

THE HOUR OF WORSHIP*

The temple bell sounded once, and then reverberated slowly through the arches and cornices above. There was a slight scurry, and through the gloom crept a shaven priest, clad in long, gray robes. In his hand he held a few sticks of incense, lit and sending forth an odor of a curious, heavy sweetness. In the dull glow his face was touched with half-shadows and sudden spots of light, out of which his eyes alone shone distinct and sombre. He slipped before the huge figure of an idol, murmured a few indistinct words, thrust the incense into a jade bowl on the altar before the image, and disappeared again. At once there was a subdued burst of voices chanting one of those heart-breaking minor chorals of the Orient. The incense smouldered before the idol, and one glowing end fell on its great, deformed foot. The choral swelled in volume. It was the hour of evening worship.

Outside the midsummer sun was setting, but the air was hot with the intensity and stillness of high noon. The bamboos surrounding the temple were motionless, and a few butterflies floated listlessly about the open gate, and settled now and then on the carved dragons by the doorstep. A narrow path twisted through the trees, beaten and dusty. Along this path a woman walked slowly, leading two dark-haired Eurasian children. She was dressed in the conventional linen garb of a respectable Chinese woman; her children, a boy and a girl, were decked out in the usual gay manner of the Orient. They chattered to her as they approached the temple, but she did not answer. As she stepped into a spot of sunlight before the temple gate, her face stood out in hard relief against the background of the dark and motionless

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bamboos. It was fair and heavily lined; her hair was of a tawny yellow, streaked with gray, and her eyes were Saxon-blue. For an instant her face was outlined there, and then she stepped within the gate, the children clinging to her hands.

Slowly she walked through the dusky entrance-way. The children shrank against her, looking with timid eyes at the ungainly shapes and staring faces, which loomed half hidden in the shadows. Once the girl cried aloud, and hid her eyes with her hand as she passed a sudden hideous body which bent forward as if to grasp her; but the boy straightened, and flung up his head and set his teeth. At last they came into the temple. The woman pushed the two children in front of the altar with the smouldering incense.

"Kneel," she commanded briefly.

They dropped down obediently and, swaying back and forth, began to repeat a ritual in low tones. The woman stood back with folded arms, her face set in a dull, listless expression. Suddenly the boy turned.

"Why is it that thou dost never kneel with us, mother?" he asked abruptly.

The woman started.

"Hush, Kwang-yu," she replied sharply. "Speak not when thou art worshipping, else the god may injure thee."

"Why?" persisted the boy.

The woman whitened slightly, and putting her hands on his shoulders pushed him down on his knees again.

"Why? Because the god loves not such as I—I with my yellow hair; he loves only black hair like thine. Now kneel."

There was silence for a while, and the woman sank back into her apathy. The children finished their prayers, bowed their heads to the ground, and rose cheerfully. The woman placed a silver coin on the altar and they turned to go, the children walking on up the narrow aisle. But the woman

hesitated a moment, and looked back half-fearfully and half-scornfully at the huge, hideous figure looming up before her, a curious, pitiful calm in her blue eyes, and a settled weariness in the droop of her lips.

There was a slight rustle in one of the chancels, and the shaven priest slipped from behind a pillar and stood beside her. She did not hear him, but stood looking at the idol. He put his hand upon her arm, and she started. For an instant they looked at each other steadily, she with that still, sad look, and he with all the craftiness of his creed in his slanting, black eyes.

"Dost believe yet?" he asked in a whisper.

"Believe?" she repeated after him.

"Yes; hath Buddha touched thy heart with nirvana and given thee peace?"

She shook her head slowly.

"No; I do not believe."

He hesitated, then gripped her arm.

"Listen," he said, in a voice which was low yet echoed strangely through the great temple. "Thy husband hath promised a cup of gold to the temple if thou wilt believe. He is a good man; thy children are true believers; why dost thou not bow to the Buddha? An instant, and it is over."

Her eyes filled with painful tears.

"I cannot believe," she repeated.

The priest thrust his face nearer.

"Some there are who cannot, nay, will not believe, but—closer, woman, and let me whisper thee—some there are who know there is no truth in all these grinning faces and carved pillars—but riches, there are riches, woman! If thou wilt but bow thine head, I will see that rare sapphires find their way to thee from out the temple coffers."

He paused to watch the effect of his words, and of a sudden her expression changed. From somewhere in that dull

brain a fire sprang and lit her eyes. She shook him off roughly.

"Thou viper," she said slowly. "Wouldst thou bribe me? I believe in nothing. Listen,"—she fixed her eyes on him with an intensity so absorbing that his outstretched hand dropped, and he bowed his head—"I am not of thy heathen blood. I am English, English born and bred. Once I was a happy English girl, fairer than any of thy straight-haired, sloe-eyed maidens. My hair was as yellow as thy golden incense, and my eyes like thy sapphires. And one day there came a man to me, a man like thou, oh, shaven priest, and bade me to go to foreign lands to convert such as thee to the Holy Mother Church, and tear down thy temples"—she swept her hand with a gesture which included the whole great hall.

"And I, poor, ignorant, happy child, was touched by pity, and my soul was set on fire with zeal. And I came. And they sent me here to this city, a thousand leagues from home—no kindred, no friends, no other white face—and I a girl of twenty, made for love and home, ignorant and pretty.

"They called me a missionary, a bearer of good tidings, but I had no good tidings. I knew nothing except pity, and pity may not save a soul—and I a girl, knowing nothing but love and home, and understanding nothing else beyond the joy upon my lover's face."

She stopped and pressed her lips together, and leaned heavily against the altar.

"Why do I tell this to thee?" she continued, her voice dropping wearily. "I was sent to save such as thee. What dost thou know of the bitter need of home and friends and a lover's eyes? Only when he, Chang Yi-yuan, came after long and lonely years, when home and friends and lover, too, had forgotten me—when he came and said he loved me, his words seemed truth, and they were sweet to me. I strove

against it many months. But I was ignorant and alone, and knowing little of that gospel they had bade me bring, I could not find their God. There was left to me only Chang Yi-yuan's love—or what he called his love—and I, being alone ——” She stopped, and her face settled again into its old apathy.

The temple was darkening. The incense had long since died out, and the evening chant was ended, its echo lingering in a weird minor. Outside the night wind had sprung up and rustled the bamboos softly and, blowing through the entrance, brushed the gray robes of the priest as he stood motionless in the deepening shadows. Suddenly a child's voice called clearly:

“When art thou coming, O mother?”

The woman started, and looked up with bitter eyes.

“What else is there to tell? I married him and have been a faithful wife to him. I have forgotten mine own people, and have become as one of these. My children—they are not mine but his, with his teaching, his religion. I am his slave. Sometimes he beats me, as do all men their wives in this land. He has other wives; I may not speak a word to him of this. I have forgotten my people and the God of my people, my friends, and my lover's eyes. I am become as one of his women—save only that my hair is yellow still, and my eyes blue, and I cannot believe in that great, brazen thing ——”

Her voice wavered and was still. She turned slowly, and made her way out among the gloomy aisles into the dusky evening air. The children were waiting, and questioned her long absence querulously, but she answered nothing. Her face was sad, and her eyes dull with an eternal weariness. Slowly they went down the winding walk among the bamboos. The temple bell sounded its long, solitary note. The hour of evening worship was ended.

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