

The Case of the Possessed Girl

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The Orient is a strange place. You cannot live in it and maintain a Western attitude. Perhaps the following story will illustrate what I mean.

One night I got a call to go to a sick person. I was living alone at my mission station at the time. The isolation from my fellow priests was getting me down. I had been away from them for a number of weeks. I felt then, and feel now, that there is nothing like another priest to keep one's spirits up.

When the call came I went. I had a job to do and I would do it. The man who came for me led the way. He made his way through the jungle to the light of a torch made from rolled leaves and a tree sap. It would burn for hours.

I walked a few feet behind my guide. His torch cast light and a thousand shadows. The shadows danced in and out, on and around the trees and bushes. The shadows seemed evil though the light seemed good.

Abruptly the light of the torch showed a house on stilts. I pulled up my white habit and climbed a bamboo ladder into the house. The house torches showed a girl on the floor. She was rigid. Dead, I thought.

She wasn't dead. She had a pulse. It was the only sign of life.

I did not know what to do. I could not give her conditional absolution and conditional extreme unction until I knew more about her.

The old man beside her said that he was her father. The mother, an old woman, said that the father had called down a curse on her. He had asked the evil one to come and live in her. From that moment the girl went into pain and then into rigidity.

The family was Buddhist. They had sent for me because they had heard that the Catholic priest was a good man and might be able to drive away the evil one because they were sorry that they had asked the evil one to go into her.

All of a sudden I felt the weight of the Orient descend upon me. The dim light of the torch, the heat of the tropical night, the strange language, the awareness of being far from home and country all combined at that moment to hit me with a terrible force. And then, was I face to face with a girl possessed?

I said to the father: "You send the evil one into her. Why do you not send him away from her?"

“I tried. I cannot. He will not leave.” He struggled to control his emotions but he could not. Even his Oriental stoicism was shaken by what he saw before him.

My Western complacency was being shaken too. I had never seen such rigidity. If it hadn't been for the pulse I would have been certain that I was looking at a corpse.

The mother said: “Is there anything that you can do?”

I said, “There is something that I can try.”

I put on my stole, one symbol of my priesthood, a priesthood conferred on me many years back in Wisconsin. My memory leaped 13,000 miles and took me back to my ordination, a glorious, fulfilling day, a day that brought me Christ-like powers.

The thought strengthened me.

I opened my prayer book and started the exorcism. I prayed to my good and gracious God that if there were an evil spirit in the girl to send him away.

I asked Our Mother of Perpetual Help to be of help now.

I said the rosary. No one answered. They were all Buddhists. I answered it myself.

All these prayers I said on my knees. When they were finished I arose. I looked to the parents and to the relatives. As I turned away from the girl to look at them they gasped. I quickly turned back to the girl. She was moving, very slightly, but moving. We waited. She moved a bit more. Then she gave a gasp and every bone in her body seemed to relax. She breathed normally as if in sleep.

I went back to the mission station with the same guide and with the light of the same torch. I tried to count the various emotions that had laid hold of me that evening. I had gone through many. Fear and joy headed the list.

The next morning my cup of joy ran over. The whole family came and asked for baptism. They wanted to become Catholics. Their request was the sweetest sound that can fill a missionary's ear.

The Orient is a strange place but it is one of God's places.

I'll say it: I'm glad I'm here.