

ISAAC WHITEHEART—A RECENT MARTYR.

By Lt.-Col. F. A. MOLONY.

“I DO not believe that anyone would face torture for the sake of religion to-day.” So said a brother officer in our hearing many years back : but since then many cases in Asia have proved him to be wrong, and the following is possibly one of the most recent.

Isaac was a comparatively well-educated farmer of the Chiang tribe, who inhabit a mountainous district on the Min river, a northern tributary of the Yang Tze Kiang, and about 150 miles from Tibet. Some of the reasons for believing this tribe to be descended from Jacob were given in *THE CHURCHMAN* of January, 1938.

About nineteen years ago Isaac first heard of the Gospel and read the book of Genesis. His people were accustomed to set up in their houses twelve white paper banners to represent twelve sons of one man who was the ancestor of the Chiang. So of course, he was greatly interested in the story of Jacob, and, as he read more of the Pentateuch, he claimed it as the long-lost title deeds of the immemorial religion of his people. A period of Biblical study in the home of the Rev. T. Torrance, at Cheng-tu, W. China, fully confirmed his faith, and he was baptized in his own country by the name of Isaac Whiteheart. The Chiang associate white with God, holiness and purity even more than we do.

He was already well known as a man of solid integrity, and now, with his heart softened with the love of Jesus, his influence was felt far and wide. With another convert he travelled among the mountain villages proclaiming the good news of the fulfilment of their ancient sacrificial rites in the work of Christ on the cross. As believers began to increase he formed the conviction that the young should be taught to read, and have, at least, an elementary education. The only way to do this was to take eight or ten lads to Cheng-tu to attend a mission school. For several years he did this, finding the whole expense of the venture himself. The only help he received was free accommodation for the lads in the home of the missionary. He longed ardently that his people might share the joy that he had found in the freedom and power of the Gospel.

After a time he returned to his preaching. When Mr. Torrance yearly visited his region in the summer months he accompanied him from place to place, introducing him to the headmen of the district and to the priests of the High Places. By his help in this way Mr. Torrance gained an inner knowledge of the religion of these Israelites, which, through fear, they refrained from giving to any outside their race. And many learnt of the Gospel at the same time.

Isaac had many threats made against him but refused to be turned aside from his work. He was a man of peace, and made no enemies. Constantly he suffered loss and indignity rather than claim his rights by law and custom. Chinese and Israelites alike loved him. His only offence was his adherence to Christ.

There being about 150 converts out of the 30,000 to 40,000 in the tribe, the churches were organized, and Isaac was ordained as pastor in charge, a number of elders assisting. It was he who gave to Mr. Torrance the written summary of Chiang ritual and beliefs which appears on pp. 113, 114 and 115 of Mr. Torrance's book (*China's First Missionaries*, Thynne & Co., 3s. 6d.). Mr. Torrance left China in November, 1934, having arranged for Isaac to make evangelistic tours and to be visited occasionally by a lady evangelist missionary of the China Inland Mission. Before they parted, Isaac besought Mr. Torrance to make the story of the Chiang known in western lands.

All went harmoniously until the summer of 1935, when a section of the Communist army, hard pressed by the Chinese government troops, took refuge in the mountains and overran the region where Isaac lived. Over twenty of the Christians lost their lives, so bitter was their feeling against Christians.

Isaac himself knew his danger, for wherever the Reds came, blood and pillage attended all they did. He made arrangements to flee, but his wife became seriously ill, and it was impossible to remove her. It came to his knowledge that the Reds murdered the whole families of those men who fled from them. What was to be done? Facing the situation calmly and as a Christian he said, "Were I to flee now and save my own life at the expense of others, I should never be able to look Jesus Christ, when I meet him, in the face. He gave His life for the world, I must, if needs be, give mine for my family. Come what may, I will stay here. My times are in His hand." And stay he did.

His expectations were tragically fulfilled, for the Reds did spare his wife and family, but they led him away amid the wailing of his friends. And that was the last seen or known of him, save that he was put to death at the Red headquarters, where the most infamous cruelties were practised on the captives. Mr. Torrance says that he was one of the noblest and most lovable men he ever met.

Isaac Whiteheart was a great expounder of the Atonement. The lamb sacrifices, made by his people, made the Gospel of Christ plain to him. His plan of action confirmed the "teaching" policy of our missionary societies, because, while he loved to preach the Gospel of Christ himself, he spent his money freely in order that his young friends should have a Christian education. His action is notable, because his upbringing and circumstances were so different to the members of our missionary committees, and yet his policy was the same. And his heroic death should constrain us to give weight to his opinions. Fortunately things are improving and we may hope that few converts will suffer the terrible death which Isaac Whiteheart faced so bravely. The example and influence of Chiang Kai Shek will doubtless prevent that happening in the parts of China which he controls.

It may be argued that Isaac died for his wife and family rather than for Jesus Christ: but he would not have been in danger at all, if he had not been known as a prominent Christian. His wife's entry into the story explains why he did not follow his Saviour's advice: "But when they persecute in this city, flee into the next." Thus he was a true Christian martyr, and a noble example of devotion to Christ.