

WITHIN THE FOUR SEAS

PROLOGUE

IT WAS market day. The little gospel hall was fresh with a new coat of whitewash. Well-written texts and colored posters adorned the clean walls, and on one side hung a large map of the world.

A young man with bright, intelligent face was talking earnestly to the group of farmers who, having made their purchases or sold their produce, had dropped in to sit and rest before starting for home. Some carried strings of fish; others, a bundle of spinach or onions, or a piece of fat pork. A smoker loaned a light to his neighbor, who had just filled the tiny bowl of his pipe. Two others were comparing prices in a loud tone and had to be asked to keep quiet. The day was hot. An unempt rustic, whose red face showed that he had tarried too long at the wine, sat in one corner and slept. It was not an inspiring audience; but the preacher was interested in what he was saying, and from their ejaculations of assent it was evident that his congregation was not wholly indifferent to his exhortations.

Standing in front of the world map a young farmer, or he might have been a member of the country gentry, intently studied the continents and seas. It was the first time he had entered the gospel hall, and the first time he had ever seen so complete a map of the whole world. Apparently he was too preoccupied to listen to the evangelist, but in reality he was following the argument very closely. Of much of it he recognized the cogency. There was more, however, which he did not understand, and some of the statements he would

like to have rebutted. He saw, nevertheless, that the speaker was a man of scholarship who knew his classics, and who, much to his delight, seemed to be able to shed new light on the old letter. Besides, he drew illustrations from the realm of science with a familiarity which made the young man envious. He continued to study the map, tracing with his finger a river system whose name he had just seen for the first time, or locating a country whose fame had reached even to the villages of Shantung.

The preacher went on with his sermon. The foolishness of idolatry and current superstitious practices had occupied a good part of the discourse. Then the evangelist introduced the subject of ancestor worship. He did not attack with the same abandon here that he had before. There was something enshrined in this cult which he must not destroy or appear to combat, and that was filial reverence.

"But you Christians abandon your ancestors, don't you?" interrupted an old man. "How can you call it filial reverence when you urge people to neglect their dead?"

Very patiently the speaker replied that no one was asked to forsake the dead; that, on the contrary, a deeper and true piety was demanded of the followers of this Way, a piety which did not consist in forms and rites, but in sincere love, respect, and care for living parents, and veneration for those who had passed away. He urged that the sacrifices of ghost paper were contrary to the example of the sages and that food offerings made to the departed were not in accord with science or common sense.

The slavery of being bound by customs for which no one could offer any claim, except that of hoary age, came in for stern condemnation. The day was a new one and demanded a new spirit, not merely conformity to the past, but the spirit of adventure for the future.

China had shown some of that spirit when she had set up the Republic. It was not much of a republic; but China had her eyes set on a goal, and that goal was ahead, and that goal was popular government instead of autocratic government. She had a long way yet to go, and she needed something which the old faiths could not give. They had much that was true in them, much that would never perish; but as the light of the sun is greater than that of the moon and stars together, so the Light of the world was absolutely essential for the dawning of this new day for China.

A man spoke bitterly of the day as darker than that of the Manchu dynasty. The preacher admitted the charges of official corruption, but refused to be pessimistic. He spoke of the need of self-sacrifice if the nation were ever to become strong. Power was to come as men dared to take up the cross and follow the Savior of the world.

"Rest yourself, rest yourself," said several on the benches to the evangelist, as he paused to pour out a cup from the ubiquitous teapot. The crowd arose and sauntered forth into the hot sunshine. The young farmer (or was he a scholar?) stayed. He wanted to ask about the British Empire, whose extensive dominions were so conspicuously red upon the world map.

