The Soul of China

Glimpsed in Tales of Today and Yesterday

Louise Jordan Miln

THE SOUL OF CHINA

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From his mother to

WYNDHAM VYVYAN MILN

who to all of us is the dearest of us all

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THE SOUL OF CHINA

THE NO-NUMBER WIFE

KUNG TO looked at Kung Kien gloomily, and wondered sourly what all the long-tailed imps in purgatory Confucius would have thought of her. He did not say it aloud, just bitterly thought it, holding the words unspoken for two quite sufficient reasons. Had he asked her the question aloud, she'd have teetered saucily on her wee deformed feet, like as not thrust her soft, dimpled cheek out baboon-shape with her bad little tongue, and then snapped him an impudent, undaughterly answer. And how could he put the question into spoken words without pronouncing with his unworthy (but strictly orthodox) lips the forbidden name of Confucius? He couldn't. But orthodox as he was, perhaps it was his quick fear of his own small daughter (undoubtedly his chattel) very much more than his deep and inborn reverence for Confucius that kept him discreetly silent.

There were only two things on earth that Kung To, the usurer—banker if you like the sound better—feared: Kung Kien and the tax-collector. But what his fear lacked in numeral quantity it more than made up in quality. He feared those two acutely, abjectly. He feared the collector of taxes, and hated him. He feared Kung Kien, and loved her. He was a jolly old

soul, Kung To, the money-lender, and besides the collector of taxes he had but one hatred. But here again his feelings' lack of quantity was much outweighed by quality. His hatred was intense. And even more than he hated the tax-gatherer he loathed all disorder, untidiness, slackness, and slightest taint of unwomanliness.

It would be pleasant to record that the "new woman" had not reached China. But she had, in a pale, mild example or two. But, even so, she had as yet penetrated no farther than Hong Kong and Shanghai, more significant as a portent than as actuality. She had never been heard of in Fuchou-fu. Kung Kien was not "advanced." No breath from the West had reached and tainted her—she was just sheer wicked and willful. Her willfulness was the most of her wickedness, but perhaps her twin sins of sloth and untidiness cut Kung To to the quick more than did all her other defects and eccentricities—and drove him more often to the dubious consolation of opium pipe and "yellow wine."

There are two countries—above all others—in which girls are terribly "spoiled": China and the United States; countries so socially unlike in most things that their similarity in this one is all the more remarkable. It's rather the rule in U. S. A.—the over-indulgence, almost deification of daughters—in China it is, apart from the Manchus, exceptional. But the Chinese are splendidly thorough, and when a Chinese "spoils" his girl-child, he goes rather farther than parents often do in Chicago or Sacramento.

And Kung Kien was at once the naughtiest and the most "spoiled" little girl in all China.

No Chinese girl ever is untidy—scarcely ever even those whose homes are poorest and roughest. Kung Kien never was anything else. Tidy in all things, a Chinese woman, old or young, is most tidy and careful of all in arranging and keeping her hair. Kung Kien's hair was a scandal—often as not it hung about her in shaggy, half-loosened plaits. She combed the cats with the stickpins Kung gave her. She tore her clothes faster than the sew-sew amah could mend them, her clothes chest was a debauch of disorder. She came into a room like a whirlwind, and left it a wreck. Even the paths and the flower pots in the courtyard dreaded her.

Every Chinese, prince or peasant, toddler or gray-beard, is industrious—indefatigably industrious.

Kung Kien would do nothing. She would not learn to write or to read—well, that didn't much matter—she would not learn to spin or to embroider flamingoes and chrysanthemums on rice-silk, she *would not* serve her brothers at rice—and not even her father. She would not arrange azaleas in the Ming-ware dish in the ko'tang, she would kot'ow to no one or nothing: not to the name of the Son of Heaven, not to her own ancestors or their graves, not to the gods. She would not light incense-sticks or polish the chopsticks. She would not even keep her own tobacco-pipes clean. Worst of all—she was immodest. What other Chinese woman or girl has ever been that? None. The most immodest thing a Chinese woman or girl can do—but none till the birth of bad little Kung Kien ever did—is to let her throat be seen. Her legs, up to the knees, more often than not, as she works and wades in the

wet paddy fields, but never, by any chance, her neck. Peasant mothers suckle their babies with serenest exposure of plump yellow bosoms, but their necks are well buttoned up as they do it. As like as not the high up-standing collar of Kung Kien's jacket flapped away unfastened from her naked throat. However was Kung To to get such a girl affianced? Or, if—tempted by a much larger dowry than Kung was minded to give—any father betrothed his son to Kien, he certainly would have her divorced inside three moons. Kung To was at his wits' end. And the wits of Kung To were no mean thing. His women, one and all, advised bribery—in the form of an inordinate dowry, and immediate betrothal to the blind second son of the widow of a tea-merchant who had gone "on high," leaving but scant earthly provision behind him. For his wives and concubines did not share Kung To's infatuation for little Kung Kien; far from it. Her own mother was dead. But Kung To, like money getters the wide world over, was a money keeper, and he had as little wish to give his Kien to a sightless lord as he had faith that any mother-in-law would keep her, or, if kept for the sake of the yen she brought, treat kindly a daughter-in-law who ran about with her throat exposed.

Kung To the money-lender was in despair.

And naughty Kung Kien ran about house and courtyard laughing and singing, misusing the flowers, teasing the tame turtles, currycombing the chained-up cats with her stickpins, and doing no earthly thing useful or seemly.

Then miracle came!

Miss Amelia Nunn came to Fuchou-fu, the treaty port at the mouth of the Min River—where the tea-plants grow in their millions, and the junks ply day and night, winter and summer.

Miss Amelia Nunn did more than that. She went to the office of Kung To, on the jute-sellers' street, walked boldly in, and asked for a subscription.

She didn't get it, but because she was something elderly, and had the advantage (*in China*) of looking much older than she was, she got ceremonial treatment, a stool to sit on, a saucer-covered bowl of pale, scalding-hot tea to drink, a knob of candied citron to nibble, and, when at last she went, a cascade of low bows at the street door. And she went away only half discouraged—Amelia Nunn was born in Rhode Island—and informed "Mr. To" that she'd call another day, and hope for better luck.

Kung To hoped she'd *not* come back, and he knew her hope of better luck was ill-founded. The Presbyterian missionaries might borrow from him—perhaps—at 80 per cent.—if they had the security—but they never would receive a dole from him. He paid his own gods a modest wage, and he'd no wish to journey "on high" by any pathway less traveled by Chinese than the one his ancestors always had used.

But if Kung To was "close," he was not cheese-paring mean. He often gave clients—or even less profitable, and therefore less welcome callers—a dish of tea, and he felt well overpaid for the refreshment the missionary lady had consumed as he sat down on the stool she had sat on, and laughed at her, chuckling till his eyes watered.

He thought she was the funniest thing he had ever seen—from her buttoned cloth boots (they'd elastic sides) to the black-bugle trimming atop of her black silk bonnet.

That was the beginning of it.

The end was different.

Miss Amelia Nunn was not a missionary—at least only indirectly, and unofficially.

Her brother-in-law, the Rev. Silas Dodd, was, and Amelia, their guest, had volunteered to do a "spell" of collecting while she looked about, and made up her mind whether she would or would not open a Seminary for Chinese Young Ladies, at the populous mouth of the Min.

She concluded to do it.

And Kung Kien concluded to attend.

Kung To forbade it. And, at first, it looked as if he'd go any length rather than permit it. But wiser counsel prevailed—his own mother's.

"Let the wild thing go. Li the Mandarin's youngest wife is going, and so are the twin daughters of Pang Sang, the tea-brick merchant. I'll pay—the charge is not much—and it may keep her out of mischief—while it lasts. It will not last long. Kung Kien will not like it."

But Kung Kien did.

What charm the spoiled Chinese child found in the "Seminary" of six pupils, kept by the New England lady, there's no saying. But Kien went, and stayed, and was changed!

Her hair grew slick, and was knotted neatly at the nape of her well-hidden neck. Her sharp little tongue

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turned to purring. She grew deft in the house, placid, respectful, obedient. She learned "to sew a fine seam." She learned to read and to write—to be sure, only in English—but it was a beginning. She grew punctual, and—even better—punctilious.

They couldn't believe it at first. But before long they had to.

Kung To was entranced, and his heart swelled till almost it hurt, and then ran over with gratitude.

No Chinese ever is ungrateful. The Chinese have their faults (and a pen that has more congenial things to record than a list of those faults, admits it—and so is done with them), but no son of Han ever is ungrateful.

The heart of Kung To turned to Miss Amelia Nunn as the sunflower turns to the sun.

And after thinking it over, he decided that the very least he could do was to call and thank her.

And he went.

He went on foot. Had he been calling on a Chinese lady, he'd have gone carried in his chair, of course. But he couldn't call on a Chinese lady—so the remark is silly. But he thought a shoe trudge an adequate courtesy to a foreign lady who stood on so narrow a precipice of ceremony that she could be visited by a man at all. And, in spite of his girth, Kung To liked walking better than he did the more bumpty-bump progress of his sedan chair. So he walked to the missionary's house; he wore his third best clothes though, and rang the bell: a strange pull-the-handle thing that the Dodds had installed in a thoroughly U. S. A. *ménage,* and a

house as reminiscent of Providence, Rhode Island, as they'd been able to make it.

Miss Nunn was "in." She came to the door herself. She was delighted to see him, and she said so.

"Come right in, Mr. To," she told him, when he said who he was. "Come right along into my own room. We'll be all alone there."

That was rather farther than Kung To had intended —but he followed the black bombazine a little gingerly, too fat to run, and perhaps too brave, and far too polite to tell her, or even to hint, that she was addressing him by his personal name instead of his surname.

Her "own room" proved reassuringly harmless. It boasted neither bed nor dressing table. It boasted a magnificent display of "tidies"—rather gaudy some of them, it must be owned, but it's done in the best New England circles—crocheted in purple and red and yellow and green even in Providence itself. It boasted three pairs of vases—in no way Chinese—four engravings, select if hackneyed (though again not in China), a shelf of impeccable books, one footstool, one Brussels carpet, two lace curtains (not costly), and a chaste selection of chairs.

"Sit right down, Mr. To."

"Mr. To" evaded the rocker—it had an attractive rolled pad of silk patchwork slung inside its back—and seated himself very carefully on the edge of a horsehair-covered chair, more secure on more upright legs.

They had "quite a talk," as Miss Nunn boasted to her relatives an hour later.

Kung To's English was limited, and not cut to pattern—New England or other—but she understood a

good deal of what he said, and he understood a little of what she said. And the proportions of their comprehension were inverse to the number of words each spoke.

But at first Kung To did most of the talking. He thanked her for what she had wrought in Kung Kien, and he did it elaborately, and he called Miss Amelia Nunn many things which happily she did not catch. He called her a "pink lotus" and a "bird of paradise" —which she would not have liked—and he more than hinted her the offspring of an acquaintance more or less legal between the Chinese god of learning and the Chinese goddess of shrewdness, which the lady would have liked less. He called her a "priceless virgin." That would have affronted her past repair. "Virgin" was a word at which she'd have blushed, had she encountered it in a Latin primer—which, by the way, she never had—such things should not be mentioned, scarcely thought, and, too, the word had a smack of Rome, which would have made it an insult applied to Miss Amelia Nunn. In spite of its second "n" she always had disliked her own family name, because of its convent sound, and would have renounced it all the more readily had the Rev. Mr. Hawkins only come to the point many years ago, after his first wife had died. But the Rev. Mr. Hawkins never had.

Kung To thanked her profusely and then he proffered a gift: the subscription to the Presbyterian Mission he'd refused before, and a very much larger one than Miss Nunn had ever thought to coax from any heathen.

Her face glowed. She saw conversion ahead: his

and dear little Kien's—Miss Nunn called her "Kattie" —and from such a beginning what spiritual redemption might not come to darkened China! And she then and there shook hands with Kung To, which embarrassed him terribly. He did not know how to shake hands, though he often had seen Europeans do it.

Presently she excused herself "for just a bit," thrust him a copy of "Pilgrim's Progress" "to look at till I come back," put his gift in one of the frilled pockets of the frilled black silk apron she wore over the skirt of her black bombazine dress, and left her guest alone.

The Dodds had servants, more than two servants—quite a few missionaries do—but Miss Amelia Nunn intended to do generous Mr. To very well—though you may be sure she used no such British expression—and she trusted her own skill in hospitality far more than she did Ah Loon's.

Kung To did not delve far into Bunyan's famous book. He held it respectfully in one hand—not liking to put it down without permission, and with his other hand he investigated the patchwork (the log-cabin pattern, if you want to know) be-cushioned rocking chair. He set it going with a timid push of his hand, then he got quite excited as he watched it rock and go on rocking, and pushed it harder and harder. But he tired of that presently, and sat back a little more comfortably on the chair he'd selected, and waited quite patiently.

He'd have been even more comfortable if one of the black horsehairs, and it a very strong one, had not chanced to pierce through his petticoat, and annoy his flesh. That's the worst of horsehair furniture. Don't you think so? But—if you're unhappily merely Eng-

lish, and unacquainted with village and seaside lodgings, perhaps you've never sat on horsehair-covered furniture? Well, you've missed a lot. But we can't all have everything.

But Kung To's eyes twinkled—in spite of the discomforting upthrust horsehair. And when Chinese eyes twinkle, they are the wickedest and the merriest eyes in the world.

He was thinking of Miss Amelia Nunn, he was thinking that she looked even funnier without her bonnet than she had with it on.

She came back carrying a well-laden tray, followed by Ah Loon, carrying another. (Ah Loon threw Kung To a cold look, and Kung To reddened a little.)

Kung To rose and bowed often and low.

"Draw up, draw right up to the table," the hostess urged. Kung To drew up. Ah Loon walked haughtily out of the room.

Miss Amelia Nunn proceeded to regale her Chinese guest. She gave him muffins (real muffins, not the things English folks call muffins), pound cake, blueberry shortcake, tea—the right sort with sugar and cream, and a big plateful of molasses candy. And poor Kung To did his best to demolish it all, thinking it impolite to do less, and found it easy enough to groan and belch his appreciation and repletion. He found her tea even nastier than she'd found his; he liked the muffins moderately, disliked the pound cake, turned a little green over the blueberry shortcake, but he loved that molasses candy. He loved it so much that when Miss Nunn was not looking he whipped three big pieces off the plate, and hid them in his sleeve to take home

to Kung Kien—not knowing that she often got some at school. And Miss Nunn turning around, missed the three biggest hunks, thought the Chinese had bolted them in his mouth (not in his sleeve) all at once, and was not surprised that he gurgled, and massaged his protuberant stomach.

Kung To sat late that night smoking his pipe in the harem courtyard. And he thought a good deal of the odd experience he'd had that afternoon. He thought the foreign lady the ugliest human being he ever had seen. He thought blueberry shortcake the most horrible thing he'd ever encountered. He thought it must be good fun to ride in that rocking-stone chair; if only one didn't fall out of it. He thought the room—Miss Nunn's "own room"—ugly, too, and uncomfortable, but yet it had appealed to him, the sweet, clean lavender smell of it, its orderliness, its spotlessness. He'd never see it again; he'd not risk either that nauseating brew of desecrated tea or that worse abomination of dough and blueberries. But Miss Amelia Nunn should have another subscription some day. He was very, very grateful for what she had wrought in Kung Kien.

It should be easy enough to marry Kung Kien now. He'd set about it to-morrow—well, perhaps not to-morrow—but soon, very soon. Then he sighed and refilled his pipe with fingers that shook a little. It would be hard to part with Kung Kien.

(To do the situation full international justice, Miss Amelia Nunn liked Kung To's personal appearance as little as he did hers. She admired his plumpness as little as he did her thinness—and especially disliked its chief location. She thought his table manners "truly

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