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A Chinese Othello and Desdemona.

By S. Pollard.

THERE are times when life in West-China is anything but monotonous. Europeans misjudge the Celestials. True, there is not the excitement of railway and steamboat travelling. The "go-out-of-doors man," as the traveller is called, who makes a steady pace of twenty-five miles a day, knows that he is doing well. In trade there are no commercial fights. There is practically no advertising and no touting for customers. In many towns the shopkeepers open their establishments long after the sun has risen, and close them before dark. During the day master and assistants gossip, smoke, sit about, and treat customers as if it were a matter of little concern whether they purchased anything or not. In fact, sometimes customers are invited to go elsewhere. Farmers, except in the very busy season, squat about in the sun, stroll across to neighbours' houses, yarn and listen to yarns in the village tea-shops and never seem as if life depended on hustling. They believe that heaven, their beneficent providence, will take care of them. As their well-worn proverb puts it they "trust heaven for rice to eat" (靠天吃飯). All their circumstances depend on fate or heaven's decree, and they do not believe that any hurrying on their part will bring the loaves more quickly from heaven's granary. The motto of all is *man-man-tih*, "make haste slowly." A traveller in North Yünnan would inevitably describe the people as a sleepy race and he might travel for weeks without being persuaded to reverse his verdict.

There are times, however, when the slow-going Yünnanese is roused up with a vengeance. One of the great excitements of his life is a quarrel, and for preference a family quarrel. Let the traveller be fortunate enough to light upon one of these domestic feuds, and he will no longer think the Yünnanese incapable of anything but inertia. The frantic gestures, the scathing sarcasm, the bitter invective, the unlimited range of curses, beginning with the first ancestor, rushing swiftly through all succeeding generations, and ending with the last of the race, the stamping feet, the waving,

disorderly hair, the piercing shrieks, the foaming mouth—all combine to make the scene one of intense excitement. Neighbours and friends gather and take sides. Passers-by join the throng. Old men with scanty much-prized beards try to pour oil on the troubled waters, but often find it is not water but fire they are dealing with. The big quarrel at once becomes the talk of the neighbourhood. It takes the place of the newspaper and, in its effects, combines the influence of political, comical, and illustrated papers in one. Great is the power of the Press in Western countries: great the influence of the quarrel in Cathay. Not only are quarrels in West-China more artistic than those in Christendom but they have a characteristic of their own in their unexpected denouement. The great fault of many of the present-day novels, is that people know just how they are going to end. This fault does not pertain to Chinese quarrels. A Chinaman may, perhaps, know exactly how the quarrel is going to end, but a European does not. Who, meeting the Chinese for the first time, would ever imagine that such fierce quarrels could end without fighting? Who would dream that the guilty party would return home and quietly "score" one over the aggressor by committing suicide? Fancy Bismark drinking a dose of hemlock to make himself even with Thiers; of Chamberlain committing suicide to spite Krüger.

The number of quarrels in China which end in suicide is enormous. In act China might be termed the "land of quarrel and suicide." Opium is the most common weapon chosen for the self-inflicted *coup de grâce*. Some years ago I gathered statistics from several provinces, and came to the conclusion that at least half-a-million people attempt suicide every year by swallowing opium. The majority of these are women. I have had between one and two thousand of these cases come under my own notice. Quarrelling is the cause in most instances. Occasionally the denouement is murder and not suicide, and one such case, where murder was with difficulty prevented, I wish to describe here.

Not far from the Temple of Hell, in the centre of the City of Chaotong, in North-east Yünnan, is the residence of a rich banker. A quarrel broke out one day in one of the branches of his family. A man had been away on business, leaving his young wife, but lately a bride, at home. On his return someone told him a story of scandal in which the young wife was the alleged culprit. A great quarrel ensued.

The first we knew of the case was the arrival of a well-dressed Chinaman asking for the English teacher. I went out to him and he begged me to go with him and help rescue a couple of lives. So urgent was he in his request, and so serious did he represent the situation, that we went off with him—a band of four. We were an Australian missionary, two Chinese boys, and

myself, all bent on business. Reaching the house we passed through the big doors and made straight for the principal rooms, where we were informed the two patients were. We had not reached our destination before several women in great distress stopped us, and led us aside into a large well-lighted guest-hall. Long whispered consultations took place, while we sat wondering what could be the meaning of it all. By-and-bye the truth came out and we were stirred by a terrible story. It was Othello and Desdemona over again. That morning the jealous husband had decreed that his slandered wife must die. He brought in to her a small pot of prepared opium, and commanded her to drink it. All her entreaties were in vain. She could no more touch his heart than could Shakespeare's fair heroine turn her cruel husband from his murderous resolve. No resistance was made, and having taken the drug the poor Chinese girl lay on her bed and waited for the end. Soon word got abroad and an attempt at rescue was made by some friends. The husband was prepared for this. He had armed himself with a sharp dagger and threatened to murder anyone who dared to interfere with his plans. He also declared that, if necessary, he would cut his own throat and, to make himself doubly sure, he carried on his person another pot of opium so as to provide an alternative method of suicide if there were no other way out of the situation. Doubly-armed and his heart beating with cruel jealousy and hatred, he sat by his wife's bedside to watch her die. Surely even Dumas never imagined anything worse than we saw that day. The desperate villain overawed the whole household and as the minutes dragged on, death came nearer the poor young woman. None of her father's family were there to help her. No one had been bold enough to carry the news of her desperate plight to her father and brothers. She resigned herself to her fate, and lay down to die. Slowly but surely the drug did its deadly work.

Our feelings can be imagined. All the chivalry in our nature was stirred. We determind together to save the young girl in spite of everybody. We knew that we should have to depend upon our own resources. None of the friends had any plan which was feasible. We proposed a rush to overpower the murderer, but he held the post of vantage and had the sharp dagger. The idea of knocking the man senseless with a chair or club was pooh-poohed. The wretch was too desperate a man to be overawed by such methods. Everybody seemed helpless and took it for granted that the wife must die. Anglo-Saxons do not so easily let women die. They will move heaven and earth to save them. Being missionaries, we were unarmed and there were no fire-arms in the house. My Australian friend then sent off one of the boys, post haste, to fetch a revolver. During the boy's absence we walked up and down the guest-room, planning the rescue. We agreed

that when the revolver arrived, we would go in and first of all see what persuasion could do. If that failed, then the man should be covered with the revolver and a rush made at him. By-and-bye, after what seemed a long time of waiting, the boy returned bringing an antiquated weapon, which looked dangerous to handle. It was loaded in four chambers. The shooting was allotted to the Australian.

Things now began to look lively. All idea of monotony fled. My temperature rose. Fancy two missionaries plotting to shoot a man in open daylight. With our plans well arranged we started a second time for the chief rooms of the house. Turning to the left, we entered a narrow passage where a scuffle would have been dangerous. Through the passage we filed into the bedroom, where sat the Chinese Othello watching Desdemona die. At our entrance the husband rose up and greeted us with simulated politeness. The exchange of a few commonplaces of courtesy passed away a few seconds. At the farther end of the room, near a window, were several people all unable to do anything but talk and watch. Right opposite the window was the bed, curtained on three sides, and here lying down the young girl, so lately a bride, waited the arrival of the Angel of Death and all that lay beyond his visit.

Nothing more was needed to nerve us to resolute action. A strange feeling had taken possession of me. The thought of what that madman had done and might do made our little band very sober. The game of bluff which the husband tried on did not last long. He pretended that his wife had been unwell and that now a turn for the better had set in there was no necessity for the foreign teachers to trouble about her. She would soon be quite well. Then the man began to grow angry as we asked a question or two more. In response to a request that he would come outside, as we had something important to say, he turned angrily to his friends, and ordered them to take away the foreigners they had brought there. The moment for action had come. Slipping his right hand up the left sleeve of his long Chinese gown my Australian friend drew out the concealed revolver, removed the pin and pointing it straight at the murderer's head, demanded the giving up of the dagger. "I will count five and if you do not by then deliver it up I will shoot," said the armed missionary. "One, two, three." Up went the man's two hands for protection, losing hold of the dagger in so doing. In a trice the revolver was passed to me and the other three had the man's hands tight and sure. The struggle was sharp but short. In a few seconds the villain was thrust out of the room, disarmed and pinioned on the floor. I kept guard over him while the others turned their attention to the woman. She had been a silent but interested spectator of the whole.

Possibly she never understood why a couple of Englishmen made such an attempt to save her life. In fact she refused at first to be saved. She knew we could not always be near at hand and that sometime her husband would be free again. What was to prevent him, in the absence of the armed missionaries, from a second time attempting successfully and in a quicker way, what he had been baulked in the first time? What was life worth to her with such a husband? Desdemona longed to live conscious that her husband, when he knew all the truth, would do her justice. This poor woman had not that faith. She did not even beg respite

"But while I say one prayer!"

Shakespeare's God was unknown to her. "It is useless," said she, "if you save me now he will murder me some other time when you are gone. Let me die." This was not the end we were aiming at and, in sight of victory, we were not going to have the prize snatched from us if we could in any way help it. The fears of the woman only served to nerve us to greater efforts. Thank God! they succeeded. After some hours of hard work we were rewarded by seeing the woman quite out of danger. Lying on the cold floor, tightly secured by cords, cool reflection once again held sway in the husband's mind and at last he humbly and sincerely begged to be let loose. He promised never again to injure his wife. We trusted him, unbound his thongs, and sent him away from home in a sedan-chair until such time as his jealous anger should have quite cooled down.

Some few days after, a pair of fine ducks and a couple of fowls were brought, as a thank-offering from the husband to the Englishmen who had fought for the life of a Chinese girl and the news was given us that husband and wife had made it up again. Missionaries are mostly men of peace but sometimes they can fight and, if it be only the life of a Chinese girl that is at stake, it is worth fighting for.