

A DREAM OF CONQUEST

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A Dream of Conquest by Lloyd Bryce

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LLOYD BRYCE

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OF CONQUEST**

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DREAM OF CONQUEST.

CHAPTER I.

WANG-CHI-POO sat in his bamboo chair, discontentedly twisting the end of his queue. The fragrance of orange-blossoms breathed softly on him from the garden, but could not soothe his perturbation, nor could the noise of the fountain heard by that came in through the paper-glazed windows. Everything palled upon him; the silken hangings interwoven with gold that decorated his apartment, the brightly tessellated floor, in short, the wealth and Oriental luxury that were on every side were, this morning, less than naught to him.

The Chinese have a song that runs somewhat in this manner :

At first, man hungers for a meal;
And then, that clothes his form conceal;
Finely attired, a wife he craves;
Married, for palanquins he raves;
Supplied with horses, mules, and lands,
Official rank he next demands;
Ennobled, he would yet climb higher,
Till by degrees he claims empire;
At last enthroned as Heaven's son,
He thinks not yet his dues are won,
But, yearning still for something more,
'Gainst Death he fain would bolt the door.
Fool, Death alone thy wants can tame:
"I crave," thy epitaph and name.

But greed for more is, I fear, too common to the human race fairly to indicate the cause of Wang-Chi-Poo's disquietude. His discontent was of a less personal description, though it was connected with ambition: it was of a more truly Chinese character than the proverb just quoted. It had its root in his country's ancestor-worship; and to Western ears it will sound peculiar. Wang-Chi-Poo, though barely

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forty-seven years of age, had reached the Second Mandarin's rank, and the cause of his discontent was the conviction of his incapacity to secure, by the usual means, the yellow button of the first rank. Nor was it for the gratification that this yellow button would confer on his personal pride that he craved this, but—here comes in the distinction, and, O land of the Antipodes, O land of the Topsy-turvy, it is a curious one—it was to gratify the pride of his grandmother, now some twenty-five years in her grave. Taking everything into consideration, for a man still in his prime, surrounded with every luxury and tempted by wealth and leisure to lead a life of pleasure,—for such a man thus to cast his longings and his aspirations backward to a previous generation illustrates, I think, one of the most beautiful traits of the Chinese character, and it is one that might well be copied by other peoples. Wang-Chi-Poo therefore pulled his queue discontentedly, and continued to brood on the hard fate of his progenitrix thus deprived, through him, of what he considered her just due.

We in the West announce our coming with a knock; those in the East enter first and knock afterward. Thus it happened that Wang-Chi-Poo was abruptly disturbed in his meditations by the presence of his secretary, before his entrance was so much as suspected. The newcomer was a small, narrow-chested young man with a large head and eyes like coals, set off by a pair of enormous spectacles tied by bows behind his ears. He was attired in the garb of the literary class, and, with much ceremony, took his seat opposite Wang-Chi-Poo, presenting him with a neatly-enveloped package of manuscript as he sat down. Wang-Chi-Poo wearily took up the parcel, only to allow it to drop as wearily into his lap.

"O Taonsu," he observed at last, "I am not in harmony with state papers, and the doctrines of Confucius sadly pall on me to-day. Amuse me, rather; tell me the doings of the town; or stay! thou who hast sojourned in the land of Foreign Devils, tell me more of it. Tell me again of this land beyond the seas, where they dress in the color of coals and wear shining black boxes for coverings of the head; where, as thou hast said, they call change progress, and select an emperor every four years, though the moment he is on the throne they proceed to look out for a new one; whercof this same emperor, as thou hast told me, is yet a god during the first two years of his term, a demon during his last, and behold when he is stripped of his authority and a new ruler elected there are none so poor as to do him honor. Have they religions there, O Taonsu, and do the followers of Confucius number many?"

"There are many from the Flowery Kingdom in America, Great Excellency, whom the press of hunger has driven thither, and a few in the schools who, like myself, were sent out by His Celestial Majesty to be instructed in their sciences."

"And what are their sciences, O Taonsu? Is it true that the fiery horse walks on big stilts through their cities, crushing and trampling down all before it? Is it true, too, that each man takes only one she-devil for his wife, and even so is obliged to cut off her nails that she can't scratch?"

Taonsu raised his eyebrows with a queer little smile.

"They certainly cut off their nails, Great Excellency; but as for one man taking only one she-devil for his wife, they often take as many as we do, only the process is different. Permit me, Your Excellency; the newspaper around this manuscript is of Western origin and chanced to come over in the last steam-junk." And Taonsu, removing the parcel from his patron's lap, untied it and spread the enveloping wrapper flat out on the floor. "There, Your Excellency," he continued, pointing to the advertisement of a lawyer who guaranteed absolute divorce, with perfect secrecy thrown in, for ten dollars, "when a man wants a new wife he goes to this lawyer, states his complaints, and gets freed from the old one by paying down his money. This is the first step." Then Taonsu ran his eye down the sheet till he came to the advertisement of a matrimonial agency. "And here is the second step," he continued. "He visits this agency, pays down ten chop-dollars more, and selects from a series of photographs he is shown the woman whose picture he likes best. Thus for twenty chop-dollars in all he is both rid of his old wife and provided with a new one."

"What strange devils these Foreign Devils are!" said Wang Chi-Poo, reflectively; "to understand them thou must look at them upside down. But our people, how do they prosper?" he went on, inquiringly.

"They did well until too many came; then the natives massacred them."

"They massacred them?"

"Even so."

"But why, when our people were many? If they were few it were more natural."

"Excellency, the natives feared we would overrun their country and take the bread out of the mouths of their own children; but here is mention of our people in this very paper, and what they suffer." And Taonsu read a serio-comic description of a late ball given at Washington by the Chinese Legation, with an exaggerated account of the scramble for supper. This he translated remarkably well, only taking in too literal a sense the Western humor.

On Wang-Chi-Poo, of course, the humor would have been entirely lost; to him only the indignity was manifest. The Chinese Embassy had been insulted; and he swore lustily in the dialect of Confucius, and would not be comforted.

"This last occurred some time ago," resumed Taonsu. "More recently, however, they have passed a law that is an express violation of all their agreements, for it will exclude our people entirely from their shores."

In Wang-Chi-Poo's eyes, the desire to exclude his people furnished rather a curious instance of that topsy-turviness he had remarked upon, but the insult inflicted on the Legation was a breach of that ceremonial which to a Chinaman is as the breath of life itself. For a long time he swore; then, his passion subsiding, he chewed the recollection like a melancholy cud.

"Go on," he said at last, "read me something more of these Foreign Devils. What do those great letters say on the top of the sheet?"

Taonsu, thus directed, resumed his office of interpreter.

"They speak, you see, Great Excellency, of the unprotected condition of their harbors, showing the billions and billions of wealth that lie exposed to any invader with no provision for their defence. Each city on the coast, it is stated, could easily be laid in ashes by a fleet of even a fifth-rate power."

"And is this true, O Taonsu?"

"Too true, Your Excellency. To defend the great city of New York, which is almost as large as this city which we inhabit, there are barely half a dozen forts well-nigh crumbling into the dust."

"How many cities are there on the coast?"

Taonsu reflected. "There are at least six of the first class, and innumerable small towns."

"How many days' sail is it to this land?"

"Steam, Great Excellency, has bridged the ocean."

"Taonsu, leave me: I would think."

When a Westerner "thinks," he generally requires the repose of absolute quiet; when a Chinaman "thinks," his cogitations are assisted by a noise. The same results are attained by exactly the reverse process. Stillness is proverbial of the fisherman's craft; in China the fisherman surrounds himself with gongs. The Chinese watchman beats his rattle, not to let the householder know that all is well, but to make thieves and evil-doers aware that he is about. And where, under Western civilization, a man having a grudge murders his foe, a Chinaman, instead, kills himself upon his enemy's threshold.

Wang-Chi-Poo entered the garden with the purpose of seeking his wives' quarters beyond, for Wang-Chi-Poo had one first wife, and—not to offend the delicate sensibilities of my lady-readers—he had several wives besides. This garden was a marvel of quaintness in its way. It was crossed and recrossed in every direction by little porcelain-paved paths; brightly-painted bridges spanned diminutive canals, and in the middle of the garden was a fountain from which the canals all radiated outward. In the basin of the fountain stood an enormous artificial flamingo, of so natural an appearance that it served as a perpetual puzzle to a live flamingo which could do nothing but walk around him and stare at him the entire day. Passing through the garden, Wang-Chi-Poo entered his wives' quarters by a curious gateway in the wall, out in the exact shape of a large teapot.

Naomoona, the first wife, was reclining luxuriously in a hammock; Taomoona, the second, was similarly engaged; Saomoona occupied a third hammock; and, in fact, the whole number, down to the very newest, were quietly swinging themselves, keeping time to the oscillations of their bodies by the motion of their fans.

On the floor was a highly-decorative bamboo mat, and on this some half-dozen little Wang-Chi-Poos were disporting themselves. A shout of delight from the latter announced the coming of the author of their beings; the ladies severally rose from their hammocks, and each, taking hold of the chair that was nearest her, proceeded to wipe from its seat with her dress imaginary particles of dust.

"The Light of the Household shall sit on my chair," exclaimed Naomoon. "No, he shall sit on mine," interrupted Taomoon. "Nay, but on mine," added Saomoon. But the Light of the Household solved the dilemma by taking his seat with the juvenile Wang-Chi-Poo on the floor, drawing some curious little tissue butterflies from his voluminous pocket, and with his fan making them mount into the air for the edification of his children.

"What would you think, O wives of my heart, if I should never sit on any of your chairs again? if, on the contrary, I should take my seat on the lofty stern of one of His Majesty's smoke-junks and sail away to the land where the White-skin Devils abide?"

A hush of intense surprise greeted this speech; then each of the ladies raised her curious little enamelled face over the edge of her curious little hammock and stared at her husband, who was still engaged with the butterflies.

"They say that they make silks of strange designs, these Foreign Devils," said number one.

"And set diamonds in a way we know naught of here," observed the second.

"Ay, and cut their stones to make them shine with unwonted lustre," observed a third. "A jeweller from India once showed me some that had been cut, he said, in barbaric lands."

"The house would be dark," exclaimed Saomoon, "without the presence of its Light, but we will curb our impatience till his return bringing with him these weird proofs of the Foreign Devils' skill."

Wang-Chi-Poo rose from the floor, tightened his broad red sash, rearranged the folds of his voluminous tunic, and called for his palanquin. He felt annoyed, just as a Westerner might, at the flippancy of his reception his serious proposal had met with. "Wang-Chi-Poo has not gone yet," he muttered, "but should he depart he will console himself with the reflection that his wives will bear up against his return."

CHAPTER II.

THE strictness of ceremonial used in approaching His Celestial Majesty was in no wise relaxed for Wang-Chi-Poo, though he was a mandarin of next to the highest rank; and for the purpose of approaching His Majesty Wang-Chi-Poo had called his palanquin. To go in proper state required, for Wang-Chi-Poo, six runners in front and six behind, without counting the fourteen bearers of the sedan-chair. Ahead of all rode a horseman with a huge sheet of paper in his hand and horns like rams' horns fastened to his cap on each side of his head. The duty of the horseman was to strike awe into the public by loudly reading off the paper the titles and dignities of Wang-Chi-Poo coming on behind; that of the runners, to prevent these same honors from being forgotten, by belaboring the public over the heads with their staves.

Not to particularize the precise road the procession took, suffice it