

PING-KUA: A GIRL OF CATHAY

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Ping-Kua: A Girl of Cathay by Rachel R. Benn

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RACHEL R. BENN

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AT THE SHRINE OF THE GODDESS
TEMPLE ON THE TOP OF TAI-SHAN, THE SACRED MOUNTAIN



SOUTH WALL AND MOAT OF NING-YANG

PING-KUA

A Girl of Cathay

BY
RACHEL R. BENN, M. D.



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By RACHEL R. BENN, M.D.

CHAPTER I

If you go by wheelbarrow or mule-litter across country from the Grand Canal of China at Chi-Ning to the city of Ning-Yang, as you draw near to the old willows by the moat you will see the corner and south side of the city wall, gray in the evening light.

Following the road around to the west you cross the moat on a stone bridge and enter the city through a great arched gateway in the wall. Note the huge iron-clad gates. They open in the middle and swing back against the wall each morning and swing out every night when the drum calls, meeting in the middle, where they are securely fastened by strong bars of wood which reach away across, with their ends fixed in holes at either side of the arch.

Just inside that massive gateway, one morning about twenty years ago, a baby was born. The mother had climbed to the very top of Tai-Shan where the Goddess of Babies has her temple, knocked her head many times before her shrine and, while clouds of incense smoke ascended, had

prayed most earnestly for a son. Then, stealing one of the boy-baby images from the shrine, she had carried it home and cared for it as if it were a real baby, believing the goddess would be pleased and answer her prayer. The whole family had hoped for a son, for girls are not counted as children in Chinese heathen homes. It was because of all this that the faces of grandmother and mother-in-law were dark with frowns and the mother wailed, "*Wo-pu-yao-ti hsia-jen*,"—which being interpreted means, "I don't want a slave." The baby was a girl.

"You bad, wicked woman, whose prayer the goddess would not hear," screamed the mother-in-law, as she fell to beating the poor mother, whose disappointment seemed more than she could bear without added pain.

"Your own ancestors were dogs, or you would have been given a better wife for your son," shouted the grandmother; and the father, hearing the uproar, knew he had been scorned by the gods, and burst into the room, howling, "Degraded daughter of foul ancestors, of what sin are you guilty that this curse is upon you? Throw the little devil away. I'll not be laughed at as the father of another slave."

In the midst of this "domestic cyclone," as Arthur Smith calls it, the helpless babe was slipped away by a servant, wrapped in a long strip of blue cloth, its feet wound around and

arms bound in close to either side, like a little mummy, and laid on a warm brick bed between two small bags of warm sand. There it slept peacefully while the domestic storm raged.

The father had gone stamping out to the courtyard, the grandmother and mother-in-law had screamed themselves hoarse, and the mother had threatened to commit suicide, before any attention was paid to the innocent cause of the turmoil. Then the great-grandmother went and looked down upon the sleeping babe. It was so cunning and pretty that her old heart was touched and she resolved that live it should. Then she began to talk peace, urging her own daughter-in-law to listen to reason and soothing the distracted mother. Finally, seeking the father in the outer court, she said, "Grandson, release your heart. Be angry no more. A great pity it is that a son was not given you, but this *ya-tou* is very pretty. I already see in her a beautiful girl, for whom you can get a rich husband, whose father will give you many strings of cash."

In the Chinese home an aged one's word is law, so the baby was neither given away, sold, nor killed, but lived and slept and stretched its little limbs, growing more charming every day. It had such a bewitching way of looking up into their faces with its large, beautiful eyes, and puckering up its dear little rosebud of a mouth as if trying to talk, that in spite of her disappointment the