

Wade Mary Hazelton Blanchard

Our Little Siamese Cousin



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Mary Hazelton Wade

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Preface

Many years ago there came to America two young men who were looked upon as the greatest curiosities ever seen in this country.

They belonged to another race than ours. In fact, they were of two races, for one of their parents was a Chinese, and therefore of the Yellow Race, while the other was a Siamese, belonging to the Brown Race.

These two young men left their home in far-away Siam and crossed the great ocean for the purpose of exhibiting the strange way in which nature had joined them together. A small band of flesh united them from side to side.

Thus it was that from the moment they were born to the day of their death the twin brothers played and worked, ate and slept, walked and rode, at the same time.

Thousands of people became interested in seeing and hearing about these two men. Not only this, but they turned their attention to the home of the brothers, the wonderful land of Siam, with its sacred white elephants and beautiful temples, its curious customs and strange beliefs.

Last year the young prince of that country, wishing to learn more of the life of the white people, paid a visit to America. He was much interested in all he saw and heard while he was here.

Now let us, in thought, return his visit, and take part in the games and sports of the children of Siam.

We will attend some of their festivals, take a peep into the royal palace, enter the temples, and learn something about the ways and habits of that far-away eastern country.

CHAPTER I.

THE FIRST BIRTHDAY

If you had seen Chin when he was born, you would have thought his skin yellow enough to suit anybody.

But his mother wasn't satisfied, for the baby's nurse was told to rub him with a queer sort of paste from top to toe. This paste was made with saffron and oil, and had a pleasant odour. It made Chin's skin yellower and darker than ever.

It did not seem to trouble him, however, for he closed his big brown eyes and went to sleep before the nurse had finished her work.

After this important thing had been done, the tiny baby was laid in his cradle and covered over. This does not appear very strange until you learn that he was *entirely* covered. Not even the flat little nose was left so the boy could draw in a breath of fresh air.

It is a wonder that he lived, for his home is very near the equator and the weather is extremely warm there all the time. But he did live, and grew stronger and healthier every day. Each morning he was rubbed afresh and stowed away under the covers of his crib.

He had one comfort, although he did not realize it. The mosquitoes could not reach him, and that was a greater blessing

than you can, perhaps, imagine. There are millions of these insects in Siam, – yes, billions, trillions, – and the people of that country are not willing to kill one of them!

"Destroy the life of a living creature! It is a dreadful idea," Chin's mother would exclaim. "Why, it is against the laws of our religion. I could never think of doing such a thing, even if my darling boy's face were covered with bites."

If she were to see one of Chin's American cousins killing a fly or a spider, she would have a very sad opinion of him.

She was only fourteen years old when Chin was born. People in our country might still call her a little girl, yet she kept house for her husband, and cooked and sewed and spun, and watched over her new baby with the most loving care.

The father was only a little older than the mother. He was so glad that his first baby was a boy that he hardly knew what to do. He was quite poor and had very little money, but he said:

"I am going to celebrate as well as I can. Rich people have grand parties and entertainments at such times. I will hire some actors to give a little show, at any rate."

He invited his friends, who were hardly more than boys themselves, to come to the show. The actors dressed themselves up in queer costumes, and went through with a play that was quite clever and witty. Every one laughed a great deal, and when it was over the guests told the new father they had enjoyed themselves very much.

After a few months, Chin had grown strong enough to walk

alone. He did not need to be covered and hidden away any longer. His straight black hair was shaved off, with the exception of a round spot on the top of his head, and he was allowed to do as he pleased after his morning bath in the river was over.

The bath did not last long, and was very pleasant and comfortable. There was no rubbing afterward with towels, for the hot sunshine did the drying in a few moments.

Nor was there any dressing to be done, for the brown baby was left to toddle about in the suit Dame Nature had given him. It was all he could possibly desire, for clothing is never needed in Siam to keep one from catching cold.

Chin's mother herself wears only a wide strip of printed cloth fastened around her waist and hanging down to the knees. Sometimes, but not always, she has a long scarf draped across her breast and over one shoulder.

There are no shoes on her little feet, nor is there a hat on her head except in the hottest sunshine. There are many ornaments shining on her dark skin, even though she is not rich; and baby Chin did not have his toilet made till a silver bracelet had been fastened on his arms, and rings placed on his fingers.

After a year or two the boy's ears were bored so that gilt, pear-shaped earrings could be worn there. Soon after that a kind relative made him a present of silver anklets, and then he felt very much dressed indeed. Few boys as poor as he could boast of as much jewelry.

Chin was born on the river Meinam in a house-boat. There

was nothing strange about that, for the neighbours and friends of the family had homes like his. It was cool and pleasant to live on the water. It was convenient when one wished to take a bath, and it was easy for the children to learn to swim so near home.

Yes, there were many reasons why Chin's parents preferred to make their home on the water. Perhaps the strongest one of all was that they did not have to pay any rent for the space taken up by the boat. A piece of land would have cost money. Then, again, if they should not like their neighbours, they could very easily move to a new place on the river.

Chin's father built the house, or the boat, just before he was married. He had some help from his friends, but it was not such hard work that he could not have done it all alone.

A big raft of bamboo was first made. This served as the floating platform on which the house should stand. The framework of the little home was also made of bamboo, which could be got from the woods not far away, and was very light and easy to handle.

How should the roof be protected from the heavy rains that fell during a portion of the year? That could be easily managed by getting quantities of the leaves of the atap palm-tree for thatching. These would make a thick, close covering, and would keep out the storms for a long time if they were carefully cemented with mud.

The broad, overhanging eaves would give shade to baby Chin when he was old enough to play in the outdoor air, and yet not

strong enough to bear the burning sunshine.

Of course, there were many windows in the little house, you would think. There were openings in the walls in the shape of windows, certainly, but they were openings only, for they were not filled with glass, nor any other transparent substance. Chin's father would say:

"We must have all the air we can get. At night-time, when the rain falls heavily, we can have shutters on the windows. They are easily taken down whenever we wish."

Why, the whole front of the house was made so it could be opened up to the air and sunshine, as well as the view of passers-by. The family have few secrets, and do not mind letting others see how they keep house.

At this very moment, perhaps, Chin's mother is sitting on the edge of the bamboo platform, washing her feet in the river; his grandmother may be there preparing the vegetables for dinner; or, possibly, Chin himself is cleaning his teeth with a stick of some soft wood.

The boy's mother has taught him to be very careful of his teeth. It is a mark of beauty with her people to have them well *blackened*. They will tell you, "Any dog can have white teeth." But there is nothing they admire more than bright red gums showing plainly with two rows of even, dark-coloured teeth.

How do they make their gums such a fiery red? It is caused by chewing a substance called betel, obtained from a beautiful kind of palm-tree very common in Siam.

Many of Chin's brown cousins chew betel, as well as the people of his own land. It is even put in the mouths of babies. Betel-chewing grows to be such a habit with them that they become unhappy and uncomfortable if long without it. Even now, although Chin is only ten years old, he would say:

"I can go without food for a long time, if need be, but I must have my betel."

Let us go back to the boy's home.

If we should count the windows, we should find their number to be uneven. The Siamese believe something terrible would be sure to happen if this were not so. They seem to think "There is luck in odd numbers," for not only the steps leading to the houses, but the stairs leading from one floor to another must be carefully counted and made uneven.

There are three rooms in Chin's home. First, there is the sitting-room, where friends are received, although there is much less visiting done in Siam than in many other countries. It took little time and money to furnish the room. There are no pictures or ornaments here. There are two or three mats on which one may sit, and there is a tray filled with betel from which every one is invited to help himself.

If callers should arrive and the betel were not offered to them, they would feel insulted and would go away with the intention of never coming to that house again.

The second room is that set apart for sleeping. Very little furniture is found here, as well, for all that Chin's father had

to prepare was a number of long, narrow mattresses, stuffed with tree-cotton. Some pillows were made in the shape of huge bricks. They were also packed full of tree-cotton, and were stiff, uncomfortable-looking things; but Chin and his parents like them, so we should certainly not find fault.

You remember there are great numbers of mosquitoes in the country. How do they manage to sleep when the air around them is filled with the buzzing, troublesome creatures? Coarse cotton curtains hang from the roof down over the beds. While these keep the mosquitoes away from the sleepers, they also keep out the air, so it is really a wonder that one can rest in any comfort.

When Chin is in the house during the day, he spends most of his time in the kitchen, which is also the eating-room. But, dear me! it is a smoky place, for the boy's father never thought of building a chimney.

The cooking is done over a little charcoal stove and, as the flames rise, the smoke rises, too, and settles on the ceiling and walls. Chin has had many good meals cooked over the little fire, and eaten as the family squatted around the tiny table.

Just think! It stands only four inches above the floor, and is not large enough to hold many dishes. That does not matter, for each one has his own rice-bowl on the floor in front of him. Chin has been brought up so that he is satisfied with one or two things at a time. The little table is quite large enough to hold the dish of curried fish or meat from which each one helps himself.

Chin is a very nice boy, yet I shall have to confess that he

usually eats with his fingers! Yes, not only he, but his father and mother and sister, and even grandmother, do the same thing. One after another helps himself from the same dish and thinks nothing of it.

People who are a little richer use pretty spoons of mother-of-pearl; Chin's mother owns one of these useful articles herself, but of course, that won't serve for five persons, so it is seldom seen on the table. As for knives and forks, she never even saw any.

One of her friends once watched a stranger from across the great ocean eating with these strange things. She laughed quietly when she told of it, and said:

"It must take a long, long time before one can get used to them. They are very clumsy."

As Chin squats at his dinner he can look down through the split bamboos and see the water of the river beneath the house. It does not matter if he drops some crumbs or grains of rice. They can be easily pushed through the cracks, when down they will fall into the water to be seized by some waiting fish.

The good woman doesn't even own a broom. Her house-cleaning is done in the easiest way possible. Anything that is no longer useful is thrown into the river, while the dirt is simply pushed between the wide cracks of the floor.

The dish-washing is a simple matter, too. Each one has his own rice-bowl, and after the meal is over it is his duty to clean it and then turn it upside down in some corner of the kitchen. It is left there to drain until it is needed again.

Chin's mother cooks such delicious rice that he wonders any one can live without it. He needs no bread when he can have that, for it is a feast in itself. When poured out, it looks like a mountain of snow; each grain is whole and separate from the others.

It is cooked in an earthen pot with the greatest care, and, when it is done, never fails to look beautiful and delicate. Chin's mother would think herself a very poor housekeeper if she should make a mistake in preparing the rice.

When a dish of rat or bat stew is added to the meal, Chin feels that there is nothing more in the world that he could wish. He knows that the rich people in the city often have feasts where twenty or thirty different dainties are served. But he does not envy them. A person can taste only one thing at a time, and nothing can be better than a stew with plenty of curry and vegetables to flavour it. We don't need to think of the rats and bats if it is an unpleasant idea.

As for Chin, if he had seen you shudder when they were spoken of, he could not have imagined what was the matter.

CHAPTER II.

LITTLE CHIE LO

"Chie Lo! Chie Lo! come out quickly, or you won't see it before it passes," called Chin to his sister.

She was playing with her dolls in the sitting-room, but when she heard Chin calling she put them down and came out on the platform where her brother sat dangling his feet in the water and holding his pet parrot.

"Chie Lo! Chie Lo!" screamed the parrot, when she appeared. He was a bright-looking bird with a shining coat of green feathers and a red tuft on his head. He must have loved Chie Lo, for he reached up for her to pat him as she squatted beside her brother.

"Look, look," said Chin, "isn't that grand?"

The boy pointed to a beautiful boat moving rapidly down the river.

"It is the king's, you know," he whispered. "Do you see him there under the canopy, with his children around him?"

"Yes, yes, Chin, but don't talk; I just want to look."

It was no wonder that Chie Lo wished to keep still, for it was a wonderful sight. The boat was shaped like a huge dragon, whose carved head, with its fierce eyes, could be seen reaching out from the high bow. The stern was made in the shape of the monster's tail. The sides of the royal barge were covered with gilded scales,

inlaid with pearls, and these scales shone and sparkled in the sunlight.

A hundred men dressed in red were rowing the splendid boat, and they must have had great training, for they kept together in perfect time.

"Isn't the canopy over the king the loveliest thing you ever saw?" said Chin, who could not keep still. "It is made of cloth-of-gold, and so are the curtains. Look at the gold embroidery on the king's coat. Oh, Chie Lo, it doesn't seem as though he could be like us at all. I feel as though he must be a god.

"The young prince who took the long journey across the ocean last year is there with him," Chin went on. "Father told me that he visited strange lands where all the people have skins as white as pearls, and that he has seen many wonderful sights. But, Chie Lo, there is nothing in the world grander than our king and his royal boat, I'm sure."

As the barge drew nearer, the children threw themselves face downward on the platform until it had passed down the river. It was their way of showing honour to the ruler of the land.

In the olden times all who came into the presence of the king, did so in one way only. They *crawled*. Even his own little children were obliged to do this. No one dared to stand in his presence.

But such things have been changed now. The king loves his people and has grown wiser since he has learned the ways of other countries. When he was a little boy, an English lady was his teacher for a long time, and she taught him much that other

Kings of Siam had never known.

It is partly because of this that he is the best ruler Chin's people have ever had.

The royal barge was decorated with beautiful white and yellow umbrellas, many stories high. There was also a huge jewelled fan, such as no boat was allowed to carry except the king's.

Other dragon-shaped boats followed the royal barge, but they were smaller and less beautiful. They were the king's guard-boats, and moved along in pairs.

Many other interesting sights could be seen on the river this morning. Vessels were just arriving from distant lands, while here and there Chinese junks were scattered along the shores. Chin and his sister can always tell such boats from any others. An eye is always painted on the bow.

A Chinaman who was once asked why he had the eye there, answered, "If no have eye, how can see?"

It is so much pleasanter outside, it is no wonder that Chin and his sister do not spend much time indoors.

After the royal procession had passed out of sight, Chie Lo went into the house and brought out her family of dolls. Of course they did not look like American dolls; you wouldn't expect it.

Some of them were of baked mud and wore no clothes. Others were of stuffed cotton and made one think of the rag dolls of Chie Lo's white cousins. The father and mother dolls were dressed in strips of cloth wound around their bodies, just like the real grown-up people of Siam, but the baby dolls had no more

clothes than the children of the country.

Chie Lo talked to her dolls and sang queer little songs to them. She "made believe" they were eating, just as other little girls play, far away across the great ocean. Then she kissed them and put them to bed on tiny mattresses under the shady eaves of the house.

Perhaps you wouldn't have known that Chie Lo was kissing them, however, for the fashions of Siam are quite different from those of our country. She simply touched the dolls' noses with her own little flat one and drew in a long breath each time she did so. That was her way of showing her love, – gentle little Chie Lo.

Chin didn't laugh, of course. He was used to seeing his sister playing with her dolls, and as for the kissing, that was the only way of doing it that he knew himself.

"Chie Lo, I saw some beautiful dolls in a store yesterday," he said, as he stopped working for a minute. He was making a new shuttlecock for a game with his boy friends the next day.

"What kind were they, Chin?" asked his sister.

"They were lovely wooden ones. Only rich children could buy them, for they cost a great deal. I wish I could get one for you, Chie Lo, but you know I haven't any money."

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