

Wong Li

by Fr. F. Sharkey, S.F.M.

Fr. Sharkey wrote the following narrative about the leper Wong Li, which in some ways defined his priesthood. This tale was printed in a book titled *Why I Became a Priest*, which was edited by George L. Kane and published by Westminster press. The story is profoundly moving because it captures the depth of God's boundless love and mercy. The disease of leprosy is no longer the dread disease it once was. However, the leprosy of sin remains very common. The story of Wong Li is a beautiful reminder that Jesus Christ, the great healer of diseased souls, is always ready to perform another miracle of healing.

"Why does God choose one man to be a priest rather than another? The question must have an answer. In the inscrutable designs of Divine Providence everything has its purpose and its meaning. This is particularly true of a vocation to the priesthood. I suppose that only in eternity can the question be completely answered. And yet every priest likes to guess at the answer in time. I am inclined to believe that the reason why God chose me to be a priest may be found in the story of Wong Li. At least, I am going to relate this striking incident from my missionary experience as a possible explanation why God called to His priesthood one so unworthy as I.

It lies between the winding river and the hills of Chekiang, this city of my story, and the Chinese call it Tsingtien - Greenfields. Tsingtien, like most of China's rural cities, is walled round on every side as a protection against two old and deadly enemies - one, the river, which, during the rainy season, swells and inundates the entire valley; the other, the bandits, who periodically swoop down from the hill country to pillage and destroy.

Now 'once upon a time' (for so indeed I should begin this fairy tale which really happened), there lived a leper. This leper was so terrible disfigured and so eaten away by the most horrible of all diseases that he was commonly called 'the most frightful leper in all China.'

He sat at the gate of the Temple of Lanterns on the main street of the city of Tsingtien. Never in all my life have I seen a sight that filled me with more pity and disgust than did that almost nightmarish figure, that mass of corruption and decay, that seeming embodiment of all the ills of mankind, spilled as it were from a worm-crawling grave - the living dead.

The Chinese mother would hurriedly cover the face of her baby as she passed the spot. The dirtiest beggar on the street would keep a goodly distance from the loathsome figure. There he would sit, through all the inclemencies of the weather, under the blistering, tropical summer sun, and in the raw, damp cold of the far-eastern winter. It was his only home, that spot beside the temple gate. He lived there through the dreary days, the long months and the longer years. He lived there - if one could call it life - and one day he died there.

Half his face had been eaten away; the fetid lice-ridden rags mercifully covered the cadaver of his body, while the stump of a hand tried to clutch the dirty rice-bowl that was held out beseechingly before you.

I had just been appointed to Tsingtien, and it was my custom to take a daily walk down the main thoroughfare of the city and out into the country beyond. So every day I passed the Temple of Lanterns and stopped to drop a mite into the rice-bowl of the leper, Wong Li. The stench about him was unbearable; the very sight of him struck terror and horror into one's very soul. But that terrible disgust that I felt at the nearness of him was drowned out in the wave of pity and sorrow that engulfed me. I was determined that if Wong Li had nothing to live for, I would give him something to die for.

The leering pagan gods; the musty, somber temples; the ridiculous conglomeration of Buddhistic and Taoistic superstitions - what had they to offer this loathsome, rotting leper but despair and darkness and abysmal loneliness? What could the intellectual lights and the great ones of this world offer? What could anyone offer? Even the mythical Superman, holding the runaway express with its precious human cargo upon the track; even the redoubtable Tarzan, hero of boyhood tales, saving the hero from the jaws of the lion and tearing the king of beast to pieces with his naked hands - what could even these fantastic creatures do for this epitome of human hopelessness before me?

In that moment there came to me the full, marvelous, almost paralyzing realization of what it meant to be a priest, a missionary priest. Where baffled science stopped and human endeavor turned helplessly away, I stood my ground, sublimely conscious of that tremendous power that was within me; and out of the fetid mass of corruption and decay and deep despair that groveled there before me, I could in my priestly hands mold a thing of eternal and unutterable beauty.

At first, I simply said hello to Wong Li and gave him my alms with a smile. Gradually, smothering my disgust and horror, I stayed to talk with the leper. He was for a long time wary and suspicious of me. Why, he was asking himself, did the foreign gentleman take such a keen interest in him whom the people called 'the most horrible leper in all China?' What did this white man with the long black dress want of him? What could he possibly want?

I found him taciturn and at times almost unfriendly. One day I would bring him a few cigarettes, the next day a few rice cakes. Ever so slowly but ever so surely, I dissipated the fears and won the heart of the leper of Tsingtien. And when I had won his heart, I bent all my energies to the task of winning his immortal soul.

I began to tell him of God and of Jesus and of Mary and of paradise. It took me back in memory to the long-lost yesterdays, when in the twilight time I had sat at my sister's feet and listened in rapt silence and starry-eyed wonder to those fairy tales that always began 'once upon a time' and always ended 'and they lived happily ever after.'

Day after day, I unfolded to Wong Li the leper a tale that made those fairy tales of childhood seem shabby in comparison - a tale of real people who rose from rags and poverty and wretchedness to become princes and princesses in a land whose gates were of amethyst and

jasmine and whose streets were of gold and silver, land of unutterable wonders, everlasting happiness and eternal glory, that lay beyond the farthest star.

I can still see that awful face fastened unalterably on mine as I told my story. I can still hear the expressions of amazement that fell from those lips festered and broken by the cancerous death that was upon him.

It was so beautiful the tale that I told him, incredibly beautiful. To this caricature of a man, forgotten, despised, unloved by anyone; to the creature who watched from day to day the slow decay and putrefaction of his own body, and whose pagan beliefs offered naught but a nether world of continued suffering, darkness and torture - my words must have sounded like the ranting of a madman and the heaven I described but a fantastic, impossible mirage of an unbalanced brain.

But, by God's grace, in time he did believe; and so, one bright, glorious summer day, I baptized Wong Li the leper, there at the very gate of the temple. Crowded around me were the curious villagers, perplexed and astounded at my words and actions. As I poured the baptismal waters over the leper's head, I remember so well the remark of one of the pagan bystanders. 'Too little water,' he said. 'You need plenty water wash Wong Li - him very dirty.' I could not help smiling, as I thought to myself of the immaculate purity and the transcendent loveliness of the soul of the leper, regenerated in the waters of baptism. If my pagan friend could only have seen the guardian angel of Wong Li fold his golden wings and shade his eyes from the splendor and dazzling brightness he could not dare to look upon!

Wong Li made his First Communion a few days later. Once again, Jesus of Nazareth walked the city streets and had compassion on the leper, for it was there at the gate of the pagan temple that the Lord of Glory wrapped poor, dirty disease-ridden Wong Li in His Sacramental arms.

And then came the day when a boy ran up to me in the mission compound and told me that my leper was dying and was calling from his friend, the Seng Fu. I hurried to the gate of the Temple of Lanterns. Poor Wong Li lay there in his last agony, and, unmindful of the curious bystanders, I dropped on my knees beside him and began the prayers for the dying. Gripped tightly in the half-rotten hand was the crucifix I had given him on the day of his baptism. It was his passport to eternal life, his key to everlasting happiness. Wong Li had been greatly impressed with the agony of Christ's terrible sufferings and he always reverently referred to Jesus as 'the man on the Cross.'

The end came very suddenly. He tried to raise to a sitting posture and I heard him whisper the name of Jesus and saw him press his bleeding lips to the lips of the figure on the Cross. Thus he died.

I stood up and almost unconsciously lifted my eyes to the cloudless blue of the summer sky. I knew that as suddenly as a blinding flash of lightning, the soul of the leper of Tsingtien had winged its way to the very portals of paradise. I tried to visualize that tremendous moment

when the gates of heaven were thrown open and Wong Li walked awkwardly up the gold-paved streets of paradise, awed by the sweetness of the angelic choirs, amazed by the beauty that 'no eye has seen or mind conceived.' I could almost hear the voice out of the Beatific Vision say, 'What is your name?' And I fancied I heard poor, humble Wong Li answer in his childlike simplicity, 'I am the most horrible leper in all China.' And then the light became too bright, the music too sweet, the glory too unspeakable. I seemed to see a nail-pierced hand take the hand of the leper and draw him into the nebula of unutterable splendor and I seemed to hear a voice say, 'I too was accounted as a leper and as one struck by God, for I am the Man on the Cross.'

And so I end my story of Wong Li, the most horrible leper in all China, who 'once upon a time' sat at the gate of the Temple of Lanterns in Tsingtien and now sits upon the throne of an angel in the palace of the King of Kings, in the city whose gates are of amethyst and sapphire and whose streets are of silver and of gold, where everyone 'lives happily ever after'."