

Tales from the
MOUNTAIN OF GOLD



**A Chinese Slave Girl in
Gold Rush San Francisco**

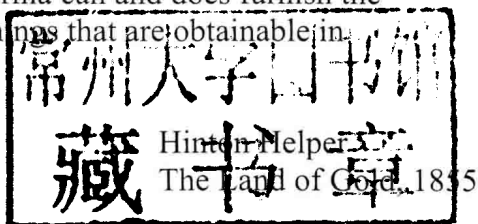
by Lee Payne

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I may not be a competent judge, but this much I will say, that I have seen purer liquors, better segars, finer tobacco, truer guns and pistols, larger dirks and bowie knives, and prettier courtezans here, than in any other place I have ever visited; and it is my unbiased opinion that California can and does furnish the best bad things that are obtainable in America.



Chapter 1

Chui was one of the least of all the earth's people. Yet she was witness to one of the greatest of its events.

Chui, in a dialect of early 19th century China, means the ninth. It was an unfortunate name for a girl. If her parents had eight other children, even if some died, a ninth was too many.

As a Tanka, she resided at the bottom of the social scale, scorned even by the Hakka, newcomers who had pushed their way into the Pearl River Delta a mere four hundred years earlier. With no room for the Tanka ashore, they lived on sampans, tiny wooden boats, tied layers deep, hugging the shoreline of the great river as it swept past the ancient port of Canton.

Life afloat was a world of movement and sound. The slosh of wave against hull, the thump of boat against boat, the mutter of ropes endlessly chafing, holding the whole, rafted community together, all as reassuringly unremarked as crickets ashore, singing on a summer night.

By 1833 or 1834 when Chui was born, coastal China was one of the most densely populated regions of the world. She was sold around the age of six. There was nothing unusual in that. Girls were little regarded in China. Slavery was a fact of economic life. Work needed to be done and children-- especially those from families poor and prolific enough to come up with no better name than Ninth--were available to do it.

Chui worked beside the other girls in the families where she lived. She cleaned, cooked and tended the younger children. She giggled and whispered with the other girls. Even those who were not slaves received little more notice than Chui, though she may not have been quite as loud in her laughter as the others. Quiet was a quality appreciated in a mooie-jai--a household slave.

What did she look like? No one recalls. Her early life was an endless effort not to attract attention, to be as small as possible. Quick and quiet with eyes downcast. In the corner, in the shadow, fleeting, insignificant, unobtrusive, barely there, living at the sufferance of others.

It was odd that Chui had no family name for that was of vital importance in China. It was the single unbreakable link with ancestors going back to the beginning of mankind. Ancestors who, if asked properly, might intercede on behalf of a descendent. In a teeming city where no advantage came easily, the aid of ancestors was not lightly tossed aside. Yet Chui claimed no family name.

Had she searched her memory for a sign of her parents? There were so many families and so many days of toil. Had she cried quietly in her narrow space at night to those who had once been hers, the ones she would have loved had they allowed it, cried to them in childish anger? Perhaps she clung for years to the hope that they had sold her with regret. After a particularly difficult day had she cast them away as they had done to her, cast aside even the name that must have been all that remained of them to her?

Even a mooie-jai brings honor to her ancestors by living as best she can the life laid out for her by her parents. Only the most willful of girls would cast her name aside. Yet that is what Chui must have done. Is it any wonder the gods decided to send her among demons?

But first she was told that she would marry. The thought of it made her gasp. Two months earlier blood from her first cycle showed that she had passed from child to woman. A new wife had once come aboard the boat of a family where she lived. Shy and uncertain, the poor girl had lived little better than Chui until she became pregnant. Then her status rose. Had she delivered a boy she would have taken over her mother-in-law's control of the household.

A woman came to take Chui downriver to Hong Kong. "Your new master is a great merchant there," she said. "He deals with the fan qui." Fan qui meant foreign devils. Chui had no idea what they were but it sounded important and terrible.

His mansion was immense. Room after room beyond a high wall on a narrow street. And all on dry land! Chui found it hard to walk on floors that did not move. In trying to appear small and graceful she succeeded only in staggering like one intoxicated.

The women of the household regarded her doubtfully. They washed her and shaved her eyebrows, tried to comb out and arrange her unruly hair, then whitened her face with rice powder and painted in more delicate features. Her feet were tightly bound in pale ribbons and forced into silken slippers a size too small. The finishing touch took her breath away. It was a glorious silk robe only slightly too large for her. Real silk! She felt almost beautiful.

A fragile porcelain tea set was thrust into her hands. "Your Lord Fou awaits his tea," the headwoman said. "Should he be kind enough to offer a cup to you, you may join him."

She paused to examine Chui. ". . . though there seems little chance of that."

Chui could barely understand the woman's dialect. It was Hakka. The serving women were all Hakka. She began to tremble. How great her new husband must be! Even his servants were of a higher caste than she.

The panel closed silently behind her. She was alone in a room larger than any she had ever seen. Dark wood floors reflected pale light from oiled paper panels. She took a tentative step and winced. Her tightly bound feet were in agony. Even if

they had fit, slippers were a new experience. She longed to spread her toes. The room was icy cold. It stole through the thin silk and drove away the heat of her bath.

A dark mass she took for a pile of rags at the far end of the room reared up and cackled. "Is that my bride come at last? My pretty child bride? With our marriage tea? Bring it here, my dear."

She walked carefully toward him. The slippers made uncertain contact with the polished floor. The cold set the teacups to rattling. This was not the wedding night she had imagined. "Set it down, child," he said impatiently. She dared not look up. From the rasping cough, she could tell he was old. Very old.

Chui had poured tea before. She knew the proper form. As she bent over the cups she presented to his view that most erotic aspect of Chinese womanhood, the back of her neck. At the base of her upswept hair just above the collar of her robe, the recently shaved point of dark hair was a vision that even one with more self-control than her new master would have been hard put to resist. With a hacking coughing croak, he swept the tea set aside and was on her.

Pressed against the icy floor with him close on top, she caught a glimpse of blackened teeth. Several were missing on one side. After that she kept her eyes tightly closed. He was strong and unexpectedly hairy. Between fits of coughing he kept up a muttering discourse that she could not understand. When he

forced himself into her, the sudden pain took her by surprise. She gave a little cry. It excited him and brought on another fit of coughing. She did not cry out again.

That she was not really a wife to her new master was soon made clear. She was sent to him several times. He insisted that she repeat every movement of their first encounter, every shiver and hesitation. But it was beyond her skill. She could never repeat that night to his satisfaction. Some of the things she did excited him, others caused annoyance--even anger. She was too frightened to ask exactly what it was he wanted and none of the serving girls would tell her. When at last he was finished with her, she was sent away.

Chui's Lord Fou Ho Pei made his fortune smuggling British opium into China. Chinese resistance led to the Opium War of 1839 but armed junks were of little use against British frigates. Emperor Tao-kuang was forced to pay \$21 million to Britain, cede Hong Kong and, worst of all, allow Christian missionaries and more opium into China.

As a former smuggler, Chui's new master knew where the bribes were to be paid to obtain the valuable licenses required to deal with the fan qui. In return, he was expected to furnish reliable servants to the Christian missions being established at Hong Kong. As the least useful member of his household, Chui was volunteered.

After her failure as a bride, she was determined to bring honor to her new master as a servant. The work was familiar. As a kitchen slave, she had little fear of actual contact with the terrible fan qui. Then the illness came upon her.

Chui lay in the mission kitchen curled into a ball around the pain in her belly. She heard a snort. "Why should I waste valuable time on the likes of this?" a strange voice demanded. "Is she to be cured just so she can sleep again with sailors and acquire even more interesting diseases?"

Chui opened her eyes. A middle-aged Chinese woman glared down at her. "I never . . ." Chui protested. "My husband was the only one--at least I thought he was to be my husband. I was unworthy. But there was never any other."

The woman laughed harshly. "And who was this not-to-be-a-husband of yours?"

When Chui named him, the woman shook her head and almost smiled. "So it is old Fou who should have stayed away from sailors. No matter. You are young and strong. Your master's diseases are as old and tired as he." She unrolled her pack and arranged several piles of herbs on the cook's chopping block. Chui watched in awe as the kitchen staff scurried to comply with her orders. This was clearly a woman of power.

The tea that she brewed tasted even worse than it smelled but the ache deep in Chui's gut began to ease. "I am Wu," the woman said. "A shaman. You may call me Mo Wu. I will

undertake your cure. In payment you will learn for me the secrets of these Christians."

Chui shrank back in horror. The other kitchen servants were as shocked by the request as she. "This is a task you must ask of the waiters who stand right at the teachers' elbows and understand their fiery roaring," Chui gasped.

Mo Wu dismissed her appeal with a wave of the hand. "The others have important work to do. Even foreign devils deserve food carefully prepared and properly served. Besides, the waiters are too old to learn these new things."

The others visibly relaxed. Chui realized in dismay that, had this woman of power demanded it of them, they would have done as she asked. "But surely my master will never allow me to do such a thing," she cried.

"Your master is a fool. As if by coupling with a virgin, her purity would draw off the diseases that infest him! Is the rotten orange cured by placing it among healthy ones?"

The cooks nodded sagely. They knew about oranges. "But what is there of value to be learned in this place?" the chief cook asked. "The talk of their great ancestor, Jesus, is foolish. Only five boys have come to hear their tales of him and none make any sense of it. They came only to learn the new language."

Mo Wu nodded slowly. "I have heard that this is the opinion even of the great mandarins at Canton. But these are the same venerable sages who must now accept thirteen big

warehouses just outside the city walls, each from a different fan qui nation. These are the same mandarins who would have allowed this very school to be set up in the middle of the city if the common people, remembering the burning and looting by the British during the war, had not rioted against it. These are the same mandarins who, for the first time in five thousand years, kowtow to fan qui. And these are the men who say we can learn nothing from the British?"

"Perhaps the missionaries deceive us," the cook said. "They say their Jesus is the great ancestor who cares for all the world. How can that be? I clean the graves and burn incense to my own ancestors. They know me. Some of them saw my face when I was young and they still lived. Yet even they are often of little help to me. Why would this Jesus who lived far away and had a family of his own to worry about, why would he do more for me than they?"

"That is why this girl must learn their language as well as their message," Mo Wu said. "To learn a man's true thoughts, one must know the language he thinks them in."

"Their language!" Chui wailed. "How can I learn to speak the devil's language?"

The cook looked at her sternly. "You must," he said.

So she did.

A mooie-jai did not question what was demanded of her. Chui had never disobeyed an order in her life. Though the fan qui took her head off in a single bite, she would force her

trembling legs to place one foot before the other until she was within their reach.

The mission's Chinese interpreter actually welcomed her flustered, stammering, barely audible request. She was allowed to sit in an adjacent room and listen to the lectures through a crack in the door. This was so as not to offend the male students. To them, the idea of learning an alien language and religion was enough of a break with tradition. To acknowledge a low-caste, serving girl as classmate would be too much.

This arrangement suited Chui perfectly. She could see the chalkboard through the crack in the door but no one could see her. Best of all, she was never called on to recite.

The class was in the charge of Peter Evans, an earnest, young missionary with experience in an English public school. Working from the Morrison Education Society's book of simple Bible stories, his lessons were translated by Yee Ling, a Chinese Christian.

To Chui's astonishment, she discovered an aptitude for learning. The 26-letter, western alphabet was simplicity itself compared to the hundreds of characters a marginally educated Chinese would have to learn. She and her classmates became literate in English without ever having been so in Chinese.

She was dazzled by tales of men living inside great fish, of mighty walls crumbling before assault by musical instrument and by martyrs emerging unscathed from the dens of fearsome beasts. To comprehend all this with her own eyes from the

printed page set Chui's heart racing. But when it came time to re-translate these wonders back into Chinese for Mo Wu, she found her new enthusiasm severely tested.

"Wonders happen in all ages to all people," the woman declared. "On the night of Confucius' birth, two azure dragons came down from the heavens and coiled themselves around his mother's room while five stars fell into her garden."

To temper Chui's enthusiasm and offer more traditional subjects for her newly-awakened mental facilities, Mo Wu began to teach her the uses of various herbs. While her own cure was underway, she was expected to learn which tree bark was best for which ailments, how blood from a pig's tail was prepared to treat smallpox, the uses for dried toad, seahorse and deerhorn velvet and how to brew snake tea.

The cooks and houseboys were as interested in the strange new teachings as was Mo Wu. They quizzed Chui about her lessons and argued over her understanding of them. They declared Jesus a first-rate shaman, especially impressed by his magic with the loaves and fishes.

Chui was in her second year at the mission when word began to spread of wondrous events on the far side of the ocean. Impoverished seamen who had left Canton years earlier were returning rich. They were coming from a land far to the east they called Gum Shan--the Mountain of Gold. One of these newly-wealthy men was the second cook's younger brother.

Yeung Fo came to the mission to formally present a gift to the second cook. The staff all gathered around as he drew a piece of folded paper from his shirt and opened it. There, the shape and size of a large pumpkin seed--lay a bit of bright, yellow metal. He set the nugget on the tip of his finger and moved it slowly toward the candle flame. The one as bright as the other.

"The Mexicans have a word for the smaller flakes of gold," he said. "They call them chispas. It means sparks, sparks that can enter through a man's eyes and possess his soul."

Yeung Fo bowed and formally presented the nugget to the second cook. "This is my gift to you, elder brother. From the Mountain of Gold. It weighs nearly an ounce which makes it worth \$16. I have returned to my homeland with \$520 in gold, enough to marry, buy a farm and live the rest of my days in comfort."

Chui slept that night with dreams of dancing sparks and a far-off mountain that seemed to be whispering to her of . . . of she knew not what. She awoke to another day and could not recall what the mountain, Gum Shan, had tried to tell her.

The Mountain of Gold spoke to others as well. Chui's master, Lord Fou, showed up shortly thereafter, his youngest son in tow.

"Ah, honorable Reverend Evans," he exclaimed genially when ushered into the young minister's presence, "This is Fou

Seen, my newest and most miserable son. This poor wretch is soon off to Gum Shan. I have given him the slave girl, Chui. I hope she has been of some small aid to you in the great work you are doing. Now that you are so well established and other merchants see that you are a good friend of mine, I am certain they will rush to offer the services of equally valuable slaves."

"She is an admirable young woman and an excellent worker," Rev. Evans said. "Is she to see to your son's house while he is in the gold fields?"

Fou laughed. "This poor fool has no house but mine, honored Reverend. That's why I'm sending him off to shovel up the gold. And what can a loving father send along as aid to such a one? The shovel he can buy when he gets there. But a handsome little slave girl can serve his needs and those of his countrymen. Did you know that only men are going to this America? Even if there is less gold than they say, he should do well."

Evans stared at him aghast. "You don't mean you would send Chui as a . . . as a . . ."

Fou made a grimace that Evans, when discussing it afterward, suspected might have been a wink. "She is small and thin and her feet are large. I admit all this," Fou said. "But a poor fish is better than no fish and I suspect there will be few fish for Chinaboys in those far-off gold fields."

Reverend Evans drew himself up to his full height--not much more than old Fou's. "It is not fish we are discussing, sir.

It is a human being. If you think I will allow this young woman to be taken as a sex slave, you are very much mistaken. Slavery may be legal in China and in America but it remains a sin and as such, has been outlawed in all parts of the British Empire since 1833. I shall go to the proper authorities and have her . . . "

He was wrong. As Yee Ling, his interpreter, explained, Chui had been sold by her father. He had a perfect right to do so. To challenge that sale would bring dishonor to her family. It was something that she, as a dutiful daughter, would never allow. Unless the Reverend Evans had the \$300 that her master, Fou, demanded for her contract, she was bound for the Mountain of Gold.

"Three hundred dollars!" Mo Wu exclaimed when she heard of it. "For a \$10 kitchen slave? What nonsense! Fou pretends you are a professional singing girl trained in all the arts of the flowery combat."

Along with most of the mission staff, the shaman had come to the dock to see Chui off. "If that evil old pirate hadn't set your price so high, we would have bought you ourselves," she sighed. "Three hundred dollars for a girl who doesn't yet know the use of half her molds and fungus. And the cook says he must avert his eyes when you try to bone a chicken."

Chui had passed through a number of families in her short life. Farewells were not new to her but this was the hardest. She bowed low to the woman, her stern teacher, and to the other kind friends who had come to see her off. The great sea

was said to be very wide and there was little chance they would ever meet again.

Her new master, Fou Seen, took her by the arm and they went aboard.