

Tsui Ching's Great Idea

(By Theodora Marshall Inglis, in 'Presbyterian Banner.')

PART II.

To his wife's sullenness on this afternoon, Tsui paid little attention. Even the boy was forgotten while he evolved in his mind a scheme that had occurred to him in the night. Like his slender, supple fingers, his brain worked faster under cover of darkness. Night was always welcome to him. In it he forgot the day's petty achievements and there opened before his twisted moral vision a long vista of successful escapades and ill-gotten gains. This latest scheme he had been forced to continue during the daylight hours. As he sat weighing the matter, he concluded that he must work out his plan or starve; there was nothing else to be done. He rejected the idea of confessing his faults to his old and wronged employers and begging leave to start work anew on the untried basis of honesty. He had done this a few times and his old patrons had lost faith in him. No, that would not work again. He must accept this new scheme, involving as it did, risk and danger—still it was a very unique idea and one worthy of his brain.

He dwelt luxuriously on the thought, the possibility of success, involving as it did rich food, silk garments for himself and his boy. His wife? Of no importance she. He would not confide his plan to her. She was getting old and soft-hearted, strange ideas had been stirring in her brain. Once she had been emboldened to throw the dog a dish of stolen meat, in open defiance of his command to cook it. But she would hardly try that again—such a fine beating as he gave her and he had burned up her precious book that some missionary devil had given her. He had stopped her attendance at the mission services, too. Missions and missionaries! Working for love were they? Well, fools might believe them. They had wicked purposes, well he knew. Who but fools or villains would leave the home of their ancestors? What of the new customs they were trying to preach in Peking? The shining, two-wheeled devils they rode about Peking streets that went faster than the eye could wink. Ah, he had worked for them, he knew their tricks and all the evils that they had brought to China. There was the railway, of which he had heard so much but never seen, another invention of the evil foreign spirit. Oh, the precious, precious ancestral mounds that had been levelled to make room for this ribbed serpent, along whose back another monster crept, a great shrieking, fire-breathing monster, they said, that devoured all in its way. The country people could tell all about its depredations. They knew what made it so ravenous; it was the human bones that the foreigners had stolen from the desecrated mounds to help support the serpent. Ugh! this was easy enough to believe, when they would bury living Chinese infants under the serpent's ribs to make a smooth path for the other monster.

Then there were the foreign doctors, didn't they have secret drawers and huge black bottles full of human eyes, from which they concocted infamous medicines and fed the poor, foolish Chinese, who like idiots often professed to be healed of their

ailments and in a very sickness of gratitude, took up with the foreigners; some even went far enough to accept the Jesus doctrine—that pernicious doctrine that bewitched so many and was slowly undermining the influence of both gods and ancestors. Pah! they were all turtles. With these most wicked of revilings on his lips, he called to his boy and they went into the room for their food.

Tsui's house consisted of one room, not larger than 8x12. The brick kang or bed occupied two-thirds of it, and the coal balls glowing in the kang fire hole, served to cook the food. Tsui's wife took from the fire an earthen dish of millet porridge, which she set on the kang before her son and husband. They squatted beside it and fell to eating greedily. The woman maintained her silence. She stood on the brick floor by the door waiting for them to finish. Then she could eat. Tsui himself was rather rigid in this matter of table etiquette and would not permit her to eat until his wants and the boy's were satisfied. But the wife's sullenness covered a restlessness of spirit. She hated her husband, of course. That was nothing, that was nothing. Thousands of Chinese women hated the men to whom they were given by their parents. She was glad, though, that her mother-in-law, in a fit of rage, had taken an overdose of opium and had died before she knew her. Truly there were strange ideas sifting through her brain, but widely different from Tsui's.

She went out the door and walked around the corner of the house. After glancing furtively about to assure herself that she was unseen, she took from her upper garment a small paper pamphlet whose contents she studied laboriously but eagerly. Now and then she gave up her effort to wipe away the tears which fell from her softened eyes. The whole expression of her face had changed; pleasant lines appeared where harsh contractions had been and Tsui creeping around the corner scarcely recognized her. But when he did all the evil within him flared up; he rushed toward her, snatched her book, tore it into pieces and beat her cruelly.

'Hi! you would follow these foreign devils, would you? You would read their doctrines, would you? I'll beat you until you have neither face nor courage to bring another book here. What are you for anyway but to serve me and tend the boy? You—you—the mother of wretched girls! Tsui's rage finally exhausted itself, and kicking his wife inside the door, he departed, muttering revilings and imprecations.

Mrs. Tsui had to cook no more food that day. She crawled, bruised and bleeding, upon the kang. The boy crept up beside her, laid his soft baby face against hers, rubbed it up and down, snuggled up in her arms and fell asleep, in some measure comforting her.

Tsui Ching did not return until night-fall. He came carrying a package, which he placed upon the kang. His wife and boy were rolled up at the other end. The boy was asleep and Mrs. Tsui, under pretense of being so, watched her husband's performance with interest.

He disrobed entirely, then taking a white substance, which in the dim candle-light, she recognized as lard, from the package, he anointed and rubbed his body with it until from crown to toe, he was sleek and shining. When he had satisfied himself

he threw a long unlined cotton garment around his shoulders, took the remaining lard in his hand and departed.

She listened until his footsteps could no longer be heard. Then she sat up, took some torn fragments of reading matter from her bosom, bent her disfigured face towards the light and stammered audibly over the characters.

Outside, the night was cool; the moon had not risen, therefore, the street lamps could not be lighted, for 'who could see to light the lamps in the dark?'

Tsui Ching had left his own alley and was creeping stealthily along the great street that led to the big mission house. He heard the beating of the watchman's wooden drum and slipped into a dark corner as the watchman and his lantern bearer paraded past. Tsui Ching chuckled. Were the Chinese watchmen with their drums and lanterns, not good fellows to call out: 'Run, thieves, run! The watch is coming, don't you hear his drum and see his light?'

The street watchman gone, Tsui went on his way, slipped stealthily past several gateways within whose arches the stationary watchmen, wrapped in sheep skins, were comfortably sleeping but conscientiously performing their duty as guardians of the law. It was yet early, but he wished to get home again before the moon rose too high, for China's skies are clear the winter through. The stars shine gloriously, and in the early night seem reflected in the myriads of moving points of light on the city streets, for every pedestrian, cart and donkey carried a lantern. But the lanterns are soon housed while the stars keep their watch the night through. When the tired and homesick soul grows weary of the surrounding filth and degradation in China, it can look up to the heavens and say: 'Here at least is something I have known before. These same stars shine down upon the old home. Perhaps some one looked up at them last night and said, "To-morrow you will shine upon her. Guard her, O stars, and take a message of love and good cheer!"' and the soul is comforted.

But Tsui Ching noticed the stars only to revile them. For his part, he would have torn them from their places, could the fingers of his natural antipathy have reached that high. He hurried along through the streets, keeping close to the shop fronts and clutching his light garment about his naked and shivering loins—shivering more from excitement than from cold. For the first time in years the brand on his shoulder burned and stung him, and his anticipations of success were sadly interrupted by memories of that awful day when the burning of his own flesh stank in his nostrils and the red iron seemed piercing to his heart.

Old Father Paul had knelt long in the starlight. The title of 'Father' had been given to him as to one beloved, and for forty years of service on the mission field, not because he differed from Protestant faith. His form gleamed shadowy in the dim starlight room. The piercing black eyes, quick to reprove and console, were closed and his long white hair, falling forward, half concealed the massive outline of his features.

There were so many things to be prayed for—the hospitals, the schools, the homes, the zeal and courage of his helpers, some