poured like swill.

One rainy day the guards dragged him fainting into the courtyard. A murderer

was being sliced to death near him, but Tsui Ching could not notice for the horrible pain across his own back; there was a sound of sizzling in his ears, the stench of burning flesh in his nostrils. Shriek after shriek tore through his pallid lips, and then it seemed to him that he died. Later, however, he found himself clothed and wandering about the dark city streets. His back stung and smarted with intolerable pain. He paused once to ask a passer-by, to tell him what was wrong, when suddenly the truth flashed through his half-stupified intelligence. Throwing up his arms and staggering forward, Tsui laughed aloud for the last time, a horrible discordant succession of inarticulate sounds that woke the night echoes and sent them flying from side to side—peal after peal rang out, penetrating into narrow alleys and by-streets—rousing the sleeping watchmen and sending the trembling beggars farther into the shadow. Ask? he would never ask. It was the brand of 'thief' burned deep into his flesh. If ever caught again and brought before the Yamen magistrate the brand would convict him of past offences and death by torture would be his certain punishment.

When recovered from his burn and ill-usage, he had certain delicate scruples against undertaking any great risk. Glory and visions of stolen wealth no longer allured him. He therefore took to small affairs along his chosen line; he perfected a system of petty thieving and squeezing, and by dint of skill, managed to get comfortably through a number of years.

The first few years he secured work from foreigners in the capacity of cook, but he was not adept enough to forever baffle suspicion and detection. He was discharged from place after place, and finally boycotted altogether by the foreigners. From them he went to his own people, but in the course of years suspicion fell upon him again. They refused to employ him and he was glad to escape from them and their threats. Thus it happened on this particular day that he found himself without the shadow of employment, where he could carry his old practices into execution. 'What to do, what to do?' was the problem. He turned his donkey into the little courtyard which held several other families besides his own. He fastened it in a roofless shed at the back of the house, then returning, sat down on his door step and pondered.

He could hear his wife's feet tapping about on the brick floor as she prepared the afternoon food. Now and then she looked through doors, a picture of sullen discontent, but she did not speak a greeting to her husband. Her expression softened, however, when it fell upon the boy. Marvellous, too, how the evil lines on the father's face relaxed as he watched his child. He was a tiny fat youngster, with shining black eyes, two wee pig tails tied with red string, sticking out horizontally over his ears. His mouth invariably dirty and smiling—not Tsui Ching's smile, but a clear ripple of mirth that transformed the pudgy features into something beautiful to see, and better than this, his smile often broke into laughter, delicious little cooes, gurgles, squeaks and squeals, so filled with joy and gladness, so replete with good nature, that everyone who heard smiled in return. The cross, old shop-man at the corner saw his roguish face peering in at his door one day, but before he could raise his hand to drive him away, the boy laughed. His mother following