

FATHER DINNY'S CHRISTMAS TREE

(By E. M. SWEETMAN, in the *Far East*.)

"What, all my pretty chickens?"

—*Macbeth*.

"See here, now," said Father Dinny to the row of pig-tails wriggling on the catechism-bench. "This is what you have to keep hold of in there, understand—comprong?" He tapped the smallest Chinese baby—a fat thing of four—on her little yellow forehead. Father Dinny was not yet proficient in Chinese, or his class in English; so they helped each other along by grins and gestures on the children's part, and odd expressions on Father Dinny's—expressions which he had picked up in the trenches during the great world-war.

Pray to Remain Always Good.

"Comprong?" repeated Father Dinny. "Tek-a and Ming, and Ching-wo, and Ouanyou, and little Ninki have all been made Christians through the mercy of God. Now they have got to live and die good Christians—to live and die," repeated the missionary with anxious emphasis. "Not just say their prayers as long as they are little boys and girls, to please Father Dinny when he comes once in a while, and gives them sweets; but persevere in those prayers, so that they may grow up real Christian men and women, and die in the Faith, and in the Grace of God."

A Prophecy: Will it Come True?

"The children in the village of Finchow, on the river, will not grow up," remarked Tek-a solemnly. He turned his impenetrable black eyes on the priest, and sucked his sugarstick appreciatively for a second or two before adding: "They are already napoo. They Christian, and when the ugly, angry people ran in, they choppee off all little boys' and girls' heads; and they die!"

"What?"

"They are napoo," repeated Tek-a. Napoo was another word which Father Dinny had found in the trenches, and it means "no more."

"No grow up," went on Tek-a, delighted at the sensation he was making, and shrugging his shoulders. "We too, perhaps, no grow up—who knows! More shug-stick, please, Father."

The First Inklings.

Father Dinny broke the remaining stick into five pieces with hands that trembled a little. There had been riots all along the river two years before. A newly established Convent of Sisters of Charity narrowly escaped demolition at that time, because the good nuns made it their business to pick up, take in, and baptise any poor little girl-baby abandoned by its inhuman parents for being of the wrong sex. Excited by a wild report that the Sisters hid the children to sacrifice them to the God of the Christians, a savage mob had surrounded the building and murdered its occupants, not even sparing babes of their own race. But things were quieting down of late; and Father Dinny hoped that in case of another rising this particular village which enshrined his precious little flock, and which was somewhat off the beaten track, would escape detection and

persecution. Tek-a's news was therefore all the more disturbing.

Prepare.

"Well, children," he said, trying to smile, "the good Jesus died for you, as you know. So we must be ready to die for Him some time or other. Whenever He wants us, you see. But we'll have our Christmas-tree first, please God."

"Me no likee die," cried little Ninki, suddenly kicking out small fat legs and beginning to struggle. "No-ee, me no wantee die and be napoo."

Good-bye.

"O good-bye to you, you little Turk," said Father Dinny in a relieved voice. He took up his bag, and drifted out of the hut. Ten paces further on he turned for a last look. The boys had joined hands again and were running to mock execution. Owanyou had wound her pigtail like a crown round her little bald pate, and stood motionless; absorbed in blissful anticipation of splendor to come. Ninki-fu alone saw him and crept towards the door. "Ha-ee-lool," called the childish voice gleefully. He came back, picked her up, blessed her, and set her down. A Chinese woman from within ran out, saluted the priest respectfully, and caught the child by the arm. But the little creature swung away from her the length of its short arm to fling a final roguish glance at the missionary.

"No likee die," said Ninki-fu, and cackled with laughter.

Father Dinny plodded on through the shadows with an unusually grave face. These farewells to the Chinese babies brought his thoughts back with a pang to last good-byes in the old home in the West of Ireland. Almost he smelt the turf smoke, and saw again the ethereal wreaths rising between the thatch and the first star of a clear rain-washed sky; almost heard the hurried feet of little brothers and sisters gathering on the threshold around the central figure of the mother; even as her yellow brood had clustered round the Chinese woman just now. Only instead of the Oriental with her impassive face, and Tek-a, and Ouanyou and the rest, over there had stood the Irish woman—her wide, guileless eyes full of illimitable sorrow; and Michael and Bridget and Patrick and little Honor had all knelt for his blessing—little Honor who alone capered on the doorstep under the purple hills, not knowing that her brother was perhaps locking at these for the last time.

I am Never Alone.

As Father Dinny trudged along in the deep Chinese mud, he wondered why he had said good-bye to all that held his affections to become a lonely wanderer under unfriendly stars. But only for a moment.

"Yet I am not alone, for the Master is with me."

He braced himself, felt for his Rosary and made the sign of the Cross.

Two months later he sat in a villainous town-lodging with a heap of parcels before him; gleefully sorting out by the help of an evil-smelling lamp the toys destined for his promised festivity. For it was close on Christmas. Father Dinny was going his round again, and his whole mind was absorbed in small lanterns, spangles, play-

things, and the general paraphernalia of a Christmas tree.

A step sounded on the ladder stair outside, then a voice:

"Are you in, Father Dinny?"

"It's the Captain," cried Father Dinny, leaping up and flinging open the door. "Why, Denis, of all people! It's you that are welcome. Well, God is great. That you should have been sent in the nick of time before I trekked off again!"

Father Denis Desmond, a tall man with a worn face, was slowly unwinding the scarf that partly concealed his features. In the dim light he looked curiously pale. He gripped his friend's hand and hesitated in speech.

Away Down the River.

"I—well I was sent to you, Dinny," he said. "Father Mike heard you were here. Tell me now where are you bound for?"

"Oh, Lord, man! hundreds of miles down the river. See here!" He nodded delightedly towards his purchases. "Are not these lovely? I'm having a Christmas tree for some of the Chinese babies. Such jolly little kiddies, Captain, and grand little Christians, what's more. Want to be martyrs, no less!"

Father Desmond made an inarticulate exclamation, but the other was too joyously excited to heed.

"Look—here's a sword—a real executioner's sword, mind you!—that's for the boys. And here's a crown for Ouanyou, the vain puss, and—oh, I say, Denis, throw your eye on this, if you please! The littlest of all the babies wants a whip to beat the devil with." He broke off to roar with laughter. "So what's the matter—what are you doing?"

For Father Desmond with a very drawn face was sweeping the toys back into their wrappings.

"Oh, Dinny, my poor fellow—put them away."

"What's that?"

"Put them away," repeated Father Denis; "they—they won't be wanted. There's been trouble down the river at San-ho—a new rising against the Christians."

"The children," gasped Father Dinny, "are they safe?"

"Safe—yes—safe in Heaven, thank God! Glorious martyrs, every one. I wish you and I were where they are now, God bless them."

Brave Little Martyrs All.

"Those brutes tried to shake their fortitude in every possible way; even causing the fathers and mothers to be beheaded under the little children's eyes, on a fallen tree by the river—all the village looking on. They hoped this would scare the children—some of them were so small. But no—the boys and girls and all the little mites joined hands and ran together to the block when their turn came. Not a child made a sound, except one."

"Except one?" faltered poor Father Dinny.

"The tiniest little mite of all cried out at the end. Something in Chiense—Hi-loo, Hi-loo, or something like that."

"It isn't Chinese," said Father Dinny in a muffled voice. "I taught it her. She didn't know what it meant."

"She knows now, praise be to God!" said Father Dinny.

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