

The Conversion of Sum Loo

By Willa Cather

For who may know how the battle goes,
Beyond the rim of the world?
And who shall say what gods survive,
And which in the Pit are hurled?
How if a man should burn sweet smoke
And offer his prayers and tears
At the shrine of a god who had lost the fight
And been slain for a thousand years?

The purport of this story is to tell how the joy at the Mission of the Heavenly Rest for the most hopeful conversion of Sum Chin and Sum Loo, his wife, was turned to weeping, and of how little Sister Hannah learned that the soul of the Oriental is a slippery thing, and hard to hold, to hold in the meshes of any creed.

Sum Chin was in those days one of the largest importers of Chinese bronzes and bric-à-brac in San Francisco and a power among his own people, a convert worth a hundred of the coolie people. When he first came to the city he had gone to the Mission Sunday School for a while for the purpose of learning the tongue and picking up something of American manners. But occidental formalities are very simple to one who has mastered the complicated etiquette of southern Asia, and he soon picked up enough English for business purposes and so had fallen away from the Mission. It was not until his wife came to him, and until his little son was born that Sum Chin had regarded the mission people seriously, deeming it wise to invoke the good offices of any and all gods in the boy's behalf.

Of his conversion, or rather his concession, the people of the Heavenly Rest made great show, for besides being respected by the bankers and insurance writers, who are liberal in the matter of creed, he was well known to all the literary and artistic people of the city, both professionals and devout amateurs. Norman Girrard, the "charcoal preacher" as he was called, because he always carried a bit of crayon and sketched opportunely and inopportunely, declared that Sum Chin had the critical faculty, and that his shop was the most splendid interior in San Francisco. Girrard was a pale-eyed theological student who helped the devout deaconesses at the Mission of the Heavenly Rest in their good work, and who had vacillated between art and the Church until his whole demeanor was restless, uncertain, and indicative of a deep-seated discontent.

By some strange attraction of opposites he had got into Sum Chin's confidence as far as it is ever possible to penetrate the silent, inscrutable inner self of the Oriental. This fateful, nervous little man found a sedative influence in the big, clean-limbed Chinaman, so smooth and calm and yellow, so content with all things finite and infinite, who could sit any number of hours in the same position without fatigue, and who once, when he saw Girrard playing tennis, had asked him how much he was paid for such terrible exertion. He liked the glowing primitive colors of Sum Chin's shop, they salved his feelings after the ugly things he saw in his mission work. On hot summer days, when the sea breeze slept, and the streets were ablaze with heat and light, he spent much time in the rear of Sum Chin's shop, where it was cool and dusky, and where the air smelt of spices and sandalwood, and the freshly opened boxes exhaled the aroma of another clime

which was like an actual physical substance, and food for dreams. Those odors flashed before his eyes whole Orient landscapes, as though the ghosts of Old World cities had been sealed up in the boxes, like the djinn in the Arabian bottle.

There he would sit at the side of a formidable bronze dragon with four wings, near the imported lacquered coffin which Sum Chin kept ready for the final emergency, watching the immaculate Chinaman, as he sat at an American office desk attending to his business correspondence. In his office Sum Chin wore dark purple trousers and white shoes worked with gold, and an overdress of a lighter shade of purple. He wrote with a brush which required very delicate manipulation, scraping his ink from the cake and moistening it with water, tracing the characters with remarkable neatness on the rice paper. Years afterward, when Girrard had gone over to art body and soul, and become an absinthe-drinking, lady-killing, and needlessly profane painter of Oriental subjects and marines on the other side of the water, malicious persons said that in the tortures of his early indecision he had made the acquaintance of Sum Chin's opium pipe and had weakened the underpinning of his orthodoxy, but that is exceedingly improbable.

During these long seances Girrard learned a good deal of Sum Chin's history. Sum Chin was a man of literary tastes and had begun life as a scholar. At an early age he had taken the Eminent Degree of the Flowering Talent, and was preparing for the higher Degree of the Promoted Men, when his father had committed some offense against the Imperial Government, and Sum Chin had taken his guilt upon his own head and had been forced to flee the Empire, being smuggled out of the port at Hong Kong as the body servant of a young Englishman whom he had been tutoring in the Chinese Classics. As a boy he had dwelt in Nanking, the oldest city of the oldest Empire, where the great schools are, and where the tallest pagoda in the world rears its height of shining porcelain. After he had taken the Eminent Degree of the Flowering Talent and been accorded an ovation by the magistrates of his town, he had grown tired of the place; tired of the rice paper books, and the masters in their black gowns, and the interminable prospect of the Seven Thousand Classics; of the distant blue mountains and the shadow of the great tower that grew longer and longer upon the yellow clay all afternoon. Then he had gone south, down the great canal on a barge with big red sails like dragons' wings. He came to Soutcheofou, that is built upon the waterways of the hills of Lake Taihoo. There the air smelt always of flowers, and the bamboo thickets were green, and the canals were bright as quicksilver, and between them the waving rice fields shimmered in the sun like green watered silk. There the actors and jugglers gathered all the year round. And there the mandarins come to find concubines. For once a god loved a maiden of Soutcheofou and gave her the charms of heaven and since then the women of that city have been the most beautiful in the Middle Kingdom and have lived but to love and be loved. There Sum Chin had tarried, preparing for his second degree, when his trouble came upon him and the sacred duty of filial piety made him a fugitive.

Up to the time of his flight Sum Chin had delayed the holy duty of matrimony because the cares of paternity conflict with the meditations of the scholar, and because wives are expensive and scholars are poor. In San Francisco he had married a foreign-born Chinese girl out of Berkeley Place, but she had been sickly from the first and had borne him no children. She had lived a long time, and though she was both shrewish and indolent, it was said that her husband treated her kindly. She had been dead but a few months when the news of his father's death in Nanking, roused Sum Chin to his duty of begetting offspring who should secure repose for his own soul and his dead father's.

He was then fifty, and his choice must be made quickly. Then he bethought him of the daughter of his friend and purchasing agent, Te Wing, in Canton, whom he had visited on his last

trip to China, eight years before. She was but a child then, and had lain all day on a mat with her feet swathed in tight bandages, but even then he had liked the little girl because her eyes were the color of jade and very bright, and her mouth was red as a flower. He used to take her costly Chinese sweetmeats and tell her stories of the five Sea Dragon Kings who wear yellow armor, and of their yearly visit to the Middle Heaven, when the other gods are frightened away, and of the unicorn which walks abroad only when sages are born, and of the Phoenix which lays cubical eggs among the mountains, and at whose flute-like voice the tigers flee. So Sum Chin wrote to Te Wing, the Cantonese merchant, and Girrard arranged the girl's admission through the ports with the Rescue Society, and the matter was accomplished.

Now a change of dwelling place, even from one village to another, is regarded as a calamity among Chinese women, and they pray to be delivered from the curse of childlessness and from long journeys. Little Te Loo must have remembered very kindly the elegant stranger who had drunk tea in her father's home and had given her sweetmeats, that she consented to cross the ocean to wed him. Yet she did this willingly, and she kept a sharp lookout for the five Sea Dragon Kings on the way, for she was quite sure that they must be friends of her husband's. She arrived in San Francisco with her many wedding gifts and her trousseau done up in yellow bales bound with bamboo withes, a very silly, giggly maid, with her jade-like eyes and her flower-like mouth, and her feet like the tiny pink shells that one picks up along the seashore.

From the day of her marriage Sum Loo began devout ceremonies before the shrine of the goddess who bestows children, and in a little while she had a joyful announcement to make to her husband. Then Sum Chin ceased from his desultory reading at the Seven Thousand Classics, the last remnant in him of the disappointed scholar, and began to prepare himself for weightier matters. The proper reception of a son into the world, when there are no near relatives at hand, and no maternal grandmother to assist in the august and important functions, is no small responsibility, especially when the child is to have wealth and rank. In many trivial things, such as the wearing of undershirts in winter and straw hats in summer, Sum Chin had conformed to American ways, but the birth of a man's son is the most important event in his life, and he could take no chances. All ceremonials must be observed, and all must transpire as it had among his people since the years when European civilization was not even a name. Sum Loo was cheerful enough in those days, eating greedily, and admiring her trousseau, and always coaxing for new bangles and stories about the five Sea Dragon Kings. But Sum Chin was grave and preoccupied. Suppose, after all his preparations, it should be a girl, whose feet he would have to bind and for whom he would have to find a suitor, and what would it all amount to in the end? He might be too old to have other children, and a girl would not answer his purpose. Even if it were a boy he might not live to see him grow up, and his son might forget the faith of his fathers and neglect the necessary devotions. He began to fear that he had delayed this responsibility too long.

But the child, when it came, was a boy and strong, and he heaved out his chest mightily and cried when they washed his mouth with a picture of the sun dipped in wine, the symbol of a keen intelligence. This little yellow, waxen thing was welcomed into the house of Sum Chin as a divinity, and, indeed, he looked not unlike the yellow clay gods in the temples frequented by expectant mothers. He was smooth and dark as old ivory, and his eyes were like little beads of black opium, and his nose was so diminutive that his father laughed every time he looked at it. He was called Sum Wing, and he was kept wrapped in a gorgeous piece of silk, and he lay all day long quite still, with his thumb in his mouth and his black eyes never blinking; and Girrard said he looked like an ivory image in his father's shop. Sum Wing had marked prejudices against

all the important ceremonials which must be performed over all male infants. He spat out the ceremonial rice and kicked over the wine.

“Him Melican babee, I leckon,” said his father in explanation of his son’s disregard of the important rites. When the child kicked his mother’s side so that she scolded him, Sum Chin smiled and bought her a new bracelet. When the child’s cry reached him as he sat in his shop, he smiled. Often, at night, when the tiny Sum Wing slept on his mothers arm, Sum Chin would lean over in the dark to hear his son’s breathing.

When the child was a month old, on a day that the priest at the joss house declared was indicated as lucky by many omens, Sum Wing’s head was shaven for the first time, and that was the most important thing which had yet occurred to him. Many of his father’s society—which was the Society Fi, or the Guardianship of Nocturnal Vigils, a band which tried to abolish midnight “hold-ups” in Chinatown—came and brought gifts. Nine little tufts of hair were left on the back of the child’s head, to indicate the number of trunks his bride would need to pack her trousseau, and nine times his father rubbed two eggs with red shells over his little pate, which eggs the members of the Society for the Guardianship of Nocturnal Vigils gravely ate, thereby pledging themselves to protect the boy, seek him if lost, and mourn for him if dead. Then a nurse was provided for Sum Wing, and his father asked Girrard to have the mission folk pray to the Jesus god for his son, and he drew a large check on his bankers for the support of the Mission. Sum Chin held that when all a man’s goods are stored in one ship, he should insure it with all reputable underwriters. So, surely, when a man has but one son he should secure for him the good offices of all gods of any standing. For, as he would often say to Girrard, in the language of an old Taoist proverb, “Have you seen your god, brother, or have I seen mine? Then why should there be any controversy between us, seeing that we are both unfortunates?”

Sum Wing was a year and a half old, and could already say wise Chinese words and play with his father’s queue most intelligently, when fervent little Sister Hannah began to go to Sum Chin’s house, first to see his queer little yellow baby and afterwards to save his wife’s soul. Sum Loo could speak a little English by this time, and she liked to have her baby admired, and when there was lack of other amusement, she was not averse to talking about her soul. She thought the pictures of the baby Jesus god were cunning, though not so cunning as her Sum Wing, and she learned an English prayer and a hymn or two. Little Sister Hannah made great progress with Sum Lou, though she never cared to discuss theology with Sum Chin. Chinese metaphysics frightened her, and under all Sum Chin’s respect for all rites and ceremonials there was a sort of passive, resigned agnosticism, a doubt older than the very beginnings of Sister Hannah’s faith, and she felt incompetent to answer it. It is such an ancient doubt, that of China, and it has gradually stolen the odor from the roses and the tenderness from the breasts of the women.

The good little Sister, who should have had children of her own to bother about, became most deeply attached to Sum Wing, who loved to crumple her white headdress and pinch her plump, pink cheeks. Above all things she desired to have the child baptized, and Sum Loo was quite in the notion of it. It would be very nice to dress the child in his best clothes and take him to the Mission chapel and hold him before the preacher with many American women looking on, if only they would promise not to put enough water on him to make him sick. She coaxed Sum Chin, who could see no valid objection, since the boy would be properly instructed in the ceremonials of his own religion by the Taoist priest, and since many of his patrons were among the founders of the Mission, and it was well to be in the good books of all gods, for one never knew how things were going with the Imperial Dynasties of the other world.

So little Sum Wing was prayed, and sung, and wept over by the mission women, and a week later he fell sick and died, and the priest in the joss house chuckled maliciously. He was buried in his father's costly coffin which had come from China, and at the funeral there were many carriages and mourners and roast pigs and rice and gin in bowls of real china, as for a grown man, for he was his father's only son.

Sum Chin, he went about with his queue unbraided and his face haggard and unshaven so that he looked like a wreck from some underground opium den, and he rent many costly garments and counted not the cost of them, for of what use is wealth to an old man who has no son? Who now would pray for the peace of his own soul or for that of his father? The voice of his old father cried out from the grave in bitterness against him, upbraiding him with his neglect to provide offspring to secure rest for his spirit. For of all unfilial crimes, childlessness is the darkest.

It was all clear enough to Sum Chin. There had been omens and omens, and he had disregarded them. And now the Jesus people had thrown cold water in his baby's face and with evil incantations had killed his only son. Had not his heart stood still when the child was seized with madness and screamed when the cold water touched its face, as though demons were tearing it with red-hot pincers?—And the gods of his own people were offended and had not helped him, and the Taoist priest mocked him and grinned from the joss house across the street.

When the days of mourning were over he regained his outward composure, was scrupulous as to his dress and careful to let his nails grow long. But he avoided even the men of his own society, for these men had sons, and he hated them because the gods had prospered them. When Girrard came to his shop, Sum Chin sat writing busily with his camel's hair-brush, making neat characters on the rice paper, but he spoke no word. He maintained all his former courtesy toward the mission people, but sometimes, after they had left his shop, he would creep upstairs with ashen lips, and catching his wife's shoulder, would shake her rudely, crying between his teeth, "Jesus people, Jesus people, killee ma babe!"

As for poor Sum Loo, her life was desolated by her husband's grief. He was no longer was gentle and kind. He no longer told her stories or bought her bracelets and sweetmeats. He let her go nowhere except to the joss house, he let her see no one, and roughly told her to cleanse herself from the impurities of the Foreign Devils. Still, he was a broken old man, who called upon the gods in his sleep, and she pitied him. Surely he would never have any more children, and what would her father say when he heard that she had given him no grandchildren? A poor return she made her parents for all their kindness in caring for her in her infancy when she was but a girl baby and might have been quietly slipped out of the world; in binding her beautiful feet when she was foolish enough to cry about it, and in giving her a good husband and a trousseau that filled many bales. Surely, too, the spirit of her husband's father would sit heavy on her stomach that she had allowed the Jesus people to kill her son. She was often very lonely without her little baby, who used to count his toes and call her by a funny name when he wanted his dinner. Then she would cry and wipe her eyes on the gorgeous raiment in which Sum Wing had been baptized.

The mission people were much concerned about Sum Loo. Since her child's death none of them had been able to gain access to the rooms above her husband's store, where she lived. Sister Hannah had again and again made valiant resolutions and set out with determination imprinted on her plump, rosy countenance, but she had never been able to get past the suave, smiling Asiatic who told her that his wife was visiting a neighbor, or had a headache, or was giving a teaparty. It is impossible to contradict the polite and patent fictions of the Chinese, and Sister Hannah always went away nonplussed and berated herself for lack of courage.

One day, however, she was fortunate enough to catch sight of Sum Loo just as she was stepping into the joss house across the street, and Sister Hannah followed her into that dim, dusky place, where the air was heavy with incense. At first she could see no one at all, and she quite lost her way wandering about among the glittering tinselled gods with their offerings of meat, and rice, and wine before them. They were terrible creatures, with hoofs, and horns, and scowling faces, and the little Sister was afraid of the darkness and the heavy air of the place. Suddenly she heard a droning singsong sound, as of a chant, and, moving cautiously, she came upon Sum Loo and stood watching her in terrified amazement. Sum Loo had the copy of the New Testament in Chinese which Sister Hannah had given her husband, open before her. She sat crouching at the shrine of the goddess who bestows children and tore out the pages of the book one by one, and, carefully folding them into narrow strips, she burned them in the candles before the goddess, chanting, as she did so, one name over and over incessantly.

Sister Hannah fled weeping back to the Mission of the Heavenly Rest, and that night she wrote to withdraw the application she had sent in to the Board of Foreign Missions.