In a Yun-nan Courtyard

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WORKS BY

LOUISE JORDAN MILN

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In a Yün-nan Courtyard

It Happened in Peking

Ruben and Ivy Sen

In a Shantung Garden

Mr. and Mrs. Sen

The Feast of Lanterns

The Soul of China (Stories)

Novels of

The Purple Mask
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IN A YÜN-NAN COURTYARD

BY

LOUISE JORDAN MILN

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TO

GEORGE

FROM HIS MOTHER

“*Free from the bondage you are in, Messala;*
The conquerors can but make a fire of him;
For Brutus only overcame himself,
And no man else hath honour by his death.”

A man in Vienna was fondling his fiddle, a girl in Poughkeepsie was gathering violets, an old missionary in a far part of far China—the only white man for many an inaccessible, perilled mile—sat in his sunny courtyard reading a time-yellowed silk of Chang Ts’ai-P’in’s. A bandit in Sze-ch’uen was sharpening his knife. None of them ever had seen the others, or could have believed how soon and how knotted their lives were to tangle. Unless, though, the missionary might—for he was old; life and thirty odd years in China had taught him much; and he knew that on earth anything may happen, especially in China.

IN A YÜN-NAN COURTYARD *CHAPTER I*

FIFTY miles or more, as the crow flew, from Chiao-chia T'ing in Northern Yün-nan, So Wing gave a grunt of satisfaction as his boat jerked through the rapid's last curling edge and slid into the smooth safety of a long placid stretch of the narrowing river.

They had fought and schemed their dangered way through rapid after rapid in their long quest; So Wing and his square-sailed craft. They would have the same river death-traps to breast on their way back. But what of that! They had reached their first goal. And So Wing was well paid for the peril he had eagerly accepted. A Chinese life weighs light against a heavied purse. Years ago he had been one of the fearless crew that repeatedly shot the Yang-tsze rapids again and again for a smaller wage than this less risky journeying to the twisted river's more placid Yün-nan stretch would earn him, if he lived to deliver Ko Ching-lin's business to Q'ūo Chung and lived to carry Q'ūo's answer back to Ko. Too, So Wing could rest now, perhaps for a moon's full quarter in the plentied home of Q'ūo Chung the wax-insect breeder.

The boy—So Wing was no more—flung his long, heavy push-pole down on the running deck, wiped his streaming face on the soaked drip-pad he unwound as he pulled it from his brow, hauled down and furled the creaking mat sail, and made solemn sacrifice—in gratitude to the River Dragon that had deigned to let them live and prevail through the Yang-tsze's angry, swirling rapids. Death and Death's henchman, the River Dragon, took heavy toll of those who journeyed on the Great River almost anywhere between I-chang and Sui-fu. So Wing often had looked into the Great River Dragon's angry eyes and seen the gnashing of his great bared teeth. This was the weaker devil-one of a weaker stretch of the Great River—almost where the Niul An Kiang poured its water tribute into the Mighty River. But dangerous enough it had menaced him all the way from Sze-ch'uen, and would again on his returning. He would propitiate it scrupulously.

So Wing brought a square of braided bamboo, a two-string, long-necked fiddle, a small-bowled, long-stemmed pipe, a tobacco-pouch and a beehive shaped reed basket from the mat-domed shelter where he slept when he dared, spread the bamboo mat on the soaking deck, balanced the precious fiddle dexterously on the dry basket's rounded top, squatted down on the now wet mat and drew a flint-bladed knife out of his only garment—his loin-cloth—tried the knife's edge on his own calloused thumb, and grunted his approval of

its murderous sharpness, opened the basket-cage cautiously and pulled out a terrified old white cock, and pinned it securely to the sopping deck with a thrust of the flint knife's keen point. It would bleed less so. All the blood that ran was the River Dragon's. But warm blood was nourishing and precious; So Wing was not minded to be prodigal of it even in the sacerdotal rites of worship. To have slashed the bird's head off and then hung it up by its tethered feet to bleed to final death would have been pleasanter torture for the poor old cock, even more pleasing, perhaps, to the blood-greedy River Dragon; but So Wing saw no necessity for such extravagance—now that immediate peril was over. And he had sacrificed several birds already on his imperilled journey. The cock-crate was cockless now. He hoped, and prayed the gods, that white cocks were cheaper here than they were in Sze-ch'uen.

He tuned and plucked his fiddle, waiting contentedly until the Dragon-offering bird had made its slow end.

And Q'ūo Ssu heard him, found the music sweet, peeped out of the *Ch'ung shu*-tree she was climbing to see how the worm eggs were forming on its top branches, looked, and saw So Wing sturdy and well-favoured.

So, absorbed in his music, let the cock suffer neglected.

So Wing grunted an angry oath when, his music done, he saw that the sacrificial fowl had wrenched its neck so desperately that its gullet was half severed and its blood was running out extravagantly. And there was nothing to do about it! He had offered it to the River Dragon, and the offering must remain as he had made it, even if all the bird's nourishing red ran never to be recovered for So Wing's own cooking-pot. So Wing was no stickler regarding ceremony. But all the dragons are adamant sticklers, and the River Dragons of the Yang-tsze and its turbulent tributaries are the fiercest sticklers of them all.

So Wing shrugged and played another tune. And Q'ūo Ssu leaned so far out from her tree-perch that So Wing saw her, and smiled and played his softest, sweetest.

Q'ūo Ssu giggled and drew back. But she knew that the strange man-one had seen and approved her. She was glad.

So Wing put his sacrificed bird to cook, and lit his pipe.

When he had eaten he stretched himself under the low dome of mat, and slept.

The sun was gone when So Wing woke; there had been just half a pinch of poppy in his last blissful pipeful; his stomach had been very comfortably furnished; he had slept long and well.

He rose and lit three lanterns and hung them on his mast.

Soon Q'ūo Chung or Q'ūo's servants signalled back with a half-score of crimson candles that suddenly burned on the branches of an acacia-tree.

So Wing poled his boat to the bank and tethered it to an iron ring fastened there securely for such purpose. But he made no move to land. He would not do that until the truant day-star had come back to China, and not until Q'ūo Chung had sent him welcome and word to land. For Q'ūo Chung was rich and powerful, not to be treated lightly.

The truant sun came back to Yün-nan promptly. So Wing woke as promptly, only stretched once, and crawling out of his low sleep-place on the drying deck, jumped up to his full height as the first javelin of light pricked the dark, and looked about him more attentively than he had done yesterday. He had been very tired then, and clamorously hungry. Now he was perfectly rested and well fed. His strong arms and legs did not even remember how they had strained and ached in the Yang-tsze's churning danger.

He had not been here before. Not before this had he been entrusted with business of such importance.

On the river's right bank (reading it from south to north) verdure-swathed hills rose up to the barren higher gypsum-cliffs. Every possible foot was richly cultivated. Vegetables and fruit-trees grew close up to the pine-trees that walled the family burial-garden. A wide oil-tree orchard, plum-trees, cherry-trees, and peach-trees spread across the green and fertile upland that stretched above the white cliffs farther than eye could see. Bamboos trembled in the sunrise, eucalyptus tanged the early air, palms edged the mulberry grove, and pricked through it here and there like grey-green pagodas.

It was May—warm for that month—a June-warm May. The poppies were

ripe for their harvest; mauve and white poppies and a few that were scarlet. Young wheat trembled in the early breeze. On the tall corn the silk-tasselled cobs, sweet and milky, still hid in their sheaths of green. The early clovers—white, pink, crimson, speckled and streaked, purple and yellow and mauve—were bursting with sweetness. Bean-vines were heavy with fragrant pink flowers. The first strawberries were ripe. The raspberries were ripening. The tall Yün-nan "privet" was all snowy with its thousands of tiny white blossoms. Every inch of the fructive prosperous place spelled indefatigable industry. And not an inch that could be cultivated was not. The ponies though shaggy were sleek, the pigs were fat. But the white-flowered, wax-insect-trees were most. For Q'ūo Chung's well-tended domain lay in the great wax-insects belt at the edge of *Ta Liang Shan*, the independent Lolo land.

Even the great bare white boulders and cliffs of gypsum, that looked so gaunt and barren, were richly productive. Flakes hammered off them, ground and then mixed with the boiling soy-bean cream which they curdled and wheyed, made the nutritious *teofu* which is the daily bread of half China's life—the most sustaining food in Asia—perhaps in the world. It is chiefly *teofu* that enables millions of Chinese peasants who rarely taste meat to toil incessantly, and to thrive on toil.

Q'ūo Chung's house was high-perched way up at the very top of his highest hill. It was barricaded and fortified, strongly enwalled. A wide deep moat surrounded the wall's outer side. Q'ūo Chung was ready and vigilant to anticipate and to resist the not infrequent Lolo raids; as there was every need to be in that part of Central Yün-nan.

The house itself was rough and unpretentious; built of dun-coloured adobe, rudely thatched with boards and planks; a casual flat roofing that had to be renewed every few years.

At one end rose a large square white tower. So Wing had seen scores of them yesterday, almost as many the day before; the sturdy watch-towers necessary to every home on the Chinese side of the pirate-infested river across which bandit Lolos and destruction might sweep at any moment. On clear days, from his own hill-top Q'ūo Chung could count all but seventy other such watch-and safety-towers.

The tower's lower story had no windows. Its one solid outer door was but a slit, ponderously masonried, ponderously bolted inside. Another very small door led directly into the low dwelling-house, that the women and children might escape under cover into the tower, if warned that the Lolos were coming to pillage and burn.

The five-storied tower's three lower stories were thirty feet square. Then it diminished by half its size to its turret-like upper stories' squat pointed roof of solid stone. The lower roof, just a broad belt of roof, slanted up sharply to the base of the wide, square turret. But the turret's roof had more than a hint of the delicious down-and-up-sweeping curves that are the most noticeable characteristic of typical Chinese roofs, and their loveliest. But both roofs wore "lions" and scorpions on their corners, quaintly hewn out of stone; the guardian demons of every self-respecting roof in China. Its solid walls were full four feet thick—almost invincible to any arms or ammunition within the Lolo hordes' command.

In times of peace the watch-tower of retreat and defence was Q'ūo's principal storehouse and granary. When the Lolos came it was Q'ūo's citadel. Then the women and children, with all the treasure they'd have time to gather and strength to carry, took refuge in one of the upper rooms. And the men put up their fight from roof and windows. There was great store of heavy round stones kept in readiness (as there was on the walls inside the moat) to pitch down crushingly on any Lolo who came within aim. Not even a Lolo could live on whom one of those stone missiles had crashed squarely down. There were spears and guns, battering rods, and deadly boathooks stored in that tower. At wartime ducks and chickens, ponies and pigs were crowded in between sacks of grain and tubs of water, a cooking pot or two, boxes of gunpowder.

The Lolo marauders did not have it all their own way when they made bandit war on Q'ūo Chung.

But all was peace here to-day.

The river's left bank was jungle-wild. It showed no path. It had known nor spade nor plough nor pruning-hook. The tangled undergrowth grew mat-thick, as it had for countless centuries. For this was Nosuland, as wild and uncultivated as the Chinese bank was tended and urged; Nosuland, as wild and turbulent as the Nosu themselves—to give the "Lolos" their truer and more courteous name. "Lolo" is the name the Chinese give their untamed aboriginal foemen in derision and hatred. Not even Q'ūo Chung dared speak the opprobrious word "Lolo" in a Nosu's hearing. And Q'ūo Chung was a man of might, known and both feared and respected in all central Yün-nan, and in all Nosuland as well.

Across the river from Q'ūo Chung's no sign of habitation showed. The Nosu's crude dwellings, far back, high on the hills, were well hidden. Even their boats, in which they crossed the river at safe, hidden places, the Nosu built far inland. They had few crafts, but much craftiness.

So Wing studied the unkempt left-hand shoreland and the rugged overgrown hills above it almost as curiously and intensely as he had the high and wide piously cultivated home-holding of Q’ūo Chung; for he knew that that upheaped tangle of trees, rocks, shrubs, and vines was Lololand, knew the peril that lurked in its silent fastness, knew the brute breed and the unbroken strength of its wildmen, the wealth of its mines, the super-skill of its wizards. All Western China knows.

Then he turned his face again to the fat homestead of Q’ūo Chung, scanned it greedily. And So Wing, patient of waiting as are all Chinese, but eager for adventure and change as all but decrepit youth always is, wondered why Q’ūo Chung did not send him greeting and welcome to land.

And before the morning rice-hour, Q’ūo Chung did. Q’ūo Toon—the second of Q’ūo Chung’s three sons—came to the boat’s side, called greeting to So Wing, and bade him land.

Nothing loth So Wing clambered over the old boat’s clumsy side and sprang ashore, followed Q’ūo Toon to the dwelling-house, and *k’ot-owed* at the presence of Q’ūo Chung.

Q’ūo Ssu served her father’s rice. A slave girl served the three brothers and the naked stranger.

Q’ūo Ssu did not look at So Wing. So Wing did not look at Q’ūo Ssu. But for the first time he knew that he was naked, knew that Q’ūo Ssu was fine-and-soft clad; and he envied the sons of Q’ūo Chung their whole, good garments.

He did not look at Q’ūo Ssu, but he saw how tiny her unsqueezed feet were, how delicately she walked, how like moths’ wings her eyebrows, how egg-shaped and egg-smooth her unpainted face. And he knew that she was the girl-one who had giggled at him from the *Ch’ung shu*-tree yesterday.

If he wondered why Q’ūo Chung let his daughter, and all unveiled, come and go at a strange man’s rice-time, So Wing was well content that Q’ūo Chung did. And So Wing little suspected that he owed to his own coolie-nakedness Q’ūo Chung’s laxity. A gentleman silken-clad and furred Q’ūo scarcely would have permitted sight of Q’ūo Ssu. A coatless, skirtless coolie did not count. This henchman of Ko Ching-lin was but a boy. Q’ūo Ssu was a child still in her father’s lagging estimate. And in Yün-nan not a few Chinese are a little lenient about such things; unconsciously made so perhaps by the constant sight, the example, of the aboriginals—the Man-tzu, Min-chia, Phö, Miao, a dozen others—whose women are as socially untrammelled as the furred and feathered she-ones of the Yün-nan hills and forests. More than this,

Q’ūo Chung’s own grandmother had been a Nosu, kidnapped and honourably married by Q’ūo Chung’s grandfather, and afterwards richly paid for with many lumps of silver, to save bloodshed and costly, lasting feud. The Nosu mother had bred some leaning to Nosu ways in her first-born at her breast—leanings Q’ūo Chung himself had inherited. And what did it matter, since no one saw or knew! Q’ūo Chung was omnipotent and undisputed in his own domain; he ruled it all and every creature in it, and no one ruled him, except only laughing Q’ūo Ssu.

The business between Q’ūo Chung and So Wing prospered. Each drove a hard bargain. Day after day they wrangled over the price that Ko Ching-lin—So Wing’s master—was to pay Q’ūo Chung for the many loads of insect-larvæ safely delivered to Ko Ching-lin at Ko’s wax-farm in Sze-ch’uen.

But the wrangling was only the window-dressing of their business; a concession to tradition, an observance of sacrosanct etiquette. Each knew to a cash what the ultimate upshot would be, and each knew that that surety was mutual. But the bargaining had to be well and truly done. Whatever else a Chinese slights, he does not slight that. And So Wing had no wish to hasten.

For fevered hours each day they wrangled and bargained. But there were other hours devoted to smoother (though probably no more enjoyed) hospitality. Because So Wing represented Ko Ching-lin, held a sort of ambassadorial rank from Ko Ching-lin, Q’ūo Chung paid the coatless coolie considerable social attentions. Q’ūo Flee took So Wing hawking, Q’ūo Toon taught So Wing new tricks of tailless-kite flying.

And after evening rice they all gathered about the fire on the stone floor at the great chimney-less room’s far end upon the windswept hill-top—for the May nights had a chill—talked interminably and made queer Chinese music, often a little squeaky, sometimes very sweet, usually gay and provocative, sometimes oddly plaintive.

And Q’ūo Ssu sat on her low stool at her father’s knee. Often the other women, free and slave-ones, too, came and went as they liked, listened to the fun, and even made a share of it.

So Wing had an agile mind and pleasant behaviour. More than once Q’ūo Chung forgot that So Wing was a coolie; Q’ūo Ssu never had thought about it.

Not that that mattered. The poorest, humblest peasant may live to be the greatest man in China, if he has the wit, gains sufficing education, and wins the kindness of the gods.

IN A YÜN-NAN COURTYARD *CHAPTER III*

LONG before sunrise So Wing crept noiselessly from the house of Q'ūo Chung, carrying a lighted lantern swinging at the end of a long pliant bamboo.

So Wing was gone all day—for the nearest town was ten or more hard miles away, as the Chinese crows fly, and the way was mountainous and tortuous.

For a long *li* the narrow path he took clung close to the river's twisted side. The willows that fringed the footway looked grey where the lantern-light found them, the trunks of the oaks showed black. There was no moon. The intense dark was relentless. A cactus tore So Wing's leg; he swore at it, and went more carefully, and swung his lantern lower. But presently he lifted it again, that he might see and search what grew on his left hand, higher than his head. So Wing was watching for a clump of three mulberry-trees and a lofty rectangular column.

When he came upon that landmark he turned from the river and began to climb a rock path that rose vertically in rude steps which were scarcely a foot wide but fully a foot high.

It was a perilous climb. Myriad coolie feet, that had climbed and descended it for centuries, had worn the high steps' scant and narrow foothold to glassy smoothness; the heavy night-dew made them addedly slippery. But So Wing went on. Twice he nearly fell. Once he did fall. But he caught the step above him with his free hand, and gripped it tight with his sinewy fingers—more by force of will than by muscle.

Vine-roped tree-limbs bent across the dangerous ladder of treacherous rock steps that he was mounting with more and more difficulty. Again and again limb or vine-rope caught and almost threw him.

But So Wing went on.

Presently his hard way grew easier; his inhospitable footholds no securer, no wider or less slippery, but vegetation no longer entangled him as he climbed. He had passed up into the naked rock-belt, crag after crag of barren limestone. And So Wing breathed easier; his lantern swung freer in a less cramped and restricted arm-hold.

Another long, neck-break *li*, and again his path rose through verdure. But it was an earth-path now, wider, and of more gradual ascent.

So Wing kept his patient jog-trot steadily, the pace he went neither slower nor quicker than it had been when he came through the tall cactus-hedge that enfenced all Q'ūo Chung's homestead. So would have been hard pressed to spurt—long and fast—but he could jog-trot on evenly and undistressed for incredible hours. Such Chinese wayfarers, if almost incapable of hurry, have little need to slack or to tarry. Their dogged persistence, though it shows no glamour, is splendid.

Just as the boy reached the apex of his long climb the new day hinted its coming.

So Wing halted then; not for breath, not to look about him, or down at the way he had come—it still was too dark for that—but to watch the sunrise.

Chinese poverty has great wealth. Nature's coffers are open wide to Chinese eyes. No Chinese coolie too poor to do constant reverence to wayside flower or mountain panorama; rarely a Chinese coolie too engrossed in self, too earth-busied to revere and to enjoy intensely the pictures of the sky.

Dark as the night had been, a few stars had winked down on So Wing all his perilled way. They were going now.

So Wing drew an incense-paper from his loin-cloth, and, glad to find it still unmoistened from his body's heat, stuck it on a thorn-bush, when searching with his lantern he had found one, struck his flints together until a spark came, and lit his red prayer so. Then he made low obeisance to the paling North Star and muttered softly salutation to Tou Mu the Bushel Mother. It was to her, the goddess of the North Star, that he had offered the incense burning on the thorn-bush.

So Wing sat down on the pathside, and waited patiently for sunrise to paint the sky.

The indescribable splendour came. So Wing had not panted, as alone in the darkness he climbed his endless path of broken rocks. He was panting now—softly—in ecstasy; all his being enriched by every tint of loveliness that crept shyly across the heavens before it rent them and blazoned them proudly, imperiously in swathes of splendour; the splendour of a day's birth, the exquisite beauty of the new day's sumptuous, flaming swaddling clothes; just-born day all raw-red, diapered in dazzling gold, green and violet, saffron and rose. So Wing's naked breast heaved and fell from the throbbing of his Chinese-coolie heart. His eyes filled.

When the sunrise had gone, and the big brazen day-star held its hot state alone in the almost purple sky, So Wing rose and went his way, stealing his

breakfast as he went—filching it from the pathside's unguarded larder. It was a strictly vegetarian break of several hours' fast, for he had brought nothing with him; but oranges, wild pears—not too ripe—nuts, all young and milky, yellow hips, sorrel, and a melon sufficed hungered So Wing.

Q'ūo Toon, not knowing that he had, had told So Wing how to find the mart So sought. So had all the ten li well mapped in his retentive Chinese mind. Twenty times where the path forked, or where there was none, he might have taken the wrong way; but not once did he. A homing pigeon could not have gone more surely than So Wing went from Q'ūo Chung's chia to Market-Town-By-The-Swinging-Bridge.

But he looked about him now as he journeyed, storing in his eager mind hillsides and vistas that rose and stretched on every side, valleys and tarns down below him; seeing it all, locking it securely in his memory for future enjoyment, possibly for future use. Thrift, ambition, and zest for pleasure kept as yet equal pace in the character of So Wing. And to him there was no pleasure greater than the sight of beauty, no joy keener than remembering it, tasting it on memory's delicate palate, tasting it again and again. He would cherish this, to perfume and gladden duller, bleaker days.

Not all of Yün-nan is beautiful. Much of it is just roughly churned rock, much is flat and drab. But it has room for much picture as well; Yün-nan is vast, China's third province in size, its area almost one-fourth more than Great Britain's. And this was one of Yün-nan's countless beauty-spots.

The ragged river ran and danced far below, but clear in the day's clear brilliance to the sharp sight of So Wing.

He could count a score of villages—very sparsely housed some of them—he could count a dozen tributary streamlets; he saw twenty bridges, all of them beautiful, most of them durable, and strangely costly to have been built in "poor" Yün-nan; a province of inexhaustible wealth, very little of which is on the surface yet. Yün-nan wears her jewels hidden deep down in her ample bosom; she is meanly clad. But her bridges tell the tale of solid substance and of a less miserly past.

So much of Chinese life is lived on her rivers' banks, her traffic and her commerce are so preponderantly river-born, that one can understand how it came that nothing was spared in Chinese bridge-building, nothing of architectural beauty and variety, nothing of stanchness of structure; and can understand why it is that in all China a bridge once built not often is neglected and left to deteriorate. The Chinese rarely repair; but they mend their bridges. The ruin and decay of their roadways, and the wanton destruction of their

forests are the twin national scandals of China; the upkeep of their bridges is a national virtue; a providentness which not their temples nor their pagodas can boast of them. Over yonder the little white temple that gleamed among the grey-green eucalyptus was but a lovely ruin; the dilapidation of the *pai-fang* that rose above a sloping field of crimson ice-flowers mocked the hero it once had commemorated; but the four-arched bridge that spanned the river between them, built centuries longer ago than they, was still solid and impregnable, well fit to defy time and weather and their cruel ravishments, because it never had known the humiliation of neglect. Its clear reflection in the river was gaily painted: the vivid reflection of a bridge that looked a four-arched stone rainbow, because of the variegated limestone of which it was made. There are hundreds of such highly-coloured limestone bridges in Yün-nan—perhaps thousands.

Beyond the grey-green eucalyptus grove the hillside was mantled by a forest at once so dense, motionless and deeply, brilliantly green that it looked cut out of solid malachite. But a thousand willows frothed it with a softer, tenderer green.

Nearer, where the ground dipped into a sheltered, sunny cup, a horde of sturdy wild ponies were feeding on the long sweet-grass, interrupting their own gluttony now and then to jostle, chase, and bite each other in play. So Wing longed to be among them, to conquer and ride. None of them could throw him. So Wing was no mean horseman; few Northern Chinese are. Swine, cattle, and sheep were browsing and rooting in stolid comfort and composure, almost between the wild ponies' shaggy feet.

There were birds and butterflies everywhere. Reeves pheasants—others even handsomer—were worm hunting between the poppy flowers, and where the twinkling blue stars of myriad forget-me-nots looked heaven come to earth. Sweet-voiced blackcaps sang above the buckwheat that an orange-beaked family of blue-green bandit-birds was industriously thieving. There were silver-breasted doves cooing on the willow-trees, and the thrushes sang above a sea of wild white roses, as if half intoxicated with the roses' fragrance, and the air quivered with the beating of the great wings of wild geese that were off to the Min River. Going off to bathe and drink, magpies parted the waist-high ferns they loved to rest in. Cuckoos called. A great turkey was headed for Burmah, a pair of falcons were making for Tonkin. Bees buzzed about the gigantic swallow-orchids that climbed and festooned the pepper-trees.

So Wing left it all reluctantly. But soon his seeing of the market town he sought, in the near distance, rewarded him. He was hungry again; he'd buy food in the market. And then he'd find and secure what he wished for much

more; what he had come all this far way to get.

MARKET-TOWN-BY-THE-SWINGING-BRIDGE deserved its name. Its market-place was not much, nor its market, when So Wing reached them. But the long, low bridge was beautiful, and undeniably it swung; its light, easy motion—whenever feet crossed it, whenever wind buffeted it—as sure and graceful as an Indian's well-balanced birch-bark canoe on the St. Lawrence.

The suspension bridge was the one outer doorway into the town it had christened; for a crinkled loop of the twisted river made the overgrown village nearly an island. The bridge had neither arches nor roofs. Its low, open sides and their top rails were bamboo loosely threaded; its floor was bamboo-plaited, steel-wired pine. It swung securely from four great pillars cut out of the solid limestone boulders that there banked both sides of the river. "Lions" and monkeys—two of each—life-sized, beautifully moulded out of solid bronze, clinched and supported both the bridge's ends to the limestone pillars. Dozens of small bronze monkeys, half a score of copper "lions," as beautifully made as the four large ones, played or lazed on the handrails. They who had made Under-Mr. Red Coat's Protection Bridge had loved it well. And it must have had its lovers now who gave it no niggardly service; all its beautiful decorating animals—they served no other purpose—were devotedly cared for, scrupulously groomed. Not a copper hair was grimed, not a bronze paw was caked.

When So Wing reached the bridge he paused to read its name. The coolie boy was not all coolie-born or all coolie-nurtured. So Wing could read and write. Not all the richer Yün-nanese can do either.

The characters that told the bridge's name were deeply cut in a slab of stone honourably placed at the left of its entrance.

Almost every Chinese bridge has its own name; every bridge of even semi-importance has. Names play a great rôle in China. Many a Chinese river has innumerable names, and changes them as abruptly and as reasonlessly as London streets do. And this in a country so peculiarly short of surnames! The Chinese barely have a hundred surnames.

So Wing grinned as he read the bridge's name. Chu I is one of the God of Literature's two inseparable companions. Mr. Red Coat is a very learned god indeed; almost as accomplished and erudite as Wên Ch'ang himself. And of all China Yün-nan is the most illiterate province. So Wing doubted if there were

ten, yes—or three, in this market town who could read—let alone write. But scholarly Chu I, too, is the God of Good Luck. And that, So Wing reflected, is enough to secure him popularity and devotees everywhere—and not least of all in land-locked, undeveloped Yün-nan.

So Wing crossed the bridge, passed between the town's principal buildings, on to the gate. The town was walled, but as more often than not it is so in Yün-nan, the best and largest houses stood outside the walls, but close enough to let the dwellers scurry in before the gate was locked, if foes approached.

On the wall, near the gate, two human heads—one still raw from the headsman's sword, one old and wizened in death—hung in their bamboo cages; a warning to all that Market-Town-By-The-Swinging-Bridge dealt well and promptly by those who broke the law. So Wing scarcely gave them a glance, nor did the children trotting and playing beneath them. Half the city-gates in Yün-nan dangled just such gruesome fruitage.

The gates that would be shut and barred at sunset were hospitably wide open. The great gods painted on the gate's now-outer inner panels were smiling, ingratiating monsters. When the gate was shut its outer panels would show twin frowning gods, threatening and forbidding.

It was market-day; every fifth day is in almost every minor market town in Yün-nan. Vendors jostled each other noisily but good-naturedly on the town's one street and in its square, squatted beside their wares wherever they could find or squeeze the space inside the town and out here beyond it.

So Wing looked about him curiously. It was his habit to be industriously observant always, but he accosted no one, and jog-trotted on until he reached the square halfway down the town's one shop-and booth-lined street.

The long street was wide, pleasantly paved with huge yellow pebbles that centuries of human feet had worn and smoothed into one comfortable surface. Here and there the shade of a great tree at a house or shop door cooled it. All the street was gay with gorgeously painted signs—red, green, black, blue. A few of the signs were charactered; and there is little on earth more arrestingly decorative than large, clearly executed Chinese characters. But most of the flat wooden signs were pictorial; a surer method of advertising in the province of illiteracy. The cheaper shops wore their bright paper signs pasted over and beside the doorways; the better shops had swinging wood signs flapping a little more than head-high across the street.

The street was draggled and grey; every booth and every building was dilapidated; but every sign was whole and was fresh with paint, or even with

gilding. You had to see and to realise what the shopkeepers had to sell.

The square was a shrill-voiced human jam. It had a lily pond at one end, an old acacia-tree at the other end; for the “square” was oblong, not much more than a wide outswelling of the street it halved. The pawnshop was larger than the Headman’s house and offices; the granary was twice the temple’s height, more imposing than aught else the square boasted; but flowers bloomed in pots and hanging baskets on all the pawnshop’s balconies, a pretty painted face smiled at one of its windows; a cheerful, friendly place the pawnshop. You could buy a pipeful (and smoke it) there any time you had the price or the credit—despite the stringent new opium laws.

The temple was small and dingy, huddled ignominiously in a corner between the butcher’s slaughter place and the disheartened booth of toys that few were rich or extravagant enough to buy.

Often the old square was deserted, almost uncannily quiet. But now, the mid-hour of market-day, all was noise and bustle.

Many non-Chinese races have made their lairs in the Yün-nan jungles beside the Yang-tsze since the Chinese, more than a hundred centuries ago, came into the valley of the Yellow River. Almost everywhere the actual aboriginals have died off or been exterminated, or been absorbed. But in Yün-nan many tribes, and even several races, of them have held their primitive own, and still prosper and live their lives out in almost complete independence of China. They have their own country—a country within a country—their own languages and customs; all strikingly unlike those of the Chinese. It is not safe to visit them uninvited. But the less wild and less hostile among them journey into Chinese Yün-nan occasionally to buy and sell. A Yün-nan market-place, on market-day, rarely is quite without a few strolling aborigines.

There were scores of them here to-day. They added strikingly to the already striking human picture. The white kilts of the Miao women, the long dark felt cloaks of the Lolos, mingled with the dull blue and black of Chinese workaday clothes and the brilliantly coloured brocades of the gay clad Chinese rich. There were bare-footed Annamites, most of them dressed in brown, all of them with their long abundant hair twisted into great top-knots at the far back of their heads. Most of them wore immense bamboo and palm-leaf hats, the women’s flat and larger than ordinary cartwheels, the men’s smaller in circumference but rising up to a sharp point two or three feet above the head; handsome creatures, stalking proudly from stall to stall, the women as fearless and free as their menfolk, and doing most of the bargaining and all of the final deciding. There were stray human sprinklings of many other tribes, all distinctively and grotesquely clad. The Chinese, So Wing noticed, seemed on

good terms with them all. But this was market-day; racial animosities gave place to greed for trade, and to hope of profit.

Everyone was busied—everyone but one.

In the dimness of the square's one quiet and tree-shadowed corner an old man under an umbrella squatted on the temple steps—a bamboo basket beside him, a long, narrow table of painted wood knee-high before him; on it a small gong, an empty bowl, a tray of charactered bamboo splints: a fortune-teller who had seen better days. His once splendid robe was faded and frayed. He neither solicited clients nor invited alms. He sat as immovable as a graven Buddha, silent, uninterested.

The chattering, hurrying throng passed and repassed him. If he saw or heard them he gave no sign. More than one threw him greeting as they passed him; a man dropped a coin in the old man's pay-bowl, asking nothing in return; a woman took a tiny melon from the market-pannier at her hip, and laid the fragrant fruit on the psychic's table; he took no notice.

So Wing paused and watched, oddly interested in the motionless old man.

Then—for the hours passed, and his business pressed—So Wing moved on with a tolerant shrug. But as he was passing, without looking at him, the other hailed him.

"Stay!" the old man commanded. "Rescuer, linger but while the cloth-vendor's abacus counts ten, and hear the wisdom this wise one will give you."

Well—the man was very old; and So Wing had heard his mother say that the fortune-tellers spoke truth-words sometimes. So laughed not unkindly, searched his wallet, found his smallest coin, and laid it politely in the prophet's bowl.

And the strangest thing that ever has happened in China happened. The shabby old seer refused the coin.

"Purse again your money, Born-before Rescuer." He lifted his eyes, and looked into So Wing's. "I who sit here always, I who look into all the future and know all the past, I who read the souls of men and can read at a glance the follies of women, I who can write your horoscope, and can give talismans that fail not take no coin from the far-come Born-before who has journeyed even from the Great Wall to rescue my townsmen from the evil that has dogged them for two hundred poisoned years. Take up your coin, I, your worm, will have none of it. To you I give. To you I do not sell. From you I do not take—not even the rescue you have journeyed from beyond the tomb-palaces of the Mings to give; for me the cat will not fang, me it cannot harm. Shang Ti has

given me, his minister, immunity from all the devil-ones that prowl and infest the earth disguised in beast-shapes.”

So Wing—little loth—took up the coin he had given, and repouched it. And while he did the soothsayer watched sharply to see that So Wing took only what So Wing had given, moved no finger towards the other coin lying in the pay-and-beg bowl.

“Venerable, distinguished Born-many-centuries-before-me who am contemptible, base, ignorant, and new-born, why said you I had journeyed even from the Great Wall?”

“All life is a journey,” the fortune-teller replied, “and you were born in the very shadow of the Great Wall.”

And So Wing wondered, greatly amazed. For it was true; he had been born close to the Great Wall.

It was true then: there were those whom the gods gifted with second sight. So Wing never before had believed it. In every land, in every class, there are instinctive sceptics. The educated Chinese inherit scepticism almost as inevitably as the Chinese peasants inherit superstition. And in the country of Confucius, even among the peasant “babies” there is now and then deep-rooted agnosticism, ingrained scepticism—vigorous, rational mentalities.

So Wing was amazed.

But the day grew, presently it would wane, and his business pressed. Again he moved to go.

Again the old psychic stayed him.

“What you foolishly seek here will still be in Hsüeh-hsün’s shop when you return; and Hsüeh-hsün will accept a less price then, after long profitless hours. Your way lies over yonder hill where the honourable walnuts and elder-trees grow. Take your way there. At the edge of the lonely sea you will find the red feather that she-who-will-forget so boisterously craves. Go and pluck it from the white crane’s pink breast. Bring to me the foul cat. It will I accept, and for it will I bless and reward you.”

So Wing suddenly felt shiveringly cold, though the midday’s heat was at its pestilent hottest.

Was this a man? Was it a god—or a demon?

So Wing was sore afraid.

So Wing’s hard mind trembled, as scepticism itself does everywhere when

confronted with refuting evidence, or what it deems such.

How had the old-one been enabled to name so accurately So Wing's far birthplace? No one in Yün-nan, no one in Sze-ch'uen, So Wing believed, ever had learned where So Wing had been born, or ever had suspected that So Wing once had come from farther north than Peking. And how had the old-one divined that again and again Q'ūo Ssu had clamoured to So Wing—but never save when they were alone—that above all else that she desired (and truly her desires were many) she longed to own and wear in her coat on festival days the crimson feather that was said to be in the breast of a fabulous crane that nested high up in a deserted leaning pagoda a *li* or more from Market-Town-By-The-Swinging-Bridge?

There was no such bird. There could not be. And yet—what was this teller-of-fortunes-one?

"Go!" the necromancer repeated. "Follow your star; heed my voice. The first rung of the long and perilous ladder of fortune that your soaring ambition so pants to scale is the entrance of the crumbling pagoda, whose nine stories are reflected in the desolate, fish-less, boatless *hai-tse*, where the bamboo and the grey eucalyptus live in loneliness. Eat—lest you faint. Then go. You who so crave great fortune, turn not away from its path which I have so accurately indicated to you."

And the fortune-teller added directions so definite and detailed that they were a map in the mind of So Wing.

So Wing hesitated—and obeyed.

He bought tea and dumplings from a street-cook, and, crouching on the crowded wayside, ate and drank in the shadow of the cook's outspread awning. And when he had scraped the last morsel from the food-box, drained the last drop from the tea-bowl, So got up, stretched himself, grunted out his stomach's satisfaction and turned him to the farther journey that the fortune-teller had bidden him; and So Wing went it half amused, half self-vexed, wholly curious.

IN A YÜN-NAN COURTYARD *CHAPTER V*

THE ruined pagoda was oddly placed. It did not mark some spot of special beauty, as if put there to catch for the scene it piously punctuated every wayfarer's eyes—to catch and bid them linger and enjoy. Nor did it stand near some crowded mart, that it so might convenience the casual prayers and the sparse worship of busied men as they hurried to and fro. It served neither of those two chief offices of Chinese pagodas.

It stood alone, desolate and broken, in a flat, wide stretch of almost barren desolation; crumbling, discoloured beauty no longer beautiful, in a scene of natural ugliness. All its bells were gone; its roofs were shattered and gone; not a "lion" remained; time and neglect had blurred the blue and citron from its tiles—for it had been porcelain-faced once. Most of its tiles had peeled off, and lay in fragments and in dust on the ground.

A few sturdy red-flowered eucalyptus-trees grew some yards away. A few loyal and persistent bamboos still grew at the almost dry "sea's" other side. All else was grey, sad nothingness; the ruined pagoda was greyest and saddest of all. For it had been a thing of rare beauty, a gleaming blue and lemon porcelain flower of human piety, all despoiled by human neglect.

The Chinese are the master-builders of the ages. But they will not preserve or mend. They patch their garments until not a thread remains that will hold or survive a needle's gentlest stitchery. But they leave their splendid roads (the broad old highroad from Yün-nan to Sze-ch'uen was one) to Time's ruthless rutting, leave their lovely, priceless buildings to years' and weather's devastating ruin. Sometimes a house-proud mandarin kept his *chia* repaired and burnished. Imperial dwellings were kept fit and cared-for caskets of the Imperial human jewels that lived in them. But those were the exceptions that proved the bad rule of reprehensible, unaccountable, cruel neglect of temples and walls of incredible cost and beauty.

The broken pagoda looked a drab, drunken hag; boasted no faintest trace of its once radiant loveliness. It sagged lop-sided almost as does Pisa's leaning tower, and far more dejectedly.

Why had the fortune-teller sent him here?

Why had he come?

There was nothing to do here; nothing to hope, attempt, or accomplish.

Human action felt paralysed in such scene of irrevocable decay. There was nothing to see here, except what sorrowed sight.

And the tatterdemalion old mystic had bade him find fortune here!

He was dolt to have been caught in the claptrap springs of the other's cheap trickery and fraudulence! All So Wing's native incredulousness and sharp scepticism reasserted themselves in cold anger and gripped him hard. So Wing had lost face in his own proud estimate; he was furious.

True, the old fraud-one had named his birthplace, and had read him with startling accuracy, had read him proud and ambitious. Well, what of it? Coincidence, lucky guessing; only those. Such always the mental refuge of the sceptic confronted by aught he can neither explain nor understand. Just lucky guesswork.

Then—but why had the fortune-teller refused his proffered dole? So Wing gave that up, shrugged sourly, and retightened his loin-cloth—loosened by his long, bootless tramping from the market-square to this arid goal—and braced his a-little-wearied body to plod back again to fulfil his now-belated business in Market-Town-By-The-Swinging-Bridge.

Then—what were those twin greens that glared hatred at him from that tottering crevice?

What bird-thing gave that one piteous cry of futile agony?

The green eyes moved. Watching, with all his mind as well as all his eyesight concentrated on that dusky crevice where the twin greens had blazed him hatred, So Wing saw an almost worm-like narrow mass striped and tawny worming its slow stealthy way up the leaning pagoda's ragged face.

It was a cat! Thinner than any cat So Wing ever before had seen—in China the land of emaciated cats—longer, less catlike, yet So Wing knew it of the cat tribe. House cat or wild cat, cat of living skin and fur or ghost-cat; it was a cat.

"Foul cat!" the old-one had said.

Again the terrible bird cry.

Something fluttered up there on the pagoda's utmost jag of broken brick: a bird's white wing.

The old fortune-teller was less discredited now.

Stealthy as it, as determined and almost as footsure, So Wing followed the great cat-thing.

Twice the pagoda's once-carved outer edge gave beneath So Wing's

weight, staggered and almost threw him. But he went on intrepidly. Again and again he slithered down, all but toppled over; but for the most part he went up—painfully, perilously, slowly, but up! His feet in his rough, spike-studded sandals were bruised and welted. His fingers bled from the blistering of the bricks they gripped but to crumble. So Wing pressed closer towards the crawling cat. It turned and hissed at him. So Wing pressed on, closer and closer to it.

Halfway up, through a wide break in the old neglected masonry, So Wing saw the terrified bird that the starved cat was stalking: a great white crane standing at bay beside its nest.

How had the bird made its way up to that nesting-place? How had it found its nest materials in this desert place; how dragged them, or flown with them, up to that ledge of peril?

What manner of bird was it? Was it a ghost-bird? Were there crane-birds in Yün-nan? So Wing believed that there were none.

Gods! Its breast was pink as courtyard roses. Kwan! One crimson feather splashed the breast of rose!

So Wing's pulse lost its beat—but not for long.

So Wing pressed on—with doubled vigour, with twice-doubled caution. He must not slip back again. The cat almost had reached its prey.

Inch by inch they crawled.

The great lank cat kept its frenzied eyes on So Wing; its gaunt ghoulish head turned towards him as it crawled and climbed, but even so its nostrils quivered hungrily towards the trembling bird, as if tasting in the anticipation of gluttonous scenting the bleeding meal it stalked.

The man was gaining on the robber cat. He drew his knife from his loin-cloth, and clutched the knife securely.

They reached the mother-guarded nest—so hopelessly guarded, so desperately defended.

There were eggs in the nest.

Already a bantling beak was pricking feebly through the eggshell that had wombed it.

So Wing raised his arm to strike.

The bandit cat lifted to spring—bared its fang-like teeth; aimed them at the throat of So Wing.

The white crane had turned to stone—frozen in fear, but valiant still in tortured motherhood.

The cat was quivering with rage. The man was tense with purpose.

The cat sprang. The man struck.

They closed.

And there they fought it out, on the crumbling outer edge of the nine-story pagoda; fought to the death; no thought of surrender or of quarter. Both knew that one of them must die. Perhaps the frenzy-frozen crane knew it, too!

Eye for eye, tooth for tooth; but it was the other's throat each aimed and schemed to reach.

So Wing's breast was scratched—not deeply; So Wing's lacerated left arm poured blood. The cat fought on with a broken leg. Its back was slashed.

The sharp point of So Wing's flint-bladed dagger reached its goal; So Wing's right hand drove the knife in, drove it in with all the man's force; drove it up, drove it down.

The wild beast's throat was slashed from chin to breast. It would never scream or snarl again; its wind-pipe dangled out a tattered rag of blood.

A moment longer the gaunt thing writhed before the mad eyes glazed. Then it pitched back so suddenly that it took So's precious, cherished weapon with it as it lurched convulsively down, and lay broken-backed and stark on the ground far below.

So Wing shrugged—in satisfaction; stood panting a while, the sweat dripping from his scratched, spent body.

When his lungs were his again, So Wing laughed proudly. It had been a good fight—a man's game. Then he turned towards the nest—towards the high-perched nest-home and its growing family; for two diminutive beaks nosed now through the snow of the mother's covering feathers.

She had watched with frozen terror the fight while it lasted. As the cat lurched and fell, she had squatted back on her nested eggs, eager and relieved. There she sat now in palpable contentment. Perhaps she thought So Wing a god who, having defended her, would defend her always.

Birds, as a rule, do not have affectionate eyes. Cranes' eyes are peculiarly hard and uneloquent. Her eyes lit with unmistakable affection as So Wing bent over her. He bent lower, and stroked her companionably; she took it companionably and serenely.

Even when he fingered her pink breast and clutched, with all the gentleness he could, the one red feather she did not wince or protest.

So Wing hated to pull or twist—but he had to have that crimson feather.

It came out easily—perhaps she was moulting. Relieved in his turn, So Wing hid the feather carefully in his loin-cloth, stroked the hen again, and again she preened her head against his fingers gratefully.

It must be in the Hour-of-the-Sheep now, So Wing thought, by the sun. He must go. Yet he lingered several minutes, looking down and about on all of Yün-nan that he could see from the old pagoda's slanting top.

And there was much to see. Dull and barren as the pagoda's site had looked when he had reached it, down below, up here it showed him panorama. For this was one of the innumerable high, if flat, plateaux so peculiarly characteristic of Yün-nan. It looked low and flat. It was flat; but its flatness was high-perched. He was looking down now, not only on the unpicturesque "sea," but on wide, undulating sweeps of natural verdure and of teeming prosperity. Blue-hazed green hills rose beneath the plateau's flattened altitude; orchards filled the hollows, and climbed the hillsides, villages showed radiant in the day's sparkling radiance; the unimportant market town he'd come from at the psychic's bidding looked proud and prosperous; all its roofs gilded by the orange sunshine, all its draggled shabbiness hidden by its distance. It was grey and dirty; it looked white and golden. And suddenly the naked peasant boy saw it a new world, and saw it a world to conquer.

If naked So Wing, already life-calloused, could read and write moderately, he had touched but few books, his keen young mind was scantily furnished, he knew little of the world beyond its few parts he had lived in, its few paths he himself had trod. But he had that great natural asset that not improbably was the foundation of Shakespeare's own greatness: So Wing loved to listen, and he listened well and intelligently. He had, too, the almost universal gift of Chinese minds, the gift of a great and exact memory. Too, he never was ashamed to question. He had a lif-long trick of making everyone better educated than he whom he met his teacher. He had known little of Yün-nan a moon ago in Sze-ch'uen; but now he knew how large it bulked on China's map, knew it the Chinese province nearest the sunset, knew something of its history and of its still bosomed, undeveloped treasure, knew of its oil-wells, its salt-wells, and mines. He knew how highly reputed were its amber, hams, and scented tea. He knew its value to China; knew its international importance. He even knew where India was, knew very hazily what India was. He had learned something of the French, of the railway from Yün-nan Fu that they had built

with almost Chinese ingenuity, endurance, and persistence. He knew the rivalry between France and England for predominant Western “influence” in Yün-nan. He knew that “three empires met” at Kien-hong on the Mekong: a geographical eloquence that stirred him oddly—perhaps prophetically. He knew that this Yün-nan he was looking down on was the last link in the long chain that more and more linked India and China.

He saw and sensed a wide world stretched about him—a world of worlds for wise and strong men to conquer; such men had done that from the beginning of history—would do it till time’s long scroll was rolled and ended.

Ambition leapt hot and mighty in the soul of naked So Wing the coolie; ambition no longer unconscious or formless.

Why should not he grow a great-one; strong in achievement and prosperity; the owner of fat lands; soft-fed, rich clad?

Thinking it, he resolved it.

Other men, as ill-equipped by fate and birth-accident as he was, had made them place and power; why not he? He was young and strong. What had others achieved and amassed that he could not?

So Wing’s nostrils quivered, his eyes gleamed. And he swore himself an oath; gave the brooding bird a last caress; and went.

So Wing slid him cautiously down into the pagoda’s roof’s opening; it would be cooler going back that way—if the stairs held!

Very slowly he began his descent, and the mother bird’s eyes, soft and human in gratitude, followed him until the pagoda’s maw had gulped and hidden him. She craned her long neck to watch him the longer; but she did not leave her nest, or stir on it.

The old stairs in the pagoda’s interior were deplorable, but on the whole better conditioned than the tower’s broken outside. Most of the steps were broken, several were missing, all were somewhat tottery. So Wing had good reason to negotiate his down-going carefully. More than once he had to swing himself over where a step should have been but was not. But no frenzied cat foe was racing him. So Wing was free to take his own time, set his own pace; climbing down an old broken pagoda’s shattered inner stairs, climbing up his life’s first high rung.

Twice he slipped. He grazed his hands again. But he did not misstep or fall.

The safe open his again; curious, he found the cat-corpse where it lay mangled and broken; its spine snapped by its fall, its whitening lips snarled

back from its sharp teeth-fangs, the great, sightless eyes still wide and green and angry in death.

“Bring to me the foul cat.”

Well, the old-one should have it. Prophecy exceeding true should be paid that way—since so the now recredited soothsayer had commanded.

So Wing wrenched out his knife, cleaned it, put it back again in his loin-cloth, then slung the lank and hideous burden across his naked shoulder, and plodded back to the market-square; back to the soothsayer’s temple pitch, and to the shop of Hsüeh-hsün.

Evening rice was over; the Q’ūos and perhaps a score of their retainers and slave-ones were gathered at the fire when So Wing came in a little awkwardly, and trying not to show it; So Wing almost splendidly clad, smarter coat-and-skirted than Q’ūo Flee or Q’ūo Toon or Q’ūo Hsien, and wearing the black silk skull-cap—a button of red braid its ornament—that is the all but universal headgear of Chinese men and boys.

So Wing had spent all but all of his hoarded earnings in the market town.

They welcomed him without comment. Comment would have been impoliteness. Q’ūo Ssu had started slightly as she looked up and saw So Wing’s covered shoulders, looked down instantly. And only So Wing saw her sudden, violent blush.

IN A YÜN-NAN COURTYARD *CHAPTER VI*

THE old missionary looked up with a smile as Q'ūo Ssu came into the courtyard. Everyone who came to him was welcome. Perhaps he welcomed the sinners who sought him out even more than he did the saints, because it was the trespassers who the more surely needed his help. There was not much he could do for those that needed nothing, those who were happy and well and safe. But always he could find some service to do one who sorrowed or suffered.

But the old man's theory and rule of welcome had an inconsistent exception. For, of all in Yün-nan—all in China, for that matter—Q'ūo Ssu was most welcome of all in the courtyard of Mr. Kwan.

He never was too busy or too absorbed to welcome Q'ūo Ssu, never too sad to play and laugh with her, always ready to tease her and to be teased by her.

For all that her father spoiled her, Q'ūo Ssu was carefully guarded and watched as a rule. That she was allowed to visit Born-before Kwan as often as she chose, to stay alone with him here in his courtyard or in his house, tells a great deal of him—tells all of the Chinese estimate in which the American missionary was held.

He had been a very young man when he had come here, years before Q'ūo Ssu was born; now he was old. Tolerated, at first, rather than accepted, tolerated with Chinese courtesy, reserve, and coldness; now the Chinese loved and revered him; and, too, did the Lolos among whom he journeyed often and freely. The long years had proved him; and his Chinese name, the name the Chinese he lived among had given him, was Kwan's Brother. Chinese lips and hearts could give no higher title.

And the man who for love of a friend and love of a woman had fled branded from home and kindred in his young long-ago deserved his Chinese name. He, too, was a Hearer of Cries, his eyes, too, were ever bright and ever kind.

Perhaps foreigners are more disliked in Yün-nan than in any other province of China—and this American missionary was the most loved man in Yün-nan. Why? Because he had earned it. The Chinese pay their debts.

He had made few "converts," if any. The Yün-nanese cling to their old

gods—as far as religion can be said to have any serious acceptance with them. Perhaps he would have made more if he had belonged to one of the missionary societies—perhaps not. He worked alone. He preached little doctrine, he attacked nothing Chinese. He merely lived there alone, and worked and waited alone. He gave them the baptism of love and sympathy, shared with them the sacrament of respect. He had coaxed many a peasant to wash, many a man to be kind, he had healed many a sore body, ministered to many minds and hearts that were troubled, he had taught little Chinese children, held epidemics at bay, pacified and settled scores of long-standing, bitter quarrels.

And so sunnily he lived among them that only he himself ever suspected that sometimes, sitting alone in his Chinese courtyard, he was homesick, bitterly homesick for a land more raw, less beautiful, less packed with human interest—only he himself, and—it may be—his sister Kwan Yin-ko.

If he preached little doctrine, he cast a wide net of subtle propaganda. He taught chiefly by example, believing it the surer, sounder teaching. He taught such of his sacred message as he found that he could get a little through; and left the rest to riper time and to the God to whom he not only had vowed, but had truly *given* himself long, long ago. He taught cleanliness, believing it halfway to God. He taught, to his utmost, the essentials of Christianity; and cheerfully let names and creeds go. He neither attacked the gods of China nor despised them. This wise man accepted them for the symbols they were. Life had purged him terribly, but had in no way soured him, or embittered. Humble, as all great souls are, he still was delightfully human. He gratified all his own innocent desires, indulged all his own wholesome creature appetites as far as he thought right, and as far as the segregated, dedicated life he had chosen permitted. And he had two vanities; knew he had, and did not starve them. He was vain as well as proud of his homestead and of the name the Chinese had given him. House, courtyard, and garden, Mr. Kwan’s Yün-nan homestead was eminently comfortable and distinguishedly beautiful. And to be known as Kwan Yin-ko’s brother he held a precious crown of life; love given by faithful Chinese hearts; gratefully accepted, proudly worn. He had not forgotten his own name; he was sane, and he already had reached manhood when he first came to China. But he had been called “Mr. Kwan” so long—even by the missionaries and the few other Europeans he very occasionally met—that even in his own thought he had come to claim and to own it as simply and as naturally as once he had his birth-name.

The old missioner had not discarded his own name. For years now he would have told it to anyone here who had asked it. None did; and it gradually had slipped away from him—laid away now in the rue and rosemary of his

memories. He believed that in all China only he himself still knew it; he cared neither way. But often, sitting alone here in his Yün-nan courtyard, the old man wondered if any still living in Virginia and in Maryland remembered it—ever thought of him?

He knew that he should end his days in China; he did not regret it. For many wondering years he had found life a peculiarly hard nut to crack. But he had cracked it; hammered away at its stiff shell; and he had crushed contentment out of its broken splinters—found its kernel sweet and nourishing. Mr. Kwan had no regrets. But he kept his memories—some of them sad ones; but they all were fragrant. Life had bruised him terribly, but he never had misused or reviled it. And now he was reaping the harvest of his own indomitable, unselfish sowing.

He had come to China because "as well there as anywhere," and the old empire had claimed him before he realised that he even liked it. Now it chained him; and he knew that it did. Yün-nan was his home now; he wished for no other. The personal nest he had made him here suited him better than our-dreams-come-true often suit us. He loved his garden, joyed in his courtyard; and the queer old solitary was house-proud.

To-day in parts of China—notably in Peking—many Europeans affect Chinese (more or less Chinese) dwellings. No Western did in Central Yün-nan when he had come there. The wise and comfortable fad had not started in Chihli or in Kiangsu. Nor had it reached the banks of the Yang-tsze river yet. Mr. Kwan was the only Western much nearer than Yün-nan Fu. His house was as unique as his life.

Mr. Kwan had bought the place for a song. Its Chinese owner had been on the point of abandoning it; and had been in too much hurry, in too abject panic, to haggle. The soothsayers had pronounced its *fêng shui* as bad as bad could be, and the owner had fled precipitously, and had accepted almost indifferently the price the Western traveller had offered. No Chinese would have paid any price at all. Why buy certain disaster?

The American had no fear of *fêng shui* at its worst. He had lived here half a lifetime now, and even the wizards had to admit that no apparent evil had befallen him, or even the place itself that he had bought and lived in in rash heathen defiance of their psychic warnings.

Of its Chineseness the man had robbed the place nothing. He had laid on water, and put in electric light, and, of course, his own plant behind the walnut-trees. He had a bath tub, and he had a good piano and kept it in tune himself. For he cared much for music, and believed it to be the voice of God

vouchsafed to men, as flowers were, and the struggles of men who failed or prevailed but persistently tried.

For his convenience he had made perhaps half a dozen interior changes; three rooms made one, one room cut up into two, and so forth. And he had added twice its original size to the house. Nearly half the books in his *shu-chia* were English, French, German, or Latin. As a rule he still wrote with a pen, and dipped it in an ink-pot. But for most else his was an Eastern home; the Chinese house of a man who loved China much, and who had taken root in Yün-nan—grown into the Orient.

For himself, at home, he usually wore a black soutane-like cashmere robe as comfortable as priestly; it did not look altogether un-Chinese. His home shoes were Chinese. But he wore neither cap nor queue. When he went from home his costume depended upon how far he was going and how; sometimes depended on his mood, or upon whether he had remembered or forgotten to change. He still rode a great deal, and always rode in Western gear.

He had preserved the old wall, but no ammunition lay handy to it, and its gate was never barred. The once watch-tower was a dovecote. Mr. Kwan feared neither Lolo nor bandit. He had no cause to. Everyone loved him, even the other missionaries, some of whom resented his aloofness, most of whom were scandalised that Tsao Shên and Tsao Shên's wife (not to mention Tsao Shên's concubine) still were enshrined in his kitchen, and had tapers lit before them more often than not. It was the Chinese servants who burned the heathen incense; but their master did not forbid it, or even rebuke them for doing it—and he owned with a laugh that he liked the smell.

Q'ūo Ssu bobbed respectfully before she ran to him, and squatted down on the flagstones near his bench.

"A gift, beloved and very old master," the girl announced, laying, quite without ceremony, a lumpy cloth-wrapped parcel on his lap.

The man unknotted the moderately clean cloth and drew the loosened ends apart. The stone-cold big buckwheat cake must have weighed a heavy pound, but it would warm quickly in the ever-ready, straw-stuffed oven beneath Tsao Shên's shrine.

"Delightful! I accept your bounty with humble gratitude." He'd have liked to pat the little dark face dimpling up at him, but thirty years in China had taught him better manners than that, and he did not touch the pretty child he loved and who, he knew, loved him, and whose saucy chin was almost resting on his knee.

“We will share it, gracious one,” he added hospitably, “and Tin Bong shall brew us almond tea to drink to it.” He opened his palms to clap them; but before he could, and summon so a servant, Q’ūo Ssu thrust her scarf between his hands to silence them.

“I stay to-day but while a *bonze* counts six beads,” she said.

Mr. Kwan did not believe her. Q’ūo Ssu always was in a hurry, but she always lingered. Not infrequently she had stayed so late that he had sent a boy hot-footed to her father for the truant’s chair, or—if his leisure served or could be stretched—had had a lantern lit, and with it to light them, had walked with her all the way to Q’ūo Chung’s gate. He put the scarf down, and again made to clap his hands.

“It is truth-word, *Ta-gên*,” she insisted. “This girl-worm came but to bring you the buckwheat cake. Most very soon I must go. It is of the necessity. You must eat the cake by your loneness, old great-man. It is a buckwheat cake much special. Q’ūo Ssu with these her own hands did make it!”

“You!” The missionary felt less sure of the plump pasty’s toothsomeness, gravely doubted its entire lightness. If Q’ūo Ssu, the spoiled gamin, had indeed made this he was sure it was the first time she had condescended to any form of domestic industry, even the prettiest and lightest. But he never had known her to lie to him; and she had boasted too proudly, he thought, for the boast to be untrue. Q’ūo Ssu had turned over a new leaf indeed. Well, it was high time; and long might it last! But he eyed the portly dainty somewhat askance.

“Each day I will learn me some thing to make cook, or some thing to make mended with a needle,” Q’ūo Ssu said earnestly—so devoutly that Mr. Kwan’s much experienced suspicion was fired.

“Why?” he demanded insinuatingly.

“Against the preparation, if it come that I go in marriage to a poor man. I would not starve him, or see him rag-clad, if he is good and strong and very handsome.” Q’ūo Ssu answered readily.

The missionary’s suspicion was doubled; and it grew a little troubled. Q’ūo Chung had let the girl run wild too long and far too far.

He probed a little farther—very gently. But Q’ūo Ssu could not be drawn again. She described her buckwheat cake making, telling it with a running accompaniment of tinkling giggles.

There are just two sorts of girls in all China; the girls who giggle prettily, and the girls whose giggling is a harassing infliction; they all giggle. Very

many of them giggle a great deal. Unfortunately, out of the sash-wearers' courtyards, the girls who giggle unmusically preponderate. But always little, uncultured Q'ūo Ssu's giggling was music.

She described dramatically the consternation in her father's primitive kitchen when she had danced into it, saying that she had come to cook, and that she was going to do a great deal of cooking every day, until she had learned it all. But she would say no more of what her motive had been. Probably it had been just a very new form of prank, Mr. Kwan half believed. And yet!

And he saw that through all her gay impish chatter she watched the sundial.

Q'ūo Ssu always had liked finery, he knew; always liked to wear gay colours. She was finer clad to-day than she usually was when she came unattended and unexpected to see him. Silk is almost common wear in many parts of Yün-nan; but Q'ūo Ssu's silk coat was costly with embroidery, and its buttons must have cost Q'ūo Chung a good many dollars. Except for the tiny fragrant flowers above her pretty ears, and her lovely glinting stick-pins, she was bareheaded. Q'ūo Ssu never wore the band of black brocaded satin that is the hat of most Chinese women; it was ugly, she said.

To-day she did not linger in the missioner's courtyard. She told her little kitchen-story quickly and ended it abruptly. Then she jumped up, and when she had stolen a flower for her hair and given her host another for his priestly coat she bobbed him another respectful bending of her body, shook her tiny yellow hands together ceremoniously, and left the courtyard almost before Mr. Kwan could have expostulated, if he'd thought it wise to do so.

Had the girl an appointment?

What sort of appointment?

Kwan's brother jotted down carefully in his mental engagement-book that he would have a cautious gossip with Q'ūo Chung before many days. Q'ūo Chung was never too busy to give Kwan Yin-ko's Brother-one cordial welcome. No Yün-nanese ever is too busy to gossip.

Q'ūo Chung liked his pipe—and in companionship that he trusted it loosened his tongue. This very odd missionary did not think quite so drastically of the poppy, used in absolute moderation, as most Western missionaries do. Scandal even said that Mr. Kwan, on strictly infrequent occasions, in sufficient fellowship would draw a friendly whiff or two of "China's poison."

And when the American had heard the slander he had laughed, and misquoted, saying: “Poor, notorious poppy is a good familiar creature, if well used.”

NOT far from Mr. Kwan's wall, but well hidden behind a spinney of willows, So Wing was holding her little black and white pony.

Q'ūo Ssu made show of surprise—almost a show of displeasure.

"How did you come? Why hold you Fan Tan's bridle? Where is Q'ūo Lou? Where are my slave-ones? My father will beat them for this."

"Your honourable brother is taken with the torture of cramp. He has gone to the hut of the wizard, Nung Fing, the slave-ones supporting him lest he fall. We are to find them all at the wizard's hut as we pass it on our way back to the palace tower of eminent Q'ūo Chung. We must procure a litter then, for your honourable, afflicted brother cannot again walk. Permit this your slave to guard and attend you back to your brother and your slave-ones. None shall molest you, neither Nosu nor Miao. This, your slave, is well armed. Permit that I lead Fan Tan most carefully."

Q'ūo Ssu frowned.

"Fan Tan can carry me in safety where you cannot go—where no man can." It was true. "My own slave woman should have stayed here until my return, no matter what ailed Q'ūo Lou. She shall be burned alive for this. How chanced you to be here, So Wing?"

"I was seeking the market village. It is much worth seeing on market-day, you yourself have told me. Seeking the village, I chanced to pass near this place. I heard your brother groan aloud with his stomach-pain, and I hastened my loitering pace, hoping to be of aid. When I saw who it was that so suffered my liver was torn with sympathy and anxiety. I feared he was going to the Yellow Springs. When I reached him he besought me to hold Fan Tan till you came from the courtyard you visited. He besought me to give you his message, and to beg you to come to him at the hut of the wizard-one, who is so eminent a medicine-man, and whose skill the sage Q'ūo Lou your brother has sureness will have restored Q'ūo Lou's jade health in all its accustomed radiant fulness at the auspicious moment of your arrival at the hut of Nung Fing the wizard."

Q'ūo Ssu's lip curled. She made no doubt of that either. She counted even more securely on Q'ūo Lou's recovery than she had on his successful shamming of illness. She wondered how much So Wing had paid Q'ūo Lou to take her old slave woman with him to the wizard's. Well, it saved her the

difficulty of ridding herself of the crone.

She knew how much she had paid Q’ūo Lou, how difficult it had been to bribe him. But he had needed badly the coin she had bribed him with. She had no fear that he would betray what she had done. Sharp as their father’s wrath would be against her, it would fall many times heavier on him. Nor would anyone of the servant-ones dare betray her; it was in her easy power to deal them cruel reprisal. Q’ūo Chung and her other brothers had gone for the day in another direction from this. She was safe.

She gave So Wing another dark frown, caught at the pommel, and swung herself up into her high, painted saddle, and chirruped to Fan Tan to go.

She rode sedately enough at first, then kicked the willing pony to a quicker pace.

“We need not hurry,” So Wing said as he ran beside her. “Your brother will be glad to rest awhile in the shade of the wizard’s wattle after the cure-incantation. Nung Fing’s incantations are long, I have heard it said, and vigorous and fatiguing.”

“You have heard truth-words,” the girl owned. “And Nung Fing’s rice-wine is sweet to the throat of my brother. And our father will not be returned to his home until the Hour-of-the-Boar is gone.” She looked into So Wing’s eyes and laughed.

Fan Tan, like all of his breed, was small. Even perched on her padded red-wood saddle the girl’s eyes were not much more than level with the eyes of So Wing.

They did not hurry—though Q’ūo Ssu made some pretence that they did now and then. Nor did they go as directly as was possible. Q’ūo Ssu hoped that So Wing did not know that—but it did not greatly matter; she did not much care.

At first they spoke little. So Wing’s heart pounded his ribs, but his tongue was tied.

Q’ūo Ssu’s tongue was not tied, and presently she pelted him with questions. What was Sze-ch’uen like? Where had he been born?

And So Wing’s tongue came back to its own, answered all she asked. But So Wing’s heart still pounded his ribs, and fire came into his eyes, and Q’ūo Ssu saw it and smiled.

Twice she kicked Fan Tan to stop short, and ordered So Wing to scramble up the hillside and gather her a flower. There were flowers a-plenty close and

low by the path where they went, but those were not the flowers Q’ūo Ssu desired.

So Wing did her bidding eagerly. She sat at her ease on docile Fan Tan, and watched So narrowly—and approved. Her young pulse quickened a little as the girl’s eyes noted how upright, well knit, and strong So was, and how goat-sure he scrambled and sprang. That was the first time.

The next time she set him a harder task, and held her breath a little while he performed it. But So Wing neither stumbled nor fell. He did not falter even when a small rocking-stone at the edge of an ugly precipice moved under him ominously. So Wing balanced himself exquisitely on one foot, waved his hand with a laugh to Q’ūo Ssu down on the path so far below, sprang lightly back to her all the way, and when he reached her he was not out of breath. He held up his offering of flowers, and smiled contentedly into her eyes. Q’ūo Ssu’s eyelids dropped her long black lashes on to her cheeks, and her face flushed prettily as she took the flowers he gave, and she tucked them into her coat, above her crimson feather.

The Chinese boy wanted one of them very badly for himself. But he did not ask. If Q’ūo Ssu read the wish in his eyes, she gave no sign. Unless the quick prod her shoe gave Fan Tan was sign.

And So Wing had to run fast to keep pace with Fan Tan.

A turbulent stream halted them; a naughty, fretful baby thing all jagged with sharp rocks, one of the tiny tributaries of the Yang-tsze that froth and foam their way to the Great River everywhere in that part of Yün-nan. Its width was little—perhaps a yard—but its peril was much. Steady Western eyes that looked at its vicious, intricate swirl might have flinched and grown dizzy.

In mid-stream a slim needle of rock rose breast high to a man. Its pointed head was sword-sharp, its sides deep-notched and saw-like.

The terrible little stream was beautiful.

The boy and the girl watched it in silence, watched it with gleaming eyes and softened faces. They were Chinese.

But Q’ūo Ssu was a woman in bud. So Wing was at manhood’s quivering edge.

“We can jump it, Fan Tan and I,” the girl said. “Can you follow us over?”

“You must not! It would catch you, and suck you in—down to the Yellow Springs.”

If he had pleaded, Q’ūo Ssu might have yielded. The word “must” angered and piqued her. And if she oddly liked the sharp authority in So Wing’s voice, she had no mind that So should know that she did. Perhaps she did not quite know it herself.

None ever had spoken to her so peremptorily before. Her little red lips curled. Her delicate apricot face stiffened.

“I wish to cross,” she said coldly.

“Let me carry you. I can take you in safety. Let me carry you, I entreat you.”

But he pleaded too late.

Before So Wing could stop her, if he could with all his strength have stopped Fan Tan—before he suspected what she intended, Q’ūo Ssu bent with a laugh to Fan Tan’s black and white ear and spoke a coaxing command.

The pony gave a startled whinny of fear and dismay.

Q’ūo Ssu spoke more sharply, and kicked Fan Tan’s spotted sides cruelly.

Terrified Fan Tan rose on his haunches, drew up his frightened feet, and leapt.

So Wing snatched at the bridle or snatched at the girl—too late.

The boy went blind and sick for one tortured quiver of time—not longer, for Q’ūo Ssu was risking her life, and he must save her or go down to the Yellow Springs with her; which ever the gods willed.

He saw again, pulling himself together in her service.

He saw Fan Tan clear the stream beautifully, stagger a little as he landed on its other side, and lift his head with a softer whinny, as if asking Q’ūo Ssu for a caress. She laughed and carelessly gave it, taunting So Wing with her eyes across the water; forbidding him ever again to forbid her, inviting him to follow her.

It had been a terrible, desperate leap. She had set Fan Tan square at the tall needle-rock; and Fan Tan had shivered and obeyed her.

So Wing followed them instantly. A little higher up, a little lower down, he might have crossed in comparative safety, springing goat-sure and lightly enough from flatter, lower stones in smoother water to stones as flat and low. But So Wing scorned to go to her so. Her eyes beckoned him, and he went to her at once, and took the shorter, perilled cut. Perhaps his young senses divined what was at stake.

Q’ūo Ssu closed her eyes as he jumped.

She felt his breath on her face, looked at him, gave a little sobbing cry, slipped a little in her saddle, and slid down into So Wing’s arms.

They did not fail to catch her—or let her go again.

They sat together under a venerable banyan, locked together in silence and throbbing happiness.

Then they whispered it all to each other.

He was strong. She was young. Her father would not give her in marriage yet—not for many and many a moon. Her father held her a child-one. Only they two knew that now they were man and woman. They had leapt over the stream of life. They had left childhood behind them. They had mated. Before her kindred suspected that she had strayed into her rose-red days, her perfumed time of music, he would return to her honourable father’s, he a rich man, ennobled and powerful. His go-between should proceed him with bride-gifts richer than ever before had been carried in Yün-nan. And they would be wedded.

There was blood on his forehead! How had it come? It was a nothing; a flick of Fan Tan’s hoof as he had reached for her bridle or for Fan Tan’s mane, whichever he could clutch, and had missed. His rich coat was torn! The tall rock had jagged it. She would mend it. One of her women should bring it to her when all the place slept. He should see how beautifully she sewed. The needle-rock had jagged his coat! His flesh had only escaped it! She leaned a little nearer against him. His arms held her a little closer.

Fan Tan browsed happy at the stream’s edge. Neither So Wing nor Q’ūo Ssu saw a drop of red drip now and then down on to the sweet grass Fan Tan was eating so contentedly. Nor would it have disturbed them. Fan Tan was sturdy. “A thorn must have caught him, or a tiger-fly nipped him,” would be Q’ūo Ssu’s reply to-morrow, if Q’ūo Chung noticed Fan Tan’s small wound, and made comment of it.

SO WING stayed at the homestead of Q'ūo Chung three days after that, completing the bargaining his master, Ko Ching-lin, had sent him to do. And then So Wing, with a heavied heart, unmoored his light junk, took a last look at the white-towered home on the cliff, and began his perilous journey back to Sze-ch'uen. And Q'ūo Ssu squared her young shoulders as best she could to woman's immemorial burden: being left behind. He left her behind him to take up her old life that the press of his arms and the coax of his voice had turned into a dull nothingness. A changed girl in an unchanged life cannot often be a contented girl. Q'ūo Ssu was not. He had left her nothing but a rose-red memory of throbbing, stolen happiness; nothing but that and a promise. He had promised to come back; rich, ennobled, a suitor no father in Yün-nan could reject. She believed him. Her heart believed him, but her shrewd little Chinese head knew that he had set himself a stupendous task. Q'ūo Ssu was wildly in love—a throbbing happiness in itself, whether the love run smooth or no—but she was miserable at So Wing's going, wretched in his absence, and tortured lest he might fail—lest he might not be able to come back. He would come, if the gods let him. Of her lover's loyalty she had no doubt. Women as young as Q'ūo Ssu do not. Life has to teach them that lesson, and the learning is long. Often hearts as loyal as Q'ūo Ssu's never learn it at all—perhaps because they will not. So Wing would keep faith, as she herself would. And if, because it was not within any possibility, he never returned to her, she would die—there was always the Great River—and wait for his soul to mate with hers down in the Yellow Springs.

Their stolen hour at the river after they had crossed it was not the last tryst they had kept before he went away. Each of the last three days had served them for meeting and courtship. Q'ūo Ssu had made the times, found the safe-sheltered place, and contrived the means. So Wing had provided the love-making, and Q'ūo Ssu had not repulsed it.

So Wing's heart was heavy, but presently he sang as he poled and tacked and outwitted the angry Yang-tsze, for he was taking fair news of good profit back to Ko Ching-lin, and his soul was big and proud with dreams of love, of ambition, and of self-aggrandisement. He would accomplish mightily. The very gods should help him. All the gods of China should help him. He let out the old boat's square sail to a favourable billow of wind, and considered whether he'd be a Governor or only a very great and always successful

General; rule a province in luxurious ease or conquer Japan, and drive all the paler barbarians out for ever from the sacred, scented land of Han.

Q'ūo Ssu's heart was torn, and she wept as she sat idle at her spinning-wheel, wept as she sat alone by the Great River, in the willow spinney or under the great banyan—where she and So Wing had sat close to each other so little ago.

When eyes were on her the girl dissembled well. But Chinese eyes have sharp sight. Busied as they all were at the towered *chia* of Q'ūo Chung, one by one they noticed that Q'ūo Ssu lacked something, or suffered something. She denied it, laughingly at first, hotly and angrily when they persisted and pressed her hard with prying questions. Then, at Q'ūo Chung's sharp command they left the girl alone, and set their wits to work how best to help her, counselled together how best to help and medicine Q'ūo Ssu.

Her mother suggested Nung Fing the wizard. He was sent for. Q'ūo Ssu would have none of him. Nung Fing had to work his necromancy without the patient's presence. That was the heaviest handicap a wizard could have. It almost disqualified him, and it offended him greatly. But he longed to pouch the generous fee Q'ūo Chung had promised; so, Nung Fing the wizard did his best.

For its more privacy, and because—whatever other skill he lacked—Nung Fing was an able stage-manager, the medicine-man wrought his necromancy "in the dead vast and middle of the night," on a gloomy clearing at the base of a cypress-shaded hillside. And because of scoffing Q'ūo Ssu the rite was performed well distant from the house.

The wind was up, not boisterously, but soughing, sobbing weirdly through the trees. Nature was playing up to Nung loyally to-night.

Up above the cypress belt, the cliff's bare rockside was honeycombed with open-faced caves and crevices. They were absolutely inaccessible. No man could scale up to them, not even the surest footed of the marvellously sure and dexterous Yün-nan ponies. Yet each cave held at least one coffin. Most of them held more. The starlight showed them clearly now and then when the heavy clouds drifted away. The people called them "fairy coffins"—perhaps believed them so. Superstition and ignorance are more rife in Yün-nan than in any other part of China. The coffins were real enough. Who placed them there?—none can even surmise. They have been there longer than Yün-nan's recorded history. Some forgotten race, greatly strong, superlatively athletic, must have hauled them up or slung them down, and placed them there—unless

the formation of the cliff and of its surroundings had changed incredibly in time's upheavals and downslides.

A black and sullen river tore literally through the hill's solid rock above the coffin-caverns, and disappeared again tempestuously into the rock beneath them; all its angry outer course dripped gigantic stalactites, as if bygone giants of fabulous size had left their frozen tears to mourn the man-forgotten dead.

Storm-fleeing night-birds flapped and cried.

Nung Fing had indeed chosen his theatre well.

But for two immovable acolytes, who held great flaming torches above him, the wizard stood alone in the centre of the wide human ring formed by his own chorus and by Q'ūo's kinsmen and retainers.

There was not a woman here. Magic cannot be performed in the presence of the "mean-ones."

A fire of charcoal and resined wood burned before the wizard; a great caldron of oil was hissing on it. A flat basket heaped with eggs stood at his feet. A goat was tethered near him, between two stout bolted boxes.

The "doctor" was magnificently apparelled. His purple velvet coat was heavily embossed with pink and scarlet tulips. His green satin petticoat was sprinkled thickly with black luck-bats. His naked arms were festooned with long variegated, glittering chains of glass beads. Below his skirt his legs were bare; but what they lacked in stockings his feet made up in shoes. The shoes were of soft blue leather, a cat's head grinned up from one of them, an owl's head from the other. The owl's head was cleverly made from glass-eyed, painted clay. The cat's head had lived once. A small brocade-lined tiger's skin hung from his shoulders. It was badly worn and moth-riddled, but of immense antiquity and value. His face was painted a ghastly white, his lips were thickly smeared with phosphorescent green paint. Most of all—and most terrible—was his head-dress: a Jack o' lantern of human bones and skin, a red candle burning in it, bats' wings for its ears; worms, beautifully made of tissue paper twisted over spirals of hair-thin wire, sprawled, and seemed to crawl, from gape-open toothless mouth and eyeless sockets. It wore a diminutive, high-perched mandarin's hat; fashioned so small that it might not hide the hideousness it crowned.

Q'ūo Chung sat alone on the bare ground just inside the human circle. He wore no trappings; only the wizard did.

The rites began with repeated volleys of fire-crackers—to frighten away every hovering demon, every spirit of ill-intent.

Music followed to invite and to pleasure the kindly spirit ones of good intent. The music was mixed, and it was badly amateur. Jews' harps predominated feebly, for all that they were very large ones. Drums and gongs made up in sound what they lacked in number and in finesse. Three fiddles made no pretence of being tuned together. The flute took its own key. But one musical quality they all achieved faultlessly: they kept perfect time. Accurate time is the hall-mark of all Chinese music; few Western musicians who might not envy it.

When the instruments ceased—it was not soon—Q'ūo Chung laid him face down in supplication, and his sons, the next in kinship to Q'ūo Ssu, led in wailing. Except Q'ūo Chung prone on the ground, and Nung Fing and his two attendant satellites, still unmoved, they all wailed—up and down, up and down, more and more crescendo, more and more doleful. Long minutes in the insatiable maw of time, were lost for ever in the maze of eternity, before the wailing ceased. It did not slacken or dwindle. It ceased abruptly, completely and in absolute unison; as if one great voice of prayer and sorrow suddenly had been knife-cut.

The doctor's painted face quivered convulsively. Q'ūo Chung sat up, and watched Nung Fing intently. All the others craned their necks to watch the nearer.

The wizard drew a knife from his bosom, chanting a guttural charm, slashed his left forearm furiously. They all saw the blade buried in his flesh. They heard his skin rip.

"Approach me, Q'ūo Chung," the charlatan—if he were one—commanded. "The miracle works!"

Q'ūo Ssu's father rose and obeyed.

"Draw from me the sacred knife," Nung Fing ordered, holding out the arm it pierced.

Q'ūo Chung obeyed.

The knife's blade was clean. Nung Fing's arm was whole.

A great guttural sigh quivered the watching circle. Tears started in Q'ūo Chung's eyes.

A tremendous scream of fire-crackers hissed and spat.

The wonder-worker held out his left hand, and took the knife from Q'ūo Chung. Q'ūo Chung saw the muscles ripple powerfully in the arm that should have been hanging limp and bleeding.

Nung Fing strode to the now moaning goat. The two attendants kept obsequious pace with him, and kept the flare of their torches on his immobile painted face.

With one clutch of his right hand's sinewy fingers Nung Fing caught the terrified goat by its long knotted mane, with one twist of his right arm lifted it high as his own grotesque, preposterous head-dress, flung it down again on its back, and with one move of the knife in his left hand ripped the poor creature from jaw to tail. One more cut of the knife, a cross-cut, and he lifted out on its point the animal's still-throbbing heart, held it up for all to see. The knife ran blood now, Nung Fing's hand and forearm dripped vermilion, blood pooled at the wizard's feet. The stuffed cat's head on his left shoe was spattered.

Nung Fing carried the dripping heart to the bubbling caldron, and tossed the raw heart in. Q'ūo Chung lugged the slaughtered goat at Nung Fing's heels, and heaved the carcass into the oil-filled caldron—matted hair, hoofs, and all.

Music followed fire-crackers; fire-crackers followed music.

The rest was less. But it was equally important and sacerdotal. The human ring watched it as breathlessly, drawing a little closer to the caldron as they did.

The wizard cut open one of the boxes. A long snake writhed out, and raised an angry, hooded, hissing head. It hissed but once before the medicine man's knife had found its neck, and instantly sliced off the pointed, spotted head. Severed head and headless dead snake went into the loathsome cooking-pot.

When the second box was cut open, carelessly and contemptuously, two draggled white cocks—common barnyard ones, and old—limped out dejectedly. Their despatch was quick and easy. In they went, feathers and all.

The eggs Nung Fing dropped in one by one, and reverently chanting an incantation as he did.

Again the scream of fire-crackers split the night air.

The broth was complete; its last ingredient was boiling furiously.

Then the climax!

Nung Fing thrust his left hand slowly into the boiling oil, drew out an egg, held it high for all to see, and let it slip back into the oil again, releasing it gently and slowly from his uninjured fingers.

And, because the boiling oil had been powerless to burn Nung Fing the

wizard, Q’ūo Ssu was cured.

The gods had heard and had granted.

A flagon was filled with the broth—for Q’ūo Ssu to drink. An egg, too, was taken out and reserved for her. All the rest the watchers shared when the broth had a very little cooled.

It had been a great miracle, greatly performed. And great as was Q’ūo Chung the wax-insect breeder’s joy, the extortionate price he paid Nung Fing wrung with torture the withers of Q’ūo Chung the insect breeder.

The next day Q’ūo Ssu drank the broth and ate the hard boiled egg contentedly, and enjoyed them. Would she have tasted or enjoyed if she had known all the broth’s ingredients? Only the gods of China know!

But she never knew. And there was only one hitch—slight, but a hitch: the spell did not work; the great miracle was barren. Q’ūo Ssu’s lassitude and restless discontent did not lessen. They increased.

Great and bitter was the wrath of Q’ūo Chung the insect breeder. Nung Fing went in fear of slaughter; and presently Nung Fing betook him and his high gift to Hu-peh. And Nung Fing went swiftly and secretly.

Q'ūo Xink, the half-Nosu grandmother, advised marriage. Q'ūo Chung fell into quick rage, and answered the old-one more abruptly than a Chinese should retort to an ancestor, even a living ancestor. Q'ūo Ssu was but a child-one. She should wear no red-veiled bride-crown for many on many a moon. The grandmother shrugged good-naturedly, and let it go. Despite her Nosu blood, she was not dominant of temper; she cared more to be at ease and at peace than she did to rule; and she cared little about it either way. Her years had bent and wearied her, and the old-one was selfish.

But Q'ūo Chung's conscience thorned him. He knew that his reluctance to part with Q'ūo Ssu made the girl's going to marriage abhorrent to him far more than her few tender years did. His conscience pricked him, and he pondered day after day, and communed with his long water-pipe night after night what he could find to give or to do that would bring her old gayness and zest to Q'ūo Ssu. The others prated and cackled together shrilly about it. Q'ūo Chung sat apart and thought.

And he found it. Q'ūo Chung himself thought out the cure of Q'ūo Ssu, announced it jubilantly and with rock-firm determination to the amazed and appalled family, and never suspected that Q'ūo Ssu had put the idea into his troubled head.

"Carry the tender-one with you when you go to Sze-ch'uen to deliver the wax-worms! You are mad to make the long-perilled journey yourself," Q'ūo Zat, his wife, wailed. "To take the girl-one would be to throw her to the forest wolves. Better and kinder to bind her arms and legs, tie a heavy rock at her girdle, and pitch her into the Great River where its torrents are fiercest and its Dragon cruellest. That end would be quick—a kindness matched against what you speak you will do. Sooner than suffer it, I, her mother, will feed her full of poppy, and slay her while she sleeps."

Q'ūo Chung smiled—all a woman's railing was worth.

Q'ūo Ssu giggled.

Q'ūo Zat, the wife and mother, said more. She scarcely had begun. She said a very great deal more. She shrilled it with oaths, she sobbed it with tears.

Q'ūo Chung continued to smile.

Q'ūo Ssu continued to giggle.

They had made up their minds. Q’ūo Zat was welcome to say and to storm what she would. So were they all. But no one else troubled to say anything. For they all knew—including perturbed (and perhaps a little jealous) Q’ūo Zat herself—that when Q’ūo Chung and Q’ūo Ssu had made up their minds, and made them up alike, no one else, no combination of others, would influence them. The herd mind counted for little, the herd will counted for nothing, in the home of Q’ūo Chung, where only Q’ūo Chung and Q’ūo Ssu ruled.

But at last, “Hush! Speak no more!” patient Q’ūo Chung commanded. “I will eat now. When I have eaten and pulled my pipe for an hour I will sleep. You have heard, woman. Obey.”

Q’ūo Zat rose and shuffled off angrily. No one else spoke. Presently she shuffled back bringing Q’ūo Chung his heated rice-wine. She offered it to him, sulky but meek, and stood before him to refill his cup again and again while Q’ūo Ssu and the servants laid his stew of pounded duck and sweet potatoes on the low table beside his chair. They all served him, his servants and women—all but the old grandmother half adoze (or pretending to be) with her pipe, on her stool by the fire.

“A man fed with white rice, warmed with wine, and his poppy-pipe well lit, can be led like a child.” Q’ūo Zat had found the adage reliable at times. She tested it now.

“To journey at breakneck pace all through the night, to swelter all day by the rough roadside,” she began pleadingly.

Q’ūo Chung smiled at her lazily through the smoke-curls of his pipe.

“Q’ūo Ssu goes with me,” he said. “She shall journey like a Manchu princess. She shall go safe and sit soft; and so shall she return.”

“If she returns!” his wife gibed darkly.

Q’ūo Ssu dimpled, but Q’ūo Chung frowned at last. “Wish you that I divorce you, over-talkative woman?”

The woman paled and cowered at his threat. Its terrible fulfilment was in his power; as it is within the power of every Chinese husband in those primitive, conventional parts of China where the good old manners and customs of Old China still persist, where the authority of the old laws still runs. “We start when the moon’s new sickle first cuts through the sky. See you that the lily-one is ready.”

“I will be ready,” Q’ūo Ssu gurgled up at him from her seat at his feet.

“I dare stand pledge you will,” the father retorted. “See you, Q’ūo Zat, that

she is well plenished—garments and quilts; all that makes a young lily-one's comfort. Omit nothing. Forget nothing. At your peril!"

"What slave-women will attend her?" his wife asked.

"That point I will consider, and I will give you my command of it to-morrow. We will speak no more of it to-night."

Q'ūo Zat said no more. But she let her lip curl. Well she knew that Q'ūo Chung's considering of the point she had raised would be in consultation with Q'ūo Ssu.

A little jealous sometimes of her own daughter, and not without cause, yet the unpampered wife loved her girl child well. Many a taper she lit to Kwan Yin-ko, many an hour she knelt alone before Kwan, and prayed the Hearer-of-cries that Q'ūo Ssu might be given only to kindness in marriage. With what bitterness might not Ssu miss Q'ūo Chung her father, pine and wilt for his indulgence and tenderness!

Many a Chinese gives his daughter a sunnier, fuller comradeship than his wife ever wins. Q'ūo Zat's anxious prayer was not without grave reason.

If he had inherited it, the seeding of it must have been a long time ago; its record lost in the thick mists of time. But the heritage was his whether heaven-sent to him in his cradle, or bequeathed him by some far-off ancestor of whom he never had heard. It was his; he was its.

That it was just heaven-sent, his very own, inherited from no one, seems the more probable. Talent usually has a more or less clear-cut ancestry; genius oftener is individual, a personal possession, not a link in a chain.

It was impossible to say when it began in him. Its first indications, given before he was short-coated, passed unnoticed; and so did the many indications of the first few following years.

The first time he opened his eyes wide with intelligence, pleasure, and consideration the canary in its cage in the next room was singing vigorously. Brent was three months old, young to have that thoughtful look in his eyes. But most babies are attracted by noise—musical or raucous. The first time he smiled happily, then gurgled delightedly, a hand-organ down in the street was pounding out “Believe me, if all those endearing young charms” for all it and the Italian were worth. But what of that? Neither nurse thought anything at all. No doubt the smile proclaimed a stomach-ache and the even cheerfuller gurgle its departure. Every nurse knows that.

Brent liked noise. All boys did. And no one—until it was too late, and a family’s tragedy full on them—was clever or observant enough to notice or realise that Brent Gayford, babe and boy, liked only sweet noises.

He gave them hints and to spare, but no one appreciated them.

The day he screamed for the toy violin conspicuous in a shop’s window chanced to be his birthday, but perhaps not less because a “scene,” even an infant one, on Kensington High Street appalled Nelson’s large sense of personal dignity, the head nurse whipped him out of his pram and carried him into the shop, he all wreathed in smiles now and murmuring, “Good Nannie, mine nice Nannie,” ingratiatingly. He was highly pleased with Nelson now.

Nelson, a convinced and on the whole consistent disciplinarian, was less pleased with herself. Master Brent already had had great largess that morning. Gifts had rained upon him in profusion. She herself had paid him tin-soldier tribute when he woke, and so had Jennie the under-nurse.

However, she was not going to walk into Kensington Gardens beside a pramful of screaming, kicking rage. The demanded toy, complete bow and all, was purchased, and the baby trotted back on his sturdy little legs to the waiting pram and its attendant under-nurse.

Brent never had heard or seen a violin. Perhaps its arresting shape had caught his infant fancy. Perhaps——

He “played” it all the way to the Round Pond. That he did disturbed no one. Either it was a mute violin, or else the tot did not get the hang of it. But he scraped its strings softly with the toy bow, and was entirely happy.

That violin had pride of place and of love in the little boy’s nurseries long after all his many other costlier birthday toys had palled and were neglected. He called it his “Noo-noo,” and more than once he fell asleep with his fat little face pillowed on it.

When Brent was nearing five his cousin Lady Cynthia Grey (his elder by a twelvemonth) came on a visit to their grandfather’s house on Sloane Street. With her she brought many dolls, three Teddy bears, and one piano. Brent swooped upon the toy piano. It was derelict. Two of its few keys were silent, another was loose. But presently he picked out of it a tiny tune.

And so it went on—and no one noticed. He found his way to the drawing-room piano one day when it was open. Standing at it, his head not much taller than the keyboard, after a vain attempt to perch himself on the stool he hit a note with eager, loving fingers, and presently he found a chord.

General Gayford gave his orphan grandson a drum—all boys like drums, and it was a suitable and soldierly toy for a future soldier. Brent was dedicated to the Army from birth, as all the male Gayfords were, and had been almost since Agincourt. That the youngster soon beat the little drum in time and tune the old General never suspected. Raymond Gayford had been a notable soldier, but he had been the despair of several regimental band-masters. From First Lieutenant to General he never had known his own regimental march from any other. He always recognised the Anthem, perhaps by some atavistic method of his own, and was ready to knock the hat off of any lout who failed to uncover at its first note; would have rejoiced to knock the head off as well; but that was the all of the old soldier’s musical attainment. Literally he did not know “Rule Britannia” from “Pack up your troubles in your old kit-bag.”

Brent—named so for his mother’s family—was the old General’s only grandson, the child of Sir Raymond’s youngest son who had died in battle, as had his two elder brothers. If the General had suffered when all his sons had been killed at the Front, all in a three months, he gave no sign. The youngest

had been his favourite, openly and always. Nor had the two older brothers resented it. Harry had been the pick of the Gayford bunch in every way—true, sunny-natured, full of laughter, incorruptible. To know him was to love him. And his friends were legion. He had married his first love, a girl as lovable and charming as he. General Gayford had liked her cordially—all the more cordially perhaps because he had frankly detested his other daughters-in-law. She had died when Brent was two, and the General had grieved fiercely, unashamed to show for her the sorrow he shamed to show for his three soldier sons who had given King and Country the service of death.

When the War had orphaned him his mother's mother had pleaded to have little Brent. Raymond Gayford would not even discuss it, let alone consider it. Sir William and Lady Brent might visit him as often as they would, the General would be delighted—or so he said—but his grandson stayed with him, not to leave him until the necessity of a good preparatory school preceded Eton and Sandhurst.

That his Eton days might be a little longer (boys that are going into the Army cannot stay long at public school) Brent went to his preparatory school younger than most boys do.

The General chose that boarding-school carefully, and almost broke down the day he left the boy there. It was their first separation. And Topham, the servant who had been with him longest, knew that General Sir Raymond Gayford was counting the hours until his grandson's first holidays came.

Having entrusted his boy to a headmaster in whom he had entire confidence, the General bothered himself not at all about what Brent was taught or how. He had told the Head to get the lad ready for Eton. He expected them to do it. How they did was their job, no concern of his. Civilian curricula did not interest him. He saw that Brent's reports, on the whole, were uniformly good as to both lessons and conduct. If the boy was not often "top," he never was bottom or near it. He had told Brent to be good but not too good; evidently Brent was obeying him. The occasional misdemeanours reported were boy-like and harmless enough. Sir Raymond did not regret them.

He did just notice once that there was mention of "Music progress." That was waste of time, but, if it was a school rule, let it go. The old military martinet was the last of all men to demand or wish "rules" to be relaxed—not even fool ones. Singing hymns in chorus wouldn't hurt Brent. No doubt it didn't amount to five minutes a day; just an excuse to put down another "extra" on an already swelling bill. They wouldn't rope his grandson into a singing or any other sort of musical fraternity; Brent was a Gayford—born a soldier. The whizzing of the bullets was the only music that Brent would ever

care for—Brent or any other Gayford ever born. “Halt” and “Right about turn” were the only tunes he’d ever sing. It was hard luck on the boy that he had been born too late to fight in the Great War, damned hard luck. But England’s wars were not done, not by a jugful, let the water-blooded old women of pacifists and such say what they liked, confer and scheme how they choose. Brent would get his soldier’s chance. God grant that he—the General—should live to see that day!

Brent was not counting his days; he was enjoying them too absorbedly. School-life was unbroken, tingling joy. He liked all of it. It was a good school and a sane one, carefully ruled and watched over by a manly gentleman who had vision and common sense; an exceptionally “right” place for growing, plastic boys. Brent Gayford had work he liked and found little difficulty in doing moderately well. He had glorious sport and wholesome exercise, and loved them. Best of all he had comradeship, which until now he always had lacked and longed for without knowing that he did. And he had a music master who almost at once discovered what was the very core of the boy’s being, held his peace about it while he fostered it, and both fathered and mothered the boy; did it so unobstrusively that Brent, and what was even better, Brent’s schoolfellows, never suspected it.

Young Gayford thought that “old von Schultz” was jolly decent to him, and liked the quiet, often lonely, Austrian more than either of them realised, but it was Dick Wentworth whom Brent loved. For the time Dick almost superseded music itself in the younger boy’s glowing heart. And Dick returned Brent’s affection fully. They did everything together, work and play. On one historic occasion they beat gloriously their opponents at squash-rackets, and won identical medals—very small ones, shaped a little like the Maltese Cross—duly inscribed. No big silver cup of their after-years’ ‘Varsity prowess ever gave either of them half the joy or a quarter the pride that those first tiny trophies did. They wrung each other’s hands and danced in triumph (when no one could see them) and exchanged a vow always to wear and to treasure this first dear sports spoil of theirs that they had won together.

Emphatically Brent did not count the days until the coming of his first long holiday. When June came so near that the soon approach of “the hols” no longer could be forgotten or ignored Brent fidgeted at thought of them, regretted that they were so near and could not be escaped. Then Dick announced that his mater had written that he might bring his chum home with him for the summer vac. Paradise opened.

Then the cross of life thudded down on Brent Gayford—his first real trouble. It scarified him. He never quite forgot it; he never will. General Sir

Raymond Gayford put his foot down. His grandson was spending the holiday with him, at home in the Priory. Brent did not take it well. He raged, more than once he swore—oaths more vivid than so young a lad so well-born and so carefully brought up should have heard, let alone known. And, strictly in private, he wept. But he spent his holiday in Kent, at the ancestral Priory, had a middling good time part of the time; and it did not occur to either boy to write to the other.

The boy was stoical, notwithstanding the tears he had shed in the privacy of his school bed. He gave no sign that he was enraged, none that he was bored. And his sore disappointment had to recede a little before the grandparent's undisguised delight at having him and pride in him. The old soldier unbent as he had not since his youthful wooing of Brent's grandmother. He saw that the boy had grown and how straight. He caught a deeper note in the lad's clear voice.

Brent Gayford had had a pony almost as soon as he could walk. An officer in *the* regiment must ride well; the sooner the better. But now his grandfather gave him a larger, more mettled mount—almost a horse. Brent was delighted and grateful. But he was not sorry to go back to school when the day came.

BECAUSE there was diphtheria in one of the cottages Brent was allowed to spend his two weeks of Christmas holiday with Dick. At Easter Dick visited Brent. Luckily Sir Raymond approved young Wentworth heartily. After that no home-bar was put up against the boys' growing intimacy. They were as inseparable as Juno's swans, and did one another a deal of good, egged each other on to healthsome bodily achievements, spurred and restrained each other in several useful ways. Dick was the sturdier, had more of the splendid salts of aristocratic commonplaceness and of bounding humour. Perhaps Brent was the sweeter, certainly in his own quiet way he was the more determined; at once the more easily moved and the less to be influenced or swayed. Both were sunny, healthy boys, sound young animals, thoroughly nice boys. The Wentworths were as glad to welcome Brent as the General soon grew to welcome Dick.

Brent had been at Hurstcroft two years—two school years—when General Gayford first visited him there. Sir Raymond did not believe in butting in on another man's job. No one ever had been allowed to butt in on his. And he took as good as he gave every time; that he did was characteristic of him. Too, he had no great enjoyment of educational establishments. They bored him; if they did not even embarrass him. Possibly he was not altogether unconscious that he did not show to his best advantage in a school environment.

But at the break-up concert of the boy's second and last year of the preparatory school the old soldier appeared as a matter of honour, an act of loyalty to the grandson. A score of other of Brent's relatives both paternal and maternal attended also.

Brent received three prize-books; one more than Dick did. And Brent played a solo—on a fiddle! Dick led the applause. "Bless my soul!" said the General. Herr von Schultz watched the grandfather as the grandson played, and avoided being presented to his favourite pupil's "governor" a little later.

But on the whole Gayford was more amused than annoyed. It was a rum joke, he decided. And when the boy had to play "The Spring Song" again, in spite of "No encores" on the much too long programme the General put it all down to his child's personality, and not for a moment to any budding gift as a music-maker. So, too, did all but one of all the other Gayfords and Brents sitting there—all very pleased to see how soldierly their boy bore himself, how calm, how well he stood, and how popular he was. His men would love him

when he was Subaltern, Captain, and Colonel. That was splendid. His men would follow him anywhere—his aunts and cousins put it; “through hell-fire” was the General’s proud reflection—the fine old soldier whose three sons had died in battle’s hell-fire.

Lady Sarah, Brent’s great-aunt—a spinster at sixty-two, who disliked Raymond Gayford almost half as much as Sir Raymond hated her—read it differently; an exceptionally shrewd old woman, as musicless as the rest of them, but who knew distinction when she met it, and had a lifelong talent that approached genius for reading between lines—even faint lines. She looked at the General with a glint of malicious amusement in her hard agate eyes. But her always hard thin lips pressed each other sourly, harder than usual. Her father (except Brent and Brent’s mother), the one creature, the only thing, she had loved in all her thin life, had been a distinguished soldier. She would approve of an organ-grinder in the family as little as the General. But she saw how the boy’s slight hands loved the fiddle and its bow, saw their adolescent mastery; and while she winced, she rejoiced tartly to think of what Raymond Gayford, in her opinion, was going to be up against, if he lived a few years longer—which she had no doubt he would; all the Gayfords were tough. She might be mistaken, but she wasn’t often. Oddly enough, the woman, with no germ of art in her soul or body, in some inexplicable way, usually could sense the essential difference between an artist and an amateur.

Lady Sarah saw what she saw—or thought she saw. But she kept her counsel; it was her way. No one ever heard her say, “I told you so”; for she never had told them. The woman squandered as few words as she did smiles; silent and tart, but a *grande dame* for all that. Brent “rather liked” her. But the boy liked most people, if he thought of them at all. He was very fond of his grandfather. His love was all for Dick—and fiddle.

After Hurstcroft, Eton.

The boys both liked it, and did a modest amount of work, and made more than a creditable record at games. If he did not overwork himself at Latin or at maths, Brent worked enthusiastically at his music. Dick pursued with entire impartiality the various paths of learning imposed upon his attention. They all were tommy-rot, and all of them were Greek to him, he said. In saying that, he did himself some injustice, claiming more indifference and density than were his; that he did was characteristically boyish. He understood quite a little of what he worked at—when he worked. And once he handed in History Q’s that gave his tutor genuine pleasure and some little encouragement. But Brent

worked harder at his music than Dick worked at all his studies, many times harder than Dick Wentworth ever would work at anything all his life through, and, take him all in all, Wentworth was no shirker. “Book learning” did not fascinate him, but there were other industries that did, and he served them not too meanly; for boy and man he was manly.

Musical Eton discovered Brent at once. His flute-like voice was charming; the violin was his instrument, but not his only one. Only his one master knew that timidly and shyly he began to compose—little tentative scraps, stray bars, of harmony. The boy’s soul was soaked in music.

The English musician—no mean one—often wondered how it would end. He did not realise as fully as von Schultz, centuried in the best Continental musical culture, had how intensely and greatly musical the lad was. And Mr. Kennedy not only knew that Brent, come from two races of soldiers, was dedicated to the Army, but he knew General Gayford—knew his quality and the set of his jaw, and he knew the pull and force of “family” in the caste to which English Brent belonged.

The Austrian musician knew how it must end. He knew little, and had seen less of General Gayford. But that was not why von Schultz knew while Kennedy only questioned. Von Schultz was confident that the boy’s art-bent was stronger than the boy, stronger than environment or any pull, however strong, of family, family prearrangements, or circumstance of future years. Mr. Kennedy thought that Brent might go far, Herr von Schultz knew that he must, knew that he inevitably would work out and follow his vocation, because it was vocation and because he must—unless only some woman perhaps should dam or shatter it. Only a woman ever could fetter or kill the artist, divert or poison the welling genius of Brent Gayford, the Viennese was sure.

But no one else suspected; least of all the Gayfords or the Brents—unless Lady Sarah ever recalled what had passed through her startled thought when her little grand-nephew, holding his fiddle as if he loved it, drawing his bow as if were self, a better, defter, dearer limb, had played “The Spring Song” at Hurstcroft.

None of the other boys knew. They were not a deeply musical crew. Among them there were a few good voices, a score that were not bad, a number played the piano prettily or with vigour. There was a boy in Brent’s house, another in his form, who played the banjo tunefully, and there was a fellow in Pop who was a wonder at it. But music was not an obsession with Brent’s Eton mates, and those of them who cared for it most said nothing about it except among themselves.

Dick Wentworth, who knew most other things about Brent, whom he loved even as Brent loved him, thought his friend's fiddle, fiddle, fiddling a rather feeble joke, and always had. Dick had a musical gift of his own though; he whistled delightfully, with blackbird tunefulness. "The Boating Song" was at its best when Wentworth whistled it. "Land of Hope and Glory" (loved for him who wrote its lyric) sounded an affectionate anthem when Dick whistled it.

Brent was as popular at Eton as he had been at Hurstcroft. His music did not segregate or cloister him; it did not even mark him—among the boys. He was straight always. And he had charm—charm the other boys were quick to feel, although none of them knew he had it, or could have given it a name. And he had magnetism. He was powerful at footer, he was a beautiful cricketer. That marked him.

General Gayford came to Eton oftener than he had gone to the preparatory school. Eton did not embarrass him. He himself had spent a few riotous, unscholarly "halfs" there. But there! Every relative goes to Eton who can. Even ducal fathers and ones that are Cabinet Ministers are proud, perhaps a little vain, of having a boy at Eton, and like to be seen there with him. Who looks proudest and happiest at the Eton and Harrow match? Not the boy!

And at Eton, as at Hurstcroft, Sir Raymond made no comment at music-swollen bills. There was plenty of money. Brent was all he had. His own Eton bills had not been small, he remembered. When Brent asked for a new and better violin—the boy was not afraid of the old martinet, the General had taught him not to be; they were friends, and they understood each other well—the General laughed throatily, and bought the violin. It was a very good one. So long as he didn't have to hear it played too often, its cost did not matter at all.

When Brent had proffered his request he had spoken of the new instrument he asked for as a "fiddle"—quite accidentally. Possibly, had he said "violin" the General might have gibed, even refused. "Violin" has a musician-sound, there is more than a smack of art—and serious art, at that—about it. General Gayford distrusted all art, would have scoffed at it, and sternly disallowed it as a soldierly attribute. But "fiddle" has a rollicking, barrack-room, camp-fire sound about it, not too inappropriate to an officers' mess, in a lonely hill-station, especially after the C.O. has gone home for the night and the subalterns are left alone to amuse themselves with their own monkey-tricks. Teddy Charmichael, who had lived to earn his Cross and carry his baton, had played a banjo often at Simla, Jack Giles had had and mouthed a Jews' harp at Gib, and Jack had died a General. Brent was welcome to his fiddle, and the grandfather scarcely had noticed that it cost more than an A 1 polo pony. He

was used to footing preposterous bills for Brent, as he'd been to footing them for Brent's father and uncles, and as his own father had been for him.

His grandson's fancy for music struck him as the rummest thing he'd ever known. But Brent would have to do his turn at foreign service, of course. The General had no parlour tricks, nor any use for them. But he knew how jolly usefully they came in in Simla. Many a subaltern had owed promotion and his Colonel's wife's warm favour to creditable performances in the Simla A.D.C. Let the youngster fiddle at Simla if he liked. And since he wished for a new fiddle, it should be a particularly good one. Nothing was too good for the youngest, perhaps the last, of all the Gayford soldiers. The General thanked God that the boy was manly and clean, and paid the swelling Eton bills and paid for the costly "fiddle-thing" as cheerfully as he knew he'd pay presently for gorgeous waistcoats and other items of Sandhurst mufti—paid for the new violin and forgot all about it.

Eton days are swift. They went all too soon. Boys that were leaving choked at the old Eton Boating Song. The biggest, brawniest fellow in Pop buried his face in his handkerchief, and didn't give a damn who saw him do it. Wentworth went up to Cambridge. Brent went to the Priory to spend a few weeks with his grandfather before he went to Sandhurst.

BRENT wondered how his grandfather would take it. He must tell him now—it was going to be jolly hard. He ought to have said it long ago. But somehow he hadn't realised it himself until the last half. Lord! it was going to be stiffer than that last five minutes in the Wall Game.

The first syllable of his surname was the only gay thing there was or ever had been about Sir Raymond. He had been a solemn baby, a grave child, a strenuous soldier from Sandhurst to Whitehall, to retirement and austere old age. But it was whispered in the servants'-hall that the stern, unbending, ungenial man was wax in "Master Brent's" young hands. But that was as may be, for it never had been tested. Whatever the other servants suspected and gossiped, Topham, the white-haired butler, knew that Sir Raymond loved the grandson fiercely and not less tenderly.

Topham probably knew Sir Raymond better than anyone else now living did.

Topham had not been born to "service." He had succumbed to it painfully. He had been born at Aldershot in "married quarters," had been a drummer boy before he was young Raymond Gayford's batman. He had risen step by step to sergeant-major. He had and cherished no mean line of medals. The bravest thing he ever had done was becoming a house-servant, forcing himself to become an efficient and impeccable butler.

Topham had signalled a footman to remove the cloth, and had placed the excellent port at Sir Raymond's right hand. Then Topham noiselessly left the dining-room.

The General filled his port glass and pushed the decanter towards Brent.

The Priory dining-room might have been beautiful and was ugly. It was in scrupulous order. Topham saw to that. If Topham had not, the General, attached as he was to Topham, would have sacked him. The dark, massive furniture would have brought two or three thousand pounds at Christie's. Cut glass sparkled on the table and on the sideboard. The silver, of different periods, all was splendid. The six life-sized portraits were too fine to be greatly injured by their ponderous, preposterous, costly ornate frames; one was a Raeburn, two were Lelys; and the dead Gayfords whom they pictured all had been more than good-looking. But the big room was all wrong. There were no softened, shaded candles on the table; three lustre chandeliers, beautiful in

themselves, were too large even for the large room; and hung too high; they were fully lit, and poured a garish blaze of light down on all the room, showing and intensifying every one of its defects. The room needed the charity of soft lighting, it needed the right flowers and laughter. There were flowers on the table—Topham had selected and arranged them—and they were the unkindest cut of all in the ill-used room. There were four kinds of fruit on the table, arranged and placed with military precision by Topham. When Raymond Gayford had brought his bride home to the Priory the dining-room curtains, hangings, chair-upholsterings, the rugs and wallpaper had been a soft, lovely rose. All had faded now. Being of different textures they had faded into clashing shades of sick mauves and hideous pink-purple greys. Brent's mother had longed to replace them all. But no one could have dared ask Sir Raymond to discard what had been put here for his bride's homecoming. He had been her lover to their end, and when she left him after more than twenty years he never had known that her eyes were a trifle dimmer, the gold a little faded in her hair.

It was an ugly room, and every year would see it uglier, unless some day Brent Gayford brought a bride home to direct Topham, and to coax the General into lovelier ways.

But the Gayfords canvased on the faded walls were good to look at, and so were the two Gayfords sitting with the port decanter between them; tall, well built, clear eyed, clean featured, direct of glance.

They were not altogether unlike. Both were soldierly. Brent's brown eyes had a quick trick of Sir Raymond's blue ones. Their small ears set flat against heads of almost identical shape. Both had strong, well-kept, athletic hands. The man's fingers were square cut at the ends, his thumbs were wide and heavy, his dull nails were flat and square. The boy's slender fingers were well cushioned, his thumbs were shaped and proportioned to match them, his bright rounded nails were rosy. Raymond Gayford's hands were a soldier's; Brent Gayford's were an artist's. But the younger hands were as sturdy as they were fine and beautiful.

Both faces were proud and strong. Brent's had a wistful sweetness that the General's lacked, and a fuller, more sensitive mouth.

The General gestured the grandson to fill his glass.

"I envy you, my boy. You have the best life in the world before you—the only life for a Gayford. And I know you'll honour it—all the Gayfords have. And all the Brents, too," he added hastily. "You'll pull through at Sandhurst, as you did at Eton. Nobody wants you to do more than that. Got to go through

Sandhurst, of course. And you'll have a damned good time there. But his regiment is an officer's only school—the only school that ever teaches him anything. Active service is better still. You'll have a better time after you get your commission, in your regiment, than you will have at Sandhurst, and—as I have said—you'll have a damned good time at Sandhurst."

"I can't go to Sandhurst, sir."

"Huh?"

"I never can be a soldier."

Brent expected an explosion, and was confident that it would be a terrific one.

General Gayford only blinked at him through sharp old eyes that suddenly had grown dull and fish-like. If his ears had heard the boy's words, his mind had not. But presently as the boy spoke on, determined to get his message through now that he had nerved himself to broach it, Sir Raymond began to understand dimly, dully.

Brent told it all. He must live by music, as he lived in music. The old man's lips trembled before they curled. He could not apply for a commission, or accept one if it were offered him. If war came again, a great war, more than the regular army and the navy could cope with, if ever England were invaded—the General spluttered an ugly laugh—he would volunteer. He would fight for England in her need—Sir Raymond sneered—but he could not go to Sandhurst. He was going to be a musician—because he must.

General Gayford reached for the decanter to refill his empty glass. It hurt Brent to see the man's hand shake. Sir Raymond poured the wine, missing the glass; the port ran in pools and trickles of ruby on the clothless table. The man's face flared redder than the wine, then went corpse-white. He rose up stiffly and went not too steadily from the room. Brent dared not follow. He rang for a footman to wipe the wine from the table, and went out into the garden.

Brent Gayford's heart was heavy. His young throat ached.

Was it worth it? Could he persist? Hurt his grandfather almost to the death? To the death, perhaps! He had seen and sensed what the General was suffering; half had expected him to fall when he rose jerkily from his chair.

Was music worth it? All the music in the world worth it? Did he have to make music? He could hear it—good music—at least sometimes. He could play a little now and then. Who was he, what was music, that he should

sacrifice the fine old fellow who always, in his own soldier-way, had been mother-good to him, an old, old man whose all he was?

It was morning when Brent Gayford slipped back into the house, up to his own rooms, and filled his bath.

But he knew.

And he was suffering less than the grandfather was, only because youth cannot experience the torture of age defeated.

THE weeks that followed were scarifying to them both.

Neither would yield. Neither could yield.

Brent kept his temper to the end. He always was glad to remember that he had.

Sir Raymond kept his temper for a long time. Desperation kept him suave. He was playing for great stakes—heart-stakes. What his fiercely enforced self-control cost him not even his own soul knew. But Brent and old Topham knew that the cost and the strain were terrible.

Sir Raymond argued courteously. Then he pleaded. And twice Brent broke down, wavered, almost promised. There had been long years of unbroken fealty between them—all of his lifetime—and he knew that he was his grandfather's all: he and family and the long, unbroken, untarnished military record of their race.

Twice the boy almost promised.

But music called him.

Sir Raymond's patience cracked, then broke into angry fragments. And he said terrible things, threatened outrageous ones. But his grandson did not love him the less for that, because he knew that it was the old General's pain and dismay that insulted and cursed and threatened.

Humiliated almost beyond endurance at having to own even to himself, still more at having to own it to others, that a situation had arisen between him and his grandson that he could not handle unaided, Sir Raymond sent for his solicitor, a proved friend and adviser to whom Brent was strongly attached; and when that failed, the troubled old soldier called a family conclave, even sent for Lady Sarah—his enemy, he knew, as he was hers. There was no devil in all Satan's wide kingdom whom Raymond Gayford would not have called and supplicated now.

Mr. Williams sympathised strongly with General Gayford; it seemed most regrettable to him that young Gayford should discard the honourable ancestral profession of arms (and certain preferment of several sorts) for the precarious and much less creditable—at least in England—life of a professional musician. But he had lived too long, and had known human creatures too well, not to

know how determined youth can be. And he always had known that under this boy's bright velvet smile there was hard granite of character, that came straight enough both from the Gayfords and from the Brents. Nor did he consider musicians—those of them that succeeded—quite as the pariahs that the angered and narrow General did. Two of Williams, Vibart and Orme's long-standing clients were musicians. Both were *personæ gratæ* and more than that in very high circles. One was exceedingly rich.

But Williams undertook to do his best. He did it loyally and deftly. He failed. And after a long friendly talk with Brent as they wandered about the country lanes he told Sir Raymond that he was convinced that Brent would follow his bent, and even went so far as to advise his client to yield.

General Gayford would be damned if he did.

"You can coerce him until he is of age. When he is, there is nothing you can do. We are helpless then. And in the meantime you cannot make him apply for a commission, you cannot force him to accept one. Another thing; being over fourteen, he can, if he choose, ask the court to accord him another guardian."

"Rubbish!"

"But the law. A remote contingency, I admit. But a possible contingency."

"He wouldn't do that. And if he did try it, he'd fail."

"Not for a moment do I think he would make the attempt. Probably he does not know that he could. If he does know it, I cannot believe that there is even a remote probability that it would occur to him to use such a weapon against you. But the possibility exists. And we lawyers know how often—especially in such cases as this—the remotest possibility becomes the established fact. As to his not succeeding; I think he might. No court, I believe, would compel him to be a soldier against his will. And, if the court did, what would his position be among his fellow cadets at Sandhurst, among his brother officers later?"

The General groaned. Williams had drawn blood.

"Unless we can persuade him, I think, Sir Raymond, that we must yield."

The General spluttered an ugly oath.

"Every possible line of persuasion must be exhausted first," the solicitor said conciliatingly.

It was then that the family was summoned—both families—and a round dozen of them came.

Much as he disliked her, Lady Sarah was Sir Raymond's best hope. If she stood with him fair and square, went with him all the way, he believed that they together could persuade Brent yet, or—failing that—starve him out. It would be gallingly bitter to own success to partnership with Sarah Brent. But it had to be swallowed. Any port in such a desperate storm.

Lady Sarah would stand with him, of course. She would see it as he did. The woman was a cat—a sour one—but she had sense, race, and family pride. She was a Brent.

They came from four different counties at General Sir Raymond Gayford's call. Lady Sarah saw it as he did—its undesirability, its damage to family prestige. They all did.

But, too, it tickled her sense of humour. Her sharp eyes twinkled as she talked it over with the would-be violinist, and once she laughed outright.

They were fond of each other, the sunny boy and the acidulated old woman. Next to his grandfather Brent Gayford had grown almost fonder of his great-aunt Sarah than he was of anyone else in the world except Dick. She said nothing about it, it was highly improbable that she ever would, but Lady Sarah loved Brent almost as fiercely as his grandfather did; loved him as she had loved his mother; two of the only three loves of her sixty odd years. When in so much more than half a century a woman loves but three, she can, and usually she does, concentrate a great deal of feeling in those three affections. Many people deemed Lady Sarah Brent cold, because she was hard and tart. "White-hot" would have been a shrewder estimate. She wore no heart on her sleeve. She disliked most people—Raymond Gayford more than all others. But the love she gave was great love. And with every fibre of her being she was loyal.

The General knew that his boy was the one living creature that "got on" measurably with Lady Sarah. Well, who didn't the rascal get on with, bless him! Everyone fell for Brent. More than that, the old General would not own even to himself. He did not suspect half how much the two cared for each other, and he would not own to a quarter of what he did suspect.

It was not from her affection for Brent, still less from any affection of Brent's for her, that Sir Raymond hoped much; it was from the woman's purse-strings; the big heavy purse that she and only she could open wide or shut tight.

Brent's mother had been an heiress. His maternal grandfather's fortune

would be Brent's when Brent was twenty-one. Until he was Lady Sarah Brent was its sole trustee, as she had been of his mother's income. She never had advanced the boy a farthing, though she had given him more than once a pound of her own. Sir Raymond had been selfish about *their* boy, rarely would let Brent visit her, or be alone with her for an hour when, lured there by love of the boy and longing to see him, she had invited herself to visit the Priory or Sloane Street, and had arrived without giving the General time to put her off; let the General support him then. Sir Raymond had asked nothing better. His means were more than ample. He would have liked it better if Brent had had no other inheritance than the generous fortune he himself should leave him, and share with him while he lived.

Not a penny of his should any Gayford have who disgraced his birth and breeding by turning organ-grinder or fiddler. That was fixed. Unfortunately Brent could claim his mother's fortune, capital and all, the day he was twenty-one. There'd be no way of getting around that, Williams had assured him. But that was nearly three years off yet. A lot could be done in three years. If only Sarah Brent played the game. But, of course, she would. Between them they'd starve the boy out. The General tried to believe that he believed that. He did not know his boy's grit. It never had been greatly tested. But deep in his stubborn old heart he suspected its quality. Brent was a Gayford.

He wondered how much money the boy had by him, if any, and cursed himself that he had allowanced him so lavishly. He knew that often Brent was well in funds on quarter-day. Lord—he hoped it wasn't that way now. Pshaw! a hundred or so would not last the beggar long.

But couldn't he borrow? The boy had hosts of friends.

The Jews! Damn! He hadn't thought of them. They could not lend to minors, of course; but they did. Would Brent go to them? He thought not. It wouldn't be like the boy. And yet——

He watched them with a wry face when through the smoking-room window he saw Lady Sarah and Brent stroll off together between the lime-trees. It galled him that he must owe victory—if victory he got—to Sarah Brent. However!

Two hour's later he saw them come back. The man's heart leapt. The woman's face was softer than ever before he'd seen it. Brent's arm lay about her thin shoulder. She had won!

SIR RAYMOND was wrong.

The boy had won.

Lady Sarah told the General so bluntly, coming straight to him to do it the moment she entered the house. She was disappointed and sorry, though very little surprised. But her own chagrin was lessened and sweetened by what she knew the General would feel, and by her keen enjoyment in dealing him the blow. She had been his last card, she knew, or Raymond Gayford never would have played her.

The old soldier aged as she told him.

"And when you said you'd not give him a shilling until you had to? That cut no ice at all with him? It will, though, when he's had a bit of it. We are not beaten yet."

"I told him no such thing."

The General gulped.

"It would have done no good. I know my nephew." Curse the woman! Damn her insolence. *Her* nephew! *His* grandson!

"I shall make him an allowance, of course. He is going to be a violinist. I think he was born one——"

"Born a kangaroo with pink and purple ears!"

"—and since he is"—ignoring interruption and rudeness—"I want him to be a good one; to have every possible chance. And I want him to be comfortable in every way while he is doing it."

Sir Raymond Gayford took himself and his purpling face out of the room abruptly. He never yet had cursed a woman to her face. He wasn't going to give this one the satisfaction of hearing him do it. So he fled.

And almost the woman was sorry for him—almost.

Raymond Gayford pleaded no more. Nor did he storm. He went to the War Office, and saw an old friend. Williams was right, damn him; the Army had no use for unwilling cadets. The General was broken—and looked it, when he got

home.

But he only once turned upon Brent before they parted—for years; perhaps not to meet again.

“May I venture to make two requests of you?” But Brent heard the unsounded sob beneath the sneer. “May I beg you never to play in England—not while I live—and not to drag a name that was honourable at Inkerman and Waterloo on to a theatre programme? I hope you will take a truly musical name, I suggest Signor Vermicilli Handorgandi.”

Brent neither flushed nor paled. He was too distressed for the grandfather he loved to think much of himself.

“I will do my best to vex you as little as I can, sir,” he said quietly. But he gave neither pledge. He resolved not to play in England while the General lived; if he could avoid doing so without positive injury to the career upon which he now was unalterably resolved. But he believed that he should not renounce his name, believed that he could not. And he might not learn to play well enough to drag the honoured name of Gayford on to a programme of any moment.

But all that could wait. It would be years and much, much work before he had won his spurs, established his right to play in public at all—if he did. The boy hoped to succeed; but like every true artist he was intrinsically humble. Time enough to choose a music-name then, if his resolve not to put away his own weakened.

A few weeks after that they parted; Brent both glad and sorry to go, both of them relieved to have the intolerable strain of the last hard days snapped.

Since his boy was going, let him go in peace! Sir Raymond was not harsh again—perhaps that made it no easier for the fleeing boy.

General Gayford kept his threat. He gave his grandson no money—not even a good-bye tip—made no future provision for him, hinted at none. But he put his hands on the boy’s shoulders, and kept them there a long moment as they stood together for the last time at the Priory door.

“Good-bye!” The gruff voice was very gruff.

Brent could not speak.

Sir Raymond turned away roughly and went rapidly back to the smoking-room. And Brent Gayford closed the hall door softly, shutting himself out from his lifelong home, and went a little gropingly to the waiting car.

General Gayford dined alone that night. He forced himself to dine well. Sitting alone when the servants had gone he did not spill port on the clothless table, and he lit his cigar with steady fingers.

He avoided Brent's rooms when he at last went up-stairs. He passed his own bedroom without going in. Topham listening knew that the General had gone on and up to the rooms that had been the little Brent's nurseries.

He flashed on all the electric lights.

He sat by the little narrow bed awhile, and kept bitter tryst with hope and pride that were broken.

The nurseries were as they had been when "Master Brent" had been promoted to downstairs quarters on the General's own floor. The nurseries had been kept clean and aired, but nothing had been changed or taken away. Such had been the master's orders. He had dreamed sometimes—old fool that he was!—that he might live to see another little boy installed and cherished here. And he might have done; for the Gayfords all made old bones—those of them that did not fall in battle.

He ransacked the two rooms—gently. He opened the old toy-cupboard, and handled its playtime contents lingeringly. And the lump in an old man's throat grew bigger and harder.

Toy soldiers—the best that money could buy; a regiment of them. And there were toy cannon. The man's face trembled, his fine hands knotted.

There was a fort. There was a faded, diminutive uniform.

Then he saw a drum—and remembered that he himself had given it to Brent, remembered the day he had; and cursed himself and cursed the day. He remembered how proudly the shaver had beaten it, how happily. And he had praised and applauded! He could hear the child playing it now. Hell and hell-fire! It was that to old Raymond Gayford.

The drum stood in the place of honour alone on the upper shelf. It was whole, looked almost new still, its sticks crossed on it neatly. Brent never had been rough-handed, and he had touched affectionately and reverently every instrument he ever had handled, even his first toy ones.

The General stood glowering down on it.

Then—he snatched it up and dashed it down to the floor and stamped upon it; stamped till the toy drum was a dry pulp of tatters and splinters; ashes of yesterday, old affection desecrated.

His rage a little spent, he spent with rage, the old man slouched down into an easy-chair too small for him by half, bent his head in his hands, and sobbed aloud. Topham heard—and whitened. And the Angel of Music hearing it, too, prayed that Brent Gayford in his own life might be spared the scarifying sorrow that goes to the fabric of every great artist, since an old thwarted soldier had paid the debt for him.

Q'ūo CHUNG's will prevailed. Q'ūo Ssu went to Sze-ch'uen with him when he journeyed there to deliver the precious purchase of wax-insects to rich Ko Ching-lin; the important purchase that So Wing had arranged for Ko Ching-lin with the insect farmer.

Had Q'ūo Ssu herself been unwilling to go, the father would not have taken her. Indulgent to no other, Q'ūo Chung was human wax in the tiny hands of his spoiled only daughter.

Q'ūo Ssu was delighted to go. The first suggestion of it instantly revived her drooped and broken spirits. Talk of it and thought of it acted upon her like a potent tonic.

From a pale, listless girl, she became a laughing, almost boisterous hoyden. The old American missionary cordially approved the plan. He had been keenly distressed at Q'ūo Ssu's unaccountable condition; anxious as to what had caused it, anxious about what would prove its outcome. For the girl's own sake he rejoiced at the treat and change she was going to have.

Also it pleased him from another angle. Every hint of freer life and outlook for Chinese womanhood pleased Mr. Kwan. He did not wish, nor would he have approved, anything approaching woman's social emancipation for Chinese women. He considered that Western women had gone far enough in such directions for their own happiness, or for the next generations' welfare—too far, perhaps. But he felt that the walls about Heaven's Well were too high, the doors too constantly and too roughly barred. He did not wish Chinese women unsexed, or hysterically interested in any outside things to the injury of home and children and of themselves. But he longed to see all their crippled feet unbound, their minds a little richlier stored, the culture and experience of books and of travel a little opened to them, slowly, cautiously, and only appropriately. It was all to the good, he thought, that dainty, impish Q'ūo Ssu was to have at least this one journeying, catch a wider glimpse of China from behind the curtains of her litter than she had had in her birthplace. He admired and applauded Q'ūo Chung for having decided, or having consented, to carry his madcap with him through the Chien-ch'ang Valley, past Yüeh-hsi T'ing, across the Ta-lu Ho into Sze-ch'uen, on to the valleys and stony uplands, past Yung-shan Hsien, past Kuo'ch'uan-t'an, through all the western border of North Yün-nan up to Sze-ch'uen; across the perilous Yang-tsze not far from Ping-shan Hsien, and still farther north to cross the Tung Ho, on to the city of

O-mei Hsien.

But, too, Mr. Kwan almost pitied Mr. Q'ūo—when the missioner witnessed the hilarity of Q'ūo Ssu's departure. There would be high-jinks on that unconventional jaunt, if the missionary was any judge of Miss Q'ūo Ssu. There had been dancing devils in her slant black eyes ever since her desperate father's plan first was mooted, and each day that the great departure came so much the nearer those innocent imps of roguish mischief capered and threatened more and still more wildly. Innocent devils, Mr. Kwan had no doubt, but he thought them by no means harmless. He very much wondered what might not happen in the departing wax-insect cavalcade before the Q'ūos—father and daughter—were safely home again. On the whole, the missionary did not altogether envy Q'ūo Chung.

Mr. Kwan was wrong. We all are apt to be when we draw conclusions from premises we do not understand or know nothing of at all.

Q'ūo Ssu was the human model of an angel all the way; a very gay and happy angel—which, by the way, is what angels should be. A sour and depressed angel would do Earth little service, Heaven little credit. But Q'ūo Ssu's gaiety was gentle and kindly; and uninterruptedly she was exceedingly docile to her honourable father all the time. He was selfishly glad he'd brought her. And the cure this had wrought for her filled Q'ūo Chung with happiness.

Girl-like, Q'ūo Ssu had thrilled to the adventure. Such a lark does not often come a Chinese girl's way. All her life Q'ūo Ssu had had considerable liberty, even for a Yün-nanese girl whose family could pretend no claim of being sash-wearers—there are very few sash-wearers in Yün-nan. But she never had dreamed of such frolic-freedom as this. She had tingled at the first hint of it. And she was both sweetly and cannily determined to show her indulgent, honourable father the gratitude of excellent behaviour.

She was going to the *chia* of So Wing's employer—or, at least, to near it. She might see So Wing there! She would keep her father pleasured in her every moment; that he might be the more complacent when they reached O-mei Hsien. No prank of hers should rasp or offend her honourable father-one. Q'ūo Ssu's new, admirable, and docile behaviour was not without an object—a very definite and secret object. Might all the gods prosper it!

The little Chinese girl was carrying a dream with her to Sze-ch'uen; an old, old dream that was new to her; the oldest of human dreams.

What a real and living thing a dream can be, only the heart of a girl can ever know. Men dream, and boys, too, but they plan more than they dream. The manlier, saner, more virile of them do not over trust their dreams. Dreams

are of the very fabric of woman's heart. Old age has its dreams—and knows that they will not come true. Youth nurses its dreams, and trusts them.

Q'ūo Ssu nursed her heart-dream tenderly; and fed it with the swelling rapture of her young imagination. It grew and thrived; far more real to her than the new sights their journeying offered to her; more real than the fern-tree thickets and orchid jungles, the towns and villages they passed and threaded, more real—infinitely more interesting—than the twisting Yang-tsze or the broad highroad beside it.

That the way they took was richly storied, hoary with tradition, great with history, was nothing to Q'ūo Ssu. When they rested in the long day heat, that the grubs might not be hatched too soon, Q'ūo Chung told his girl-one all the little he himself knew of the country they were crossing. Q'ūo Ssu listened to him nicely, and thanked him sweetly; but she scarcely heard him. She was listening to an even older story. What was it to her that a great Mohammedan rebellion, scarce half a century ago, had gashed Yün-nan's history, scarred its face? What to her that Yün-nan had led the outcry when Yüan Shih-k'ai proclaimed himself Emperor, and started the instant rebellion that had caused his downfall—and, as some think, China's? It was nothing to Q'ūo Ssu that far away to the left lay a great land called India, and that when the Han still reigned in China, his servants had tried to reach India through Yün-nan—through this very path perhaps—and had to give it up because of roads even more impassable then than now.

Nor was it much to her that her very honourable father would be the richer by a hill of silver *shoe* when he had delivered his perishable living merchandise to rich Ko Ching-lin.

The wax industry of China—Yün-nan and Sze-ch'uen are its stronghold—does not flourish to such profit now as it used to do; but, astutely and devotedly followed, it still can lead its husbandmen and merchants to more than modest fortune. Better still, it keeps many poorer Chinese families—coolie families—in the very moderate creature comfort that fills their patient, plodding souls with contentment, fills their pine bowls with almost sufficient rice, occasional fat pork bits, fish-stew, or buckwheat broth and vegetables. For the precious honourable worms will not deposit their wax where they first are formed in their tiny brown shells on the *ch'ung shu*-trees which are their best nursery. They are bred on the Yün-nan bank of the long loop that the Yang-tsze makes to that province, and thereabouts, and in the Insect Land south of it; they are hatched on very different trees a long trot away in Sze-ch'uen; and it is coolie porters, specially trained and specially paid, who carry them from the "privet"-trees of Yün-nan to the "ash"-trees of Sze-ch'uen.

There are sparse “wax”-trees and wax-insects in a few other parts of vast China. Nature tolerates few complete monopolies in the old Empire. But the best worms grub in the one part of Yün-nan; hatch best, and deposit the best wax in one coign of Sze-ch’uen. And porting them the long, difficult way they have to go from mid-Yün-nan into Sze-ch’uen is difficult and delicate work. The men who do it must be faithful, deft, and tireless; and they must understand their job. In China, even more stringently than in any other land, the labourer must be worthy of his hire. The insect-porters must not jolt or stumble; must not go irregularly or too slow; above all, they must not quit, for each man’s load of sixty pounds is worth three English sovereigns. And in Yün-nan three pounds are a great deal of money. Good Chinese candles are the best candles in the world. They need to be, because so many of them burn out of doors—on trees, graves, and rocks—often in windswept places. The wax the wax-insects deposit on tree trunks and branches is used for the outer coating of “all-number-one” candles. It will resist far greater heat than any other wax will, and candles cased in it never gut—no matter how the sun of summer pours, no matter how the angry winds of winter blow. When China was more preponderantly candle-lit—before kerosene lamps came—insect-wax holdings paid more richly than now, but even now their earnings are generous.

Ordinarily the Sze-ch’uen purchaser comes to Yün-nan, bargains for the larvæ, and himself takes his purchase home with him. But Ko Ching-lin, a very rich man, had many irons in his financial fire; heavy as his insect buying always was, wax yielded him but a modest fraction of his great income. He had employed So Wing on many business errands; and had found him trustworthy and capable. And astute Ko Ching-lin had tested So Wing severely; and meant to do so again—and again. If So Wing came through all the tests the master planned, then Ko purposed a great future for his favourite “coolie”: education and adoption. Ko Ching-lin had no son; and he had found his marriages thorny.

So Ko Ching-lin had not come himself to inspect the worm crop of Q’ūo Chung, but had sent So Wing.

They made their start in the comparative cool of the late afternoon—and several weeks later than the honourable insects usually are journeyed. April is the great harvest-time of the Yün-nan insects. Q’ūo’s had retarded themselves oddly this year. The season itself had been a little backward a few months ago when the little brown shells were first forming soft on his large-leaved privet—if the glossy *ch’ung shu* evergreen is a privet. But the yield, when it did come, had been enormous. Q’ūo Chung believed that he should make shift to

get the worms safely and unhatched to Sze-ch’uen; and he was in high good-humour as they started.

All day Q’ūo and his men had been busy gathering from the tree-trunks the soft, brown shells, each filled with almost infinitesimal grubs, putting them carefully in ventilated bags of thin paper, laying the bags on open-work trays of split bamboo, stacking tray on trays until the pile was all that one worm-coolie could carry.

The soft, brown shells are frail; they must be fingered cautiously, or they are broken and spoiled. To detach them from the tree is even nicer work.

Some of them Q’ūo—as always—had tied up in small bundles of straw, twenty or thirty shells in a bundle; and had hung the straw packets back on the “crackling-flea”-trees, close against the bark. In a moon the wee grubs would crawl out—two by two—crawl up and down and about until each pair had selected “married quarters,” and settled down to breed nests and young. In another twelve moons—a little earlier, if the coming seasons were normal and prompter than this had been—the *ch’ung shu*-trees again would be completely covered with the little brown grub-sacks that held much of Q’ūo Chung’s fortune in their gelatinous, squirming, wormy bosoms.

Q’ūo Ssu rode Fan Tan, because she refused to ride anything else. But Q’ūo Chung rode a wise and sturdy mule. The mule is the aristocrat’s steed and the rich man’s in all Western China. Q’ūo Chung would not have been seen approaching the gate of Ko Ching-lin less nobly mounted. And the mules of Yün-nan are many times surer of foot and of leg, and sounder of wit, than any horse is. Horses slip and fall, but not the mule-ones of Yün-nan. Coolies carried their chairs, that they might ease them by changing their mode of going when they chose, and that they might have the better shelter, if the often treacherous river-weather turned inclement. Coolies carried a bed and her quilts for Q’ūo Ssu, and a wide sleep-mat for Q’ūo Chung; not for them to sleep on at night, but by day. All their halts would be day halts. They must speed on through the cool of the nights as swiftly as they could, for the health’s sake of the precious, fragile grubs.

Q’ūo Ssu wore no finery to-day. Her dark blue jacket was her shortest and plainest. Her dark blue trousers were her coarsest. Her tightly braided hair was wound about her head securely. Of course, she was hatless. She never had seen a hat—a woman’s hat—except on Nosu women, and the roughly plaited bamboo or grass sun-hats that the coolie women sometimes wore in the rice-fields, or when they were breaking stones by the roadside in August’s terrific heat. Only her embroidered red shoes were fine. Nothing but abjectest poverty, and not always it, can induce a Chinese girl or woman to shoe her feet

inconspicuously. And as almost every Chinese woman makes her own shoes, and does it with the inherited skill of centuries, few of them indeed that lack a gorgeous and elaborate pair of shoes—not always for every-day wear. Q'ūo Ssu had dozens of splendid shoes; and two or three of them the lazy little thing actually had made herself.

Her feet were not bound. On the whole golden-lilies are less universal in Yün-nan than they are in most other parts of China. Of all the Chinese the Yün-nanese are the least social sticklers; perhaps because they live so far on China's farthest outskirt, perhaps because of all Chinese their blood is the most mixed. But Q'ūo Chung was rich, and he was inordinately proud of his only daughter. And they had attempted to squeeze little Ssu's feet when she was five. But she already was spoiled, always wilful, sometimes termagant. She had not wailed with the pain, she had screeched and scratched. And, to his wife's sharp displeasure, and to Mr. Kwan's great delight and very flatteringly expressed approval, Q'ūo Chung had yielded. And after a few days of ugly baby sulks tiny Miss Q'ūo had forgiven him, and treated him again as almost an equal.

In weakly yielding to her; weakly failing to squeeze his girl's feet into exquisite deformity, Q'ūo Chung had mutilated to some degree her matrimonial prospects; and Q'ūo knew that he had. Q'ūo Zat did not let the unfatherly deed fade from his memory. But even in China—in some Chinese circles—the jingling of the *tael* helps the hurt that uxorious pride feels. Q'ūo Ssu should go from him well dowered; Q'ūo Chung strove to dull the pricking of his conscience by reflecting that it was so. But, even if outspoken Q'ūo Zat had not so constantly upbraided him, his Chinese conscience would have punished him for his unfatherly remissness to the beloved girl who lacked, now at the budding of womanhood, but one beauty—it, alas! the all-essential one: binded feet.

Did Q'ūo Ssu, now that she had grown to marriage age, regret and blame him? Q'ūo Chung thought not. Reticence was no trait of Q'ūo Ssu's. And she never had spoken of the hideousness of her unsightly, unbinded feet. He had watched her when other girls had passed them swaying on their golden lilies; and not yet had he read envy on Ssu's placid egg-shaped face. But would not the time come, in a husband's *kuei*—in spite of her deformity, Q'ūo Chung aimed high for Q'ūo Ssu—that she would suffer bitterly at her lack of the most essential of woman's beauties, and feel that the greater ease and freedom of all her joyous childhood—and only a memory then—in no way compensated for her poor neglected feet?

Whatever her feet lacked in squeezed and broken smallness, Q'ūo Ssu

made up to them (as far as anything could) in much and splendid footgear. Did she do it in carelessness, thoughtlessness, or bravado? Just in thoughtlessness, the repentant father believed; for he believed that Q'ūo Ssu rarely, if ever, thought: a mistaken conclusion that Western fathers sometimes arrive at concerning daughters who do not think aloud to them.

They had rivers to cross, mountain barriers to defy and to penetrate, long forced marches to make from each sunset until the day's heat came, sweltering siestas to take as best they could, wherever it found them when the first hot hour came. There would be much to see—a feast of new experience panoramaed for an untravelled girl's eager eyes. And there would be much to endure.

Q'ūo Chung was clad even plainer than the girl was; Q'ūo was clad in stout homespun. But he had fair clothes stowed in the huge *kang* that eight coolies carried. For he should show himself to Ko Ching-lin bravely clad.

Q'ūo Ssu had a rare store of fine garments in the big *kang*—the carry-all of Yün-nan. It was just possible that she might be invited into Ko Ching-lin's harem for an hour or so, if Ko Ching-lin or his number-one chanced to learn that Q'ūo Chung had a daughter-one with him. If that happened, Q'ūo Ssu would not go plainly dressed to Ko Ching-lin's wives. For their daughter to have done so, would have shamed Q'ūo Chung and Q'ūo Zat; and Q'ūo Ssu herself would have liked it even less.

Of course, they moved off to the sound of many crackers, very big red ones—at least twice the size of German sausages. Had they been carrying silk-worms or cocoons, they must have moved noiselessly, and have risked evil spirits daring to pounce upon them at the river's bank or from the mountains' rocky gorges; silk-worms sicken and perish at the jolt of loud or sudden noise. Silkworms are all nerves. But white-wax-insects are soundproof; their nervous system is as impervious and complexless as a suet pudding's.

There were several in Q'ūo's almost imposing retinue who were not carrying grubs or *kang*. The jade-bearer walked alone, and kept close behind his master. The bearer of the sacrificial brazier walked at the jade-man's elbow. The two were clad in silk, their hats were hung with charms, their snake-skin shoes were powdered with sparkling jewels—of glass.

In the West we who are not sinologists think of jade as jewellery, or at most as works of Chinese art. Jade is more than that. Its Chinese significance cannot be exaggerated, easily grasped, or briefly told. Jade and its ceremonial usages are an intrinsic part of Chinese history. Year after year, for thousands of years, it crept and was swept into all of Chinese being, became part of it; and

lives there still quick and established—perhaps for ever.

For instance—one of hundreds: when the Emperor of Below worshipped the Emperor of Above, the Son of Heaven made sacrifices of jades to Shang-ti. Lesser men worshipped their ancestors and their lesser gods with the sacrifice of lesser jades. For thousands of years Chinese travellers have journeyed under the protection of jade.

Jade is very costly—jade worthy the name. Neither mountains that menaced nor rivers that threatened could expect Q'ūo Chung to destroy number-one jades in their propitiation. Q'ūo Chung was prosperous in his own way. But he was no Son of Heaven; not even a millionaire. And Q'ūo Chung was thrifty, hated avoidable squander. The ample supply of the Six Ritual Jades that Gag Ky carried in his heavy brocade bag were imitation jades; they did just as well. For the gods of China are profoundly reasonable. They all set men a score of good examples, none finer than their example of pleasant reasonableness. The *pi*, the *huang*, all the others that Gag Ky carried were made of stone and of stained wood and even of paper. Some were merely pebbles. But all were correctly shaped and coloured—or at least approximately.

What more could any reasonable god or demon ask or expect of a comparatively poor man? It was the spiritual significance of the ritual, not its costliness, that counted with the dragons of earth, water, and air, with deified mountains. Shang-ti, the supreme ruler, had to be sacrificed to with *pi* of perfect jade, perfectly shaped and cut, the braziers in which they were thrown filled with rare gums and spices and aromatic woods. But Q'ūo Chung was not privileged to worship Shang-ti. Only the Supreme Ruler of Below—the Emperor of China—might link himself by vigil, prayer, and sacrifice with the Supreme Ruler of Above. And who was to worship Shang-ti now that Heaven no longer had a son in Peking's sacrosanct Purple City? But the lesser gods, the godlings and dragons still hold their Chinese thrones, still claim their Chinese worshippers from the Great Wall's easternmost end and to the south-west point of Yün-nan, and *pi*, *hu*, *ts'ung*, *kuei*, *chang*, and *huang* of inferior and of imitation jade and of inferior workmanship answer well enough for their appeasement, especially if the sacrificer can afford no better. The coin value of what Gag Ky carried in his brocade bag was not great, but those "ritual jades" were important to the safety of the journey and to the welfare of the travellers. Gag Ky bore himself importantly.

It was a glorious day; Yün-nan at its loveliest, Heaven very gracious. The *kia ye* flowers were out, iris and fragrant orchids everywhere, forget-me-nots were carpets, wild white roses climbed and tangled half the trees and shrubs,

over-ran the paths.

In the Hour-of-the-Dragon, for it grew hot, they made their first halt. And when the grub-bags had been spread out in the shade, and opened for the better ventilation of the sensitive valuable contents, Q'ūo Chung and Q'ūo Ssu and all the retinue ate and smoked before they slept. But first the necessary propitiatory sacrifice was made to the genii of the vehement river. They were not about to cross the river, not to cross any river for some time, but this was a convenient time to make the first sacrifice, and there was small doubt that, now as always accommodating, the spirits of the river would accept Q'ūo's worship when it least inconvenienced him to pay it.

Mountains and rivers are barriers the gods have set. It is presumptuous to pass them; to do so without apology and without conciliating them is suicidal.

Perfumed candles and sticks of sandal-wood were lit. Drums were beaten. They all *ko-t'owed* to the river.

Q'ūo Chung himself selected a *huang* from the bag Gag Ky held out to him opened; the *huang* was black, of course, since it symbolised the element of water. To have offered the river or its dragon a yellow disc sacred to the earth and mountains, or a red one, due to fire and the South, would have been an atrocious *faux pas*, and as certainly as deservedly disastrous. Complacent and even lax in much, the gods and the dragons (most especially the godlings and the dragons) are sticklers in much else. To pay them the wrong homage is to affront them beyond all hope of forgiveness.

Q'ūo Chung held the *huang* toward the river, held it level with his breast, and as far as his arms could stretch, bowed to the river three times thrice, and then threw it far into the water. The *huang* sank instantly; it was weighty. A cry of rejoicing and of gratitude came from them all, and Q'ūo Ssu clapped her hands, and gave the river a very special bow. Their sacrifice had been accepted. The honourable river was appeased. They could rest beside it safely, travel beside it in security, venture to cross it presently, if they wished, with a reasonable hope that the bridge they passed over would not give way beneath them at mid-stream.

Now for food-baskets and cooking pots! Q'ūo and his daughter lunched in some state, squatting comfortably on the river's bank. An orchestra of birds and the music of the wind-strummed trees sang to them as they ate. They ate better food and more elaborately prepared than was their daily home fare, doing it not to lose face before their retinue or before the river, the wind gods, the tree gods. It is most important to save your face under such circumstances as these in China.

The carry-coolies, too, were well fed. They had far and hard to go, and because their efficiency and health were all-important to the safe and soonest arrival of the grubs, Q'ūo Chung wisely made it his rule to supplement generously the coarse and not too plentiful food with which they provisioned themselves.

After food, smoking. And even Q'ūo Ssu's tiny pipe-bowl had a tiniest pinch of opium in it. Opium, not misused, can be very harmless—even helpful as well as enjoyable. A lot of nonsense is talked about opium—and a lot of terrible truth.

Then Q'ūo Chung had his sleep-mat spread, and lay down on it in high contentment.

Q'ūo Ssu sat beside the river and nursed her knees, high as her dimpled yellow chin, in her dimpled yellow hands, and dreamed.

A score of the porters refilled their pipes and sat guard about the grub-bags. The other porters and the servants slept. At the Hour-of-the-Horse the grub guards would be changed.

When the sun lowered in the sky, and the wind rattled cooler in the trees' broad dry leaves, the insect procession reformed and went on again.

And so Q'ūo Chung and his daughter and his insects journeyed on to the wax-farm of rich Ko Ching-lin; eating, smoking, sleeping by day, travelling rapidly by night; never forgetting or neglecting to sacrifice appropriately (from the brocade bag Gay Ky carried) to any mountain that was a god, or was dragon inhabited, to the essential elements and to the points of the compass that play so great rôles in Chinese thought, history, belief.

They burned blue-green *pi* in homage and bribery of Heaven, red *chang* to the South, green *kuei* to the East, white *hu* to the West, black *huang* to the North; propitiating Above and all the cardinal points of the compass so. And the air was thick with the scents of the fragrant gums and sweet woods that served the brazier for fuel.

They buried a yellow *ts'ung* in the earth of every mountain before they presumed to breast or skirt it.

And if the ritual symbols that Q'ūo Chung sacrificed were commercially valueless as jades, and were homemade, they were as nearly right as prudent economy could contrive. The *ts'ung* were as yellow as the golden soil of the hills, the *pi* were perfectly round orifice-pierced discs, and the ring-band of each of them twice as wide as the orifice it enclosed; each orifice was exactly at the centre of the circle it pierced.

And Q’ūo Ssu paid individual, unexacted homage of her own now and then, when something attracted and moved her. A great irrigating wheel, tall as a tall oak-tree, at the river’s edge seemed to her peculiarly and magnificently beautiful; which it was, all jewelled and iridescent with dripping water, and softly, sweetly musical as it wheeled and dripped. Nothing would do, but she must slide down from Fan Tan’s back and make it obeisance. And when she had, she needs must delay still longer, and gather and weave a wreath of wild flowers to hang on the monster wheel as it turned. And Q’ūo Chung fretted and fumed, but loved her too well to reproach or hurry her. And the porters and servants were pleased enough to squat a while and taste the bliss of their pipes, and Fan Tan was very pleased to find and to munch the long sweet grass that grew in luscious tufts between the thick forget-me-nots and the wild columbines, in the cool of the sunset.

But most of all they passed she scarcely saw; for most of all the long way they went Q’ūo Ssu was dreaming. She missed a great deal—in the early day hours when they still dared to journey the precious insects, and between sunset and dark.

On and on they went as early and late as they dared. And at length, not far from Ping-shan Hsien, they crossed the yellow, foaming Yang-tsze.

Still further north they crossed the Tung Ho; and at last they had reached the wax-groves of Ko Ching-lin.

Q’ūo Ssu was not invited into Ko Ching-lin’s *kuei*. He had neither wife nor daughter. The only women in his “flowery” were servant-ones, and the wives and widows of poor kinsmen, whom he supported as a matter of course, as all rich Chinese do. An orthodox Chinese must share his substance with all his needy relations who claim his hospitality as simply as he invariably gives it. There was no laughter, no music in Ko’s *kuei* now. He himself had not entered it for years. It did not occur to him as a suitable place for Q’ūo’s girl-child’s entertainment when by chance he learned that the insect merchant had brought a girl with him all the way from Yün-nan. And the father and daughter left O-mei Hsien the very day they reached it.

But in the few hours that Q’ūo lingered among Ko Ching-lin’s wax-trees Ko Ching-lin saw Q’ūo Ssu twice: and approved her—wished that the gods and his dead wives had granted him such another daughter. He did not say so to Q’ūo Chung. He did not even show that he had seen the girl, still less what she looked to him; Chinese gentlemen do not speak of their women, the inferior, shut-in ones, to each other. But Q’ūo Chung knew, and shrugged indifferently—though he’d take good care never to tell Q’ūo Zat. Q’ūo Ssu’s father had shrewd vision—uncramped by too fine a sense of etiquette.

Q’ūo had no pretensions of being a gentle; Ko Ching-lin, although he belonged in part to the plebeian merchant class, had been born something of a sash-wearer. He clung to many of the sash-wearers’ old ways.

Q’ūo Ssu did not see Ko Ching-lin. While the two men greeted, and chatted of their engrossing business, she strayed as far from her father as she dared; a dainty blue-clad, unpainted girl gathering a posy of wild flowers for her jacket, searching with her eyes—near and far—sighing for what they did not find.

But presently they might! So she made opportunity to return modestly (or so Ko Ching-lin thought—Mr. Kwan could have told him better) to her curtained palanquin, and in its privacy she changed her outer garments and painted her face. She looked a high-born, Ko thought, when she slipped back to the flower-thick coppice where the hyacinths and the violets were a fragrant carpet, but none of them so gaily clad as Q’ūo Ssu, and not an anemone or a white violet that looked more guileless and innocent than she tripping among them in her jewelled azure satin coat and her best green trousers. Q’ūo Ssu’s best green trousers were very fine indeed, just the colour of young peach leaves, heavily embroidered with rose and lemon chrysanthemums and violet periwinkles. But there were serpents in her eyes, searching, searching for what she longed to see.

But she caught no glimpse of So Wing. And when she scraped acquaintance with some of Ko Ching-lin’s coolie women busied at the wax-trees she could hear no word of him, except that he had stayed but a day when he had come back from Yün-nan to the honourable Ko Ching-lin; had gone then; and no one knew towards where he had turned his feet. And it was whispered, so the women told her, that So Wing would not return; that he had forsaken their master’s service, or had been dismissed it. At that hearing Q’ūo Ssu went quietly back to her palanquin, and did not thrust up its shutter, looked no more from between its curtains, until she felt it lifted shoulder-high, and knew that they were journeying home again over the high mountain barrier, through the oleander jungles and forests of cork trees.

Once more, Ko Ching-lin, seeing her go, and noting that she kept her woman’s close refuge, liked the modesty of the girl from Yün-nan. But he almost regretted that she had not waited a little longer at the edge of the busied scene. For it must have interested her, he thought, to have seen the worms transferred from the trays they had travelled in on to the *pai-la shu*-trees, which in a twelve moons the precious creatures would so have encased in the valuable white wax that his ash-trees would look a forest of ivory.

Everyone was working: Q’ūo Chung’s porters and his own servants who had come with him, more than two hundred of Ko Ching-lin’s farm-hands (almost three score of them women). And both Ko and Q’ūo worked with their own hands; taking a paper bag gently from the tray it rested on, tearing it apart carefully, and letting the grub-sacks it held fall from it into a *pai-la shu* branch and fasten there. The encased grubs did that almost at once, as if glad and relieved to be again at anchor.

A coolie woman, stretching up to let her bagful drip its living contents down on to a free branch, lost her balance, staggered, and fell. A score of grub-sacks were scattered; probably ruined. Their rough fall had jarred them. Search the long scented grass, no matter how industriously; some of the scattered treasure might not be found again, or found soon enough. Most of them might be crushed, and all their virtue gone. An older woman turned upon the small-footed angrily, and had struck her but for Ko Ching-lin’s quick command.

“The peasants should not squeeze their women’s feet!” he said to Q’ūo Chung. “Golden-lilies should sway only at their slow ease across a rich man’s courtyard. And truth-word, I like not with all conviction that one of our honoured practices. Always in Peking it seemed to me that the Manchu women not only had the more of comfort in their walk-withs, but that they in beauty gained as much as they lost. And when I travelled and sojourned in the America, in my time of youth, sometimes I considered when my women bore me daughters, if it would not be that I forbade to the tender feet of my daughter-ones the binding. A little the golden-lilies are passing from China now. I cannot regret it.”

Q’ūo Chung bowed politely. He made no other reply. And Q’ūo Chung was careful to show no glint of the satisfaction he felt at the unorthodox words that in-most-things-strictly-orthodox Ko Ching-lin had spoken.

Their return home was slower, more leisured, considerably more comfortable than their going to O-mei Hsien had been.

They journeyed by day now, halted at night; they had a reduced retinue, travelled an easier route.

There was much to see, much that should have interested and intrigued the little Chinese girl; but she gave none of it much heed, she was grieving—for a dream.

As they journeyed back to Yün-nan, Q’ūo Chung said little. Q’ūo Chung was thinking. And he smiled at his own thoughts. Except to answer, Q’ūo Ssu scarcely spoke. She did not smile.

For a Chinese, Q’ūo Chung, as a rule, was rather wordless. Q’ūo Ssu always had been a chatterbox.

VIENNA!

The music he heard there!

The work he did there!

The friends he made there!

For five years he worked incessantly; a few months at a time in Paris now and then, but it was Vienna that gave him most. In a sense he never had known before he felt at home. And he loved Vienna with the love apart that the earnest artist gives to his own workshop.

He did not forget England or old friends. It was not in a Gayford or in a Brent to do that. And in all but his obsession in music Brent Gayford was true to type. He wrote to his grandfather every few weeks. The General never answered. But Brent did not let the time between his own writing lengthen for that. His letters were not returned to him, nor was he requested—say, by Williams, Vibart, and Orme—to discontinue sending them. He did not believe that his grandfather would ever forgive him—or rather, forgive what he had done—two very different forms of unforgiveness, but he knew that Sir Raymond loved him, and always would. Lady Sarah wrote to him regularly; brief, caustic, not unaffectionate letters. She made him a generous allowance, of which Brent had the good-sense to spend less than half. She called it an "advance out of funds in hand," and the boy never suspected that it was nothing of the sort, but just a self-indulgence of Lady Sarah's that cost her little enough, for she was rich. And she had not altered her will. General Gayford had altered his.

Lady Sarah not only wrote to Brent, but twice during his five student years she came to see him. She stayed at an hotel, and did not interrupt his work. She knew a good many people in Vienna, in a very different circle from that of most of Brent's Viennese friends; and was both competent and content to amuse herself in her own way with her "own sort." She told Brent frankly that she had run over to see how he was getting on, what he was up to, how his mad-hatter own-way was panning out. Brent believed her. But if it were so, she must have formed her conclusions with amazing quickness. She did; such being her habit of mind, and type of intelligence. Society saw most of her; Brent and his workshop saw little.

Brent was delighted to see her, glad of the home news she told him, and saw her off cheerfully when she went. The stanch old creature liked him none the less that he did. She knew that he had been glad to see her; she was glad that he had; she did not resent that he did not regret her going.

Brent missed the Priory, the English countryside—a little. He missed his grandfather—sometimes. He missed Eton more. He missed Dick most. He blamed himself very much that he did not miss them more; especially his home and his grandfather; a self-injustice. Conscience-sensitive youth often so scourges itself because it cannot give to age what it has not to give. How could he be homesick when he was at home? At home as he never had been before.

The music-drenched city did much for the young English student. His master did many times more; an impatient old bear named Vogelweid who drove even men pupils to tears, and was rumoured to have driven one to suicide. But not once did he ruffle this English pupil of his. He tried; and when he failed he tried again furiously, persistently, and with his all of ingenuity. But he failed and continued to fail. And then he knew; knew that this young English violin-student would succeed. He had known from the first that the lad had genius. But genius is not all, not even enough. If it lack industry and grit, it profits art and the world little. If Vogelweid never gave Brent the offence or the cause to leave him that Haydn gave Beethoven, he never was lenient.

The harder he drove young Gayford, the uglier he cursed him, the more he scoffed at him the more cheerfully the English pupil went back to the phrase or the task his performance of which Vogelweid had reviled.

“Why do you take it like that,” the old master demanded one day when he had threatened bloodshed, and had heaped indecent insult on his pupil, “when I tell you the truth about the hopeless failure you are, and always will be? You are an imbecile. There’s not one note of true music in you. And I! I am an imbecile to let you waste my valuable time on you and your caterwauling!”

Brent laughed. “Why do I take it quite happily, Maestro? Because it’s what I am here for—it’s what I want. And it is what you are here for, I take it. I may be a failure—always. I know that. I always have known it. But I am going on trying to learn to play, as long as I live. Next to succeeding, I’d rather fail trying to be a violinist than do anything else in the world. I’ll go back to the beginning of that second movement, and see——”

Vogelweid snatched the boy’s violin from him, violently but carefully, put it down on a chair gently, and threw his arms about Brent Gayford and kissed him.

Brent grinned and patted the master’s shoulder. He had lived on the

Continent too long now, in emotional art-circles too long, to be nonplussed or embarrassed by other men's embraces and kisses.

"You *are* a musician!" the old man cried, wiping his eyes. "You were born one. God made you one. I will make you a great one. We shall do that, you and I. The world shall hear you play, and acclaim; women and other fools will send you bouquets, and ask to meet you—hold your hand, if you let them, and want a piece of your hair. But the critics, the music world, all who know, all who count will give you respectful recognition, the dignified homage that art owes to art. You will play to the world, be its greatest artist, I think—after many years and much suffering, long after I am dead. Think you then, I ask it, when the applause screams about you, sometimes of a crabbed old man who cursed you, and taught you, and loved you in old Vienna. I have taught here in Vienna for more than forty years. I have had no such pupil before. I shall curse you often, you are worth it; curse you and make you great—a very great violinist. To be that is to be the greatest of all human things—greater than kings, greater than Goethe, greater than Metternich. Get on with our lesson."

But Vogelweid rarely cursed his favourite pupil again.

THE violin student saw little of his own countrymen in Vienna. But the British Minister's wife was Brent's distant kinswoman; her he went to see occasionally, and very occasionally accepted one of her constant invitations.

The girl he took into dinner one night was more than good looking, and he found her both interesting and charming—a highly satisfactory dinner companion. Her clear voice was strangely musical—an irresistible quality to Gayford's music-steeped ears; and one they rarely heard, or heard so beautifully used. He had not caught her name, but he resolved to discover it presently. And he quite forgot to pay any attention to his left-hand neighbour; which luckily did not matter at all, since she was about equally engrossed with her meal and with her own left-hand neighbour.

They found plenty to say to each other—Gayford and the exceedingly pretty girl whom his kinswoman had allotted him. Music they did not happen to mention. The girl supposed him one of the younger diplomats, one of the Legation attachés. He had no idea who she was, but he meant to find out.

They both were surprised and not too pleased when dinner ended, and the women left the men to tobacco and wine.

When he went back to the drawing-room he intended to renew his very pleasant dinner acquaintance. A Princess stopped him with a question, gestured him to a seat beside her, began at once to tell him about a recital she had heard in Dresden a few nights before. The royal lady was no mean musician herself, and she talked well. Gayford forgot all about the girl he had meant to find, and to chat with as long as she'd let him. And he never thought of her again; never remembered her or that he had met her. The small incident may serve to show how music-bound Brent Gayford was.

Only a dead soul or a very dull one could fail to yield, and yield gladly and gratefully, to the lure of Vienna. Brent Gayford loved the beautiful city beside the beautiful Danube; and knew that he loved it quite aside from its own music and the help it lavishly gave to his music; as he had loved the musicless Priory: loved it for its physical self as well as for what it was. Vienna, even in devastating War's hungry aftermath, is still far the richest and gayest city in south-eastern Europe. But it was for none of that that the young Englishman loved it. His own gay soul made gaiety and to spare for him everywhere. Vienna gave him joy. He could not have analysed its subtle witchery, but he

knew that it had bewitched him, and believed that no matter how long he lived, or how far away he wandered, he always should long to see Vienna once more. He never had been in love—not even in the small but pathetic ways that boys so often are. He had not needed to be. His life had been filled without that usual experience. He had not even thought at all interestedly of such things. But once or twice he had wondered whimsically, if ever a woman would bewitch him as much as Vienna did. The old city spoke to him—and he understood her language. He felt the throb of her intellect—unsurpassed (if equalled) in Europe; he felt the charm of her culture and the health of her *bonhomie*. He loved her bridges, her streets wide and narrow, her parks and her mansions, he loved the gaily frescoed outer walls of her great apartment buildings.

She gave him growth, and she gave him frolic.

And he worked there. How he worked!

His work never tired him: the true worker's big reward!

Gayford made his professional début in Paris. That he did was at Vogelweid's wish.

"Make your plunge in stranger waters. You have too many friends here. There is a prejudice against my pupils in Paris. You'll have a cold hearing in Paris. That is what I want. Fight your way you must, if you are ever going to amount to anything; and the harder you have to fight the better. There is no road to real success but the one the artist hews out for himself. I have taught you to play. I do not intend to help you to become famous. That is your task. Damn publicity. Damn the critics. Damn everything except your fiddle and your own hard work."

Gayford's Paris concert brought him in receipts just half what he paid his accompanist. But the judicious knew. And his old master, listening, was satisfied.

Little by little, many a setback, Brent Gayford made his way. He played under his own name. But he kept out of England. Even when the slow day came that every Continental capital knew and applauded him, Gayford the violinist would accept no London engagement.

He must go back to England, and before very long, he resolved. It was his motherland. He loved it. The years should not slip away from him with the Channel always between him and the white cliffs. As soon as he could fit it in he'd have a few months in England—at home—with Dick. Dick was a poor

hand at coming to Austria. Well, he'd go to Dick—and to England before long. But fiddle should not go with him. Not even alone in a room of his own, not out in the country woods would he ever in England draw bow across violin strings while his grandfather lived. To ask a fellow to renounce his own name, his father's name—as if he were ashamed of it, or had given it reason to be ashamed of him—was to ask too much, more than a man ought to yield. But he would not play in England, while his grandfather lived. Dick would not be any less glad to see him because he'd left his violin behind him!

He meant to go to England soon.

He went sooner than he had intended.

He read Lady Sarah's wire, and started for the station inside of half an hour. He'd have started sooner, if there had been a sooner train.

He reached the Priory in time. The General lived a week.

They did not say much to each other. The old man was weak and tired.

Brent never left him. The old man clung like a child to the younger Gayford's strong, supple hand.

Did his grandfather remember—give it a thought—how constantly that hand had drawn a bow across the strings of a violin? Brent wondered ruefully. How much of the strength of the fingers the dying man held so persistently they owed to violin practice? They owed all their suppleness, all their delicacy of touch to the instrument the old man so hated. But that would not suggest itself to General Sir Raymond Gayford's very lay mind, the violinist was sure.

It happens now and then that the artist mind misjudges the layman as unjustly as the lay mind so often does the artist.

The day before the General died he turned from his quiet watching of the sunrise splendour, and asked, "Ever repented it, Brent? Ever wished you hadn't done it?"

"No, sir," Brent said gently. But the two words almost choked him.

The General smiled and nodded. "I thought not. You don't look like a square peg that has found itself jammed in a damned round hole. Well! Well! it's a rum world."

After breakfast which they both took in the sick-room that both knew would be a death-room soon—Sir Raymond's breakfast was champagne and strychnine—his grandfather suddenly demanded: "Got your fiddle here with you?"

“No, sir”—thank Heaven, he could say so—“indeed I have not. I would not have brought anything of that sort, if I had thought of it, remembered there were such things in the world, which I didn’t. I just wanted to get to you, sir. I didn’t think of anything else. And, sir, I want to say this, please: Thank you for letting me come, for letting them send for me. It means a lot to me, it always will—as long as I live. I wish I could tell you how much I thank you.”

The General chuckled. “I did not let them send for you. I was not going to either. Old Sarah Brent did it off her own bat, damn her, and told me she had, when she knew you were at the hall door. She knew what I wanted, what I needed, curse her. The most objectionable type of all the objectionable types of women; the ones so damned sharp that they know more than any woman has any business to know, know a hell of a sight more than is good for them or for anyone else. No, by gad, I did not send for you. But thank God that you came! Thank God you are here!”

Brent could not speak.

“I wish you had brought your fiddle thing with you. I’d like to hear you play it once before I go up to Parade. Do you play it well, my boy? I hear you are famous now.”

“I am learning to play, I think,” the other told him. “I believe that I shall be a good violinist some day.”

“First class?”

“That is to be very fine indeed, sir. But—yes—I hope so—some day.”

“Write tunes, too, don’t you? And get ’em published and paid for?”

“I begin to, sir.”

“Oh, Lord! A Gayford! My grandson! It *is* a rum world! A damned rum world! Ring that bell, boy. Push it hard.”

“You phone to London,” Sir Raymond told the amazed, white-lipped Topham, “tell ’em to send the best fiddle they’ve got out here, and to send it darned quick—car, train, buzzer, whatever’s quickest; you understand?”

“Quite so, sir——”

“See that *they* understand. Music shops’re on Bond Street, aren’t they, Brent? You tell him which one.”

Brent Gayford scribbled an address with fingers that shook.

“Wish you’d brought your own with you—one of your own—though. I’d like to hear you play one of your own tunes on your own fiddle—before I go.

Got more than one fiddle, haven't you?"

"Yes—sir."

"How many?"

"Six—now, sir."

"God bless my soul! Never had more than two swords—been enough if I'd been Commander-in-Chief. What do you want of six fiddles? Only got one pair of hands, haven't you?"

The violinist would not rasp the dying man with a technical or a musical explanation or answer. Nor would he tell him that an old Austrian music teacher had given him his best, if not quite his most treasured violin.

"It's like this, sir: two of them you gave me——"

"Took them along with you when I turned you out?"

"I took them, sir. But you did not turn me out."

"I damn well did. There are more ways than one of doing that job. So you have kept those two old fiddles along with your new ones. You always were a rum 'un, Brent. Bit of a rum 'un myself, shouldn't wonder."

Then the General dozed.

He half-woke at noon—and lunched as he had breakfasted, and, as he had breakfasted, from Brent's careful hand.

"Good stuff! Plenty left down in the cellars for my heir," he said as he dozed off again.

Sunset was flooding the great room that had windows to the east and to the west as General Gayford woke again—very wide awake this time.

The nurse came quickly to the bed.

"You clear off, my woman," was the thanks she got. "You go perk up to Dr. Harding over the phone. He's a widower, you know. Off you go!"

The woman went. She had had three peculiarly trying weeks here. A case was a case, of course, but like many of her trade, she had considerable sense of self-importance, and had little stomach for her high authority flaunted. She hoped she should not have another such a patient ever. A trained nurse should be obeyed implicitly—it was bad enough when a physician was defied—but a trained nurse! And in this house everyone obeyed that terrible old man—the doctor included. And more or less even she had had to. She went, and she did go to the telephone to report to the doctor that their patient was sinking, and

her very cap so trembled with indignation that its starch rattled as she moved.

“Brent, do you remember me giving you a drum when you were a shaver?”

“Indeed I do, sir. It’s up in my old toy-cupboard now, I’ve no doubt. I was very fond of that drum—always took care of it. I’ve wished I’d taken it with me. I’ll keep it always, if I may, sir.”

“Come here, boy.”

Brent had not far to come. He knelt down, and as the feeble figure groped towards him a little, he gathered the old General into his strong arms, rested the wearied, wilful old head on his shoulder—held the sick man close, more carefully, even more tenderly than he ever had shouldered and held a violin.

“I busted that poor little drum, Brent—the night you went. I wish to hell I hadn’t done it.”

Brent Gayford laid his face on his grandfather’s face. Neither moved, nor spoke. They still were so when death came to them, dividing them, yet uniting them newly and for all time, and Topham came into the room carrying a well-covered package that looked as if it were a well-wrapped baby’s coffin, but was, in fact, only a very expensive violin from a Bond Street shop.

The reading of a recently dead man’s will is not usually considered an appropriate occasion for open laughter, and is not often so treated. Both Brent Gayford and Lady Sarah laughed right out, and the old lawyer’s eyes twinkled slightly, when the one sentence of General Gayford’s final will was read. Williams himself had drawn it up and seen it signed and witnessed less than a month ago. It was a very different will from the one that Sir Raymond had made and executed the day after his grandson had left the Priory *en route* for Vienna and a serious musical education.

A will could scarcely be briefer. Sir Raymond Gayford had left absolutely all he had had to Lady Sarah Brent, without reserve or condition.

And she and Brent involuntarily laughed out frankly. Both instantly understood. The dead man had sworn five years ago that Brent his grandson should inherit nothing from him—not so much as one farthing, not the torn lining of one old coat. And he had kept his oath.

He had left all he had, including the Priory, of course, to the person he most bitterly disliked—because he knew who her heir would be.

So does love circumvent our most sacred word of honour—at the end—

sometimes.

Herr Vogelweid saw at once that his pupil had suffered bitterly, and realised it more profoundly when he heard him play. And Vogelweid was glad. To suffer bitterly and long, to go down into the dark waters and to drink of them deep, was the artist's one essential initiation—the only qualification the young violinist had lacked. And Vogelweid rejoiced that it had come. The artist was made. He hoped it would come again—probably through a woman the next time; the great searching time. For only through the artist's personal sorrow, a smashing blow on life and soul, can any great artist come into his own, achieve his best and most; even as the sandalwood-tree must suffer the slash of the shattering axe at its core before it can give its sweetness.

When Gayford told him that after the engagements he already had made had been fulfilled he was going to make no more for a time, but was going to travel and think, the old maestro was puzzled and doubtful; very anxious. But he said little, and said nothing caustic. He was a wise man. He had lived much, seen much, learned much. And he had acquired the grace to hold his tongue whenever he was darkly baffled. He saw that some big thing—big to Gayford, if not big in itself—was brewing. And having no idea what, he held his peace—and secretly hoped that he might live until after Gayford's return.

When Dick Wentworth got Brent's letter, telling him what Brent had told Vogelweid, Dick gave a whoop of delight.

"He's going to give it up!" he cried out to Lady Sarah, waving Brent's letter before her.

"Don't be a fool," she admonished. She, too, had had a letter. "*Why* he is off on a perfectly imbecile world-trot, I confess I have no idea. But he is not giving up his musical career. He never will."

"Bet you a thousand, even money, he does—chucks fiddle and Jews' harp and all the rest of it, comes home and settles down like a sensible Englishman. Golly, I'm glad! Don't say he won't ever go to a concert, or wind up the music-box, start his gramophone sometimes. But I say the picnic is over, the lights gone out in the opera house. Brent has come back to his senses. Bet you a thousand, even money. Take me?"

"I do not bet with mental minors or with congenital nincompoops," he was told politely.

Dick Wentworth didn't mind.

“We’ll see!” he retorted.

“We shall!” Lady Sarah agreed.

And when Gayford, after a month in England again, about evenly divided between them, told them good-bye, and departed for unknown paths, neither the woman nor Wentworth had changed their conviction.

Brent didn’t know where he was going: just where the will-o’-the-wisp led him; and said so. But he knew why he was going; and did not say.

IN A YÜN-NAN COURTYARD *CHAPTER XVIII*

IN the Peach month a go-between brought Q'ūo Chung Ko Ching-lin's offer of marriage. Q'ūo wasted little time in accepting it. A match he had aimed at with the son of a leading tea man in Canton had proved unnegotiable because the boy's mother would not tolerate a big-footed daughter-in-law.

Q'ūo Ssu did not mope all the time now, but she was not her old glad self very often. She had reached the marriage time; the longer she remained unwedded now, the less easy it would be to give her to advantageous wedlock. It would pang to part with her, but it would shame to keep her, unsought, unaccepted, much longer. If she passed her beauty's radiance, and passed the age when women are docile and malleable, those two detriments added to the desperate detriment of unsqueezed feet might make it impossible to secure her a first wife's place in a desirable husband's comfortable home. For Q'ūo Ssu's own dear sake, perhaps even more to save his own face, Q'ūo Chung would have paid any price he could to avoid that dire catastrophe. Only one of all things was dearer to Q'ūo Chung than Q'ūo Ssu was: face. No blame to him! For he was Chinese. He was what two thousand years had made him.

No; Q'ūo Chung did not haggle at all persistently with Ko Ching-lin's matchmaker.

The betrothal was made, irrevocably signed and sealed some time before the father told the promised bride of her great good fortune. The Dragon Boat Festival was close at hand; Q'ūo Chung determined to let Q'ūo Ssu enjoy it in maiden freedom this last time, as she had until now. They would keep it together, he and she, as they had so often. It should be her good-bye to girlhood and to old home; and she should be all his own as she watched it with her little hand clinging to his girdle, and with no thought in her of any man-one other than he.

There are many festivals in China. Not all of them can be universally kept everywhere. If they were, all play and no work would hunger China to the starve-point in a year. But several of them are sacred and are sacredly kept wherever in all China there are Chinese. At least—the Feast of Lanterns, the worship of Shên Nung at springtime, the Moon Feast, All Souls' Festival, and the Dragon Boat Festival must be kept. They and many more were well observed in wealthy Q'ūo Chung's *chia*. But always, even from her babyhood, Q'ūo Ssu had cared most for the Dragon Boat Festival. She liked them all, and took them as she found them, and with fun and frolic. For in China "All Souls'

Day” is not kept sadly. But she always waited eagerly for the Dragon Feast, and counted the moons from the last to the next.

This year she was waiting for the festival more impatiently than she ever had before.

Dreams rarely came her cylinder-pillow’s way, but several times since her fruitless (or so she thought) journey to Sze-ch’uen, Q’ūo Ssu in her sleep had dreamed of So Wing. The dreams of him had varied little; they all had been vivid and lifelike. In each of them he had come back to her, and at the Dragon Boat Festival.

Would it be this year or another? Q’ūo Ssu did not know. Her dreaming had not told her that. She knew that he had gone to win fortune, and to carve fame and place out of poverty’s hard rock. That might cost him and her impatience many lonely moons. But miracles are rife in the tales and songs of China—and in the questing hearts of love-plagued girls. Q’ūo Ssu hoped that Kwan and Ts’ai Shên had granted big miracle to her lover, and that even now at this festival he might come—rich and powerful—to woo again and to claim.

Truth to tell, he had faded a little from her thought as the days passed. She was very young, and her simple life was full of innocent interests and of quick young pleasures. She might have forgotten him, or have remembered but to laugh at their undiscovered trespass, but for those sleep-time dreams. But the dreams came, vivid and insistent. They reminded her in a way sharply impressive to an untutored, inexperienced girl’s raw mind. They brought So Wing back to her, clad in glamour. And she quite forgot that for a time she almost had forgotten him—remembered him just a little indifferently.

On the fourth night of the year’s fifth moon Q’ūo Ssu dreamed again; dreamed so clearly that when she woke she still saw So Wing’s eyes vowing his soul into her eyes, still felt his gem-encrusted garments brush against her poorer ones, still heard the gold-pieces clink in his girdle-pouch as he sprang to her, heard his eager, tender voice, felt his breath on her quivering face.

There was dew in her eyes, rose-flush on her cheeks when Q’ūo Ssu woke to greet the Dragon Boat Festival’s dawn. Hope was high.

Morning rice was but a pretence; toilet was long and studied.

Q’ūo Chung thought that never before had his red-lily-one been quite so beautiful as when she ran laughing beside him on the river’s bank, and pushed her pretty, wilful way imperiously through the human throng already dense there. And Kwan Yin-ko’s American brother thought so, too, as he stood and watched the radiant pomegranate face dimpling up at Q’ūo Chung. And fine as

Mr. Kwan often had seen her, he never before had seen her fine as this! There were jewels flashing in the long braids of soft black hair that hung down below her jacket's hem. Little Miss Q'ūo must assume the hairpin soon, but she had not done it yet! And there were red and beryl strands of silk braided in her jewelled braids of silken hair. Her coat and trousers were made out of Yün-nan's famous natural silk; less durable than Shan-tung's, but softer and glossier. The pretty jacket-coat was dyed a lovely azure; it was cunningly cut to show its crimson crêpe lining and down-hanging inner sleeves. It was embroidered with pink and lemon green-leafed honeysuckle and with border motifs of wind, rain, sky, and sea-waves. The jaunty high collar looked to choke her; it was decreed for modesty—even careless and care-free little Q'ūo Ssu never must let her pretty amber throat, or even a hint of it, be seen above her close collar. A very rich man's number-one might have envied the alternate-sapphire-and-emerald buttons that fastened her coat diagonally all its length, from left shoulder to hem. The girl's jade-green trousers had bands of the same motifs, and showed their blue lining above her embroidered fine white stockings. The little red shoes glittered with tinsel and winked with many glass-jewels. Her scarf was a delicate rainbow. Her round fan was beautifully painted; its stick was green jade. A band of jade held in place the tiny bouquets over her ears. She wore an orchid in her coat. Tassels of silk-threaded seed-pearls dangled from girdle and pouch. She wore many rings. Her every movement wafted perfume. Her eyes were everywhere; now flashing with anticipation, now languorous with desire for the fulfilment of a dream not yet come true.

The boats were coming.

Q'ūo Ssu caught at the branch of a low-growing willow, to steady herself, and leaned far out over the edge of the dancing river.

The expectant crowd sighed with relief and delight. Even Q'ūo Chung was moved.

And the American missioner was moved; and no whit ashamed that he was. It was very beautiful, this Dragon Boat Festival on the River of Golden Sand. And, like Q'ūo Ssu, the Western greatly preferred the "Dragon Boat" to all other of China's festivals. Its story appealed to him immensely; the nobility and ethics of it; and its rank superstition did not trouble him in the least. The follies and blunders, the crimes and the wants of China flayed him constantly, and grieved him profoundly. But the poetry of China, written or lived, never rasped him at all; he liked it, sympathised with it all. And that it expressed itself in "heathen, idolatrous terms" did not seem an essential thing, or an ugly flaw to him. Realities meant everything to this American; superficial terms

unless for verbal beauty—meant little. The story back of the Dragon Boat Festival was, he thought, almost China's noblest.

This is that story: Four hundred years before Christ was born in Bethlehem the old Chinese State of Ch'ü suffered great and many ills from the rule of its infamous Prince. Huai was indolent, vicious, selfish, and profligate, caring nothing for his people, for his own kingdom, for his own honour. Ch'ü Yüan of imperishable memory, a minister of Huai's, was as strong as his master was weak, as industrious, generous, humane, selfless, and just as his Prince was not. For a time Huai tolerated—though not once to heed them—Ch'ü Yüan's ceaseless supplications for better governing and kinder treatment of the people. Perhaps the royal weakling felt Ch'ü's magnetism, felt his charm—for few in history or in story have had more. Perhaps there was one streak of good in the scoundrel Prince after all, one poor chord of human affection in his black heart. For, though he would grant him nothing, Huai heard Ch'ü Yüan for years, and sometimes seemed to listen almost consideringly. And Ch'ü Yüan plodded and pleaded on, always hoping against hope to gain some alleviation for the downtrodden, misused people. He had many rivals who feared him, envied him their master's friendliness, perhaps, too, envied him his manliness they would not emulate. Their machinations against him prevailed at last. And, too, perhaps Huai grew over-wearied of his favourite officer's reiterated reproaches. It happened a long time ago. The details of the old story are misty. The good man was impeached, suffered dismissal and disgrace. A bad father was succeeded by a bad son on the throne of Ch'ü, and the new Prince—his name was Hsiang—hated virtuous Ch'ü Yüan venomously. The would-be reformer's degradation and ruin were complete. He had nothing left to live for. But banished, disgraced, and homesick, he bequeathed the world one of its great poems—his own swan song. *Li Sao* enriches China's great literature. In the ups and downs of Chinese dynasties, and of Chinese politics, its pathetic words must have stung many a Chinese conscience, been cut deep on many a Chinese heart. Hopeless and soul-sick, full of years and disappointments, noble Ch'ü Yüan on the fifth day of a fifth moon flung himself into the Mi Lo-kiang. All the common people loved him. Had not he earned it? For he had given them love and sympathy and his own ease and sure preferment! Peasant fishermen saw him plunge himself into the river. They forsook their uncaught spoil, and pulled hastily to where he had sunk. But Ch'ü Yüan did not come to the surface again. Friend nor foe ever saw him more. The fishermen searched deep as they could, and searched the shore for a risen, drifted body. They searched in vain. Weeping they scattered all their own scanty store of rice into the Mi Lo where he had sunk; that Ch'ü Yüan's drowned spirit might not hunger.

His story spread—never may it perish!—and every fifth day of every fifth moon since all China has searched for Ch’ü Yüan, and not finding him, has fed his spirit with libations of rice and gratitude.

Wherever in all China there is water, broad river, tiny creek, canal, lake, or lakelet the memorial festival of good Ch’ü Yüan is kept by the racing Dragon Boats: once a solemn processional, often now a high-spirited, hilarious frolic. But always the burning spirit of gratitude to the old would-be defender of the destitute *yü min* incites and pervades it. And when have the Chinese taken their religiousness—such religiousness as they have—sadly?

Where there is no water on which the boats can ride and chase—as in Peking—camels, chariot-carts and ponies take the place of the boats, and race on roads and streets, boiled rice flung from them as they speed. In Mongolia the festival is kept with theatricals—Ch’ü Yüan the hero of the dramas.

Though the pious, loyal fishermen of old never found Ch’ü Yüan’s body, never were privileged—they or his own clan—to give it honourable burial, once the wraith of what once had boned and fleshed him rose from the Mi Lo-kiang, and told them that the rice they each year, on the day of his suicide, had thrown to him never had reached him. A monster water-dragon had snatched it all; he was very hungry. If they would enclose the rice in bags of rich silk, the reptile-glutton would not know it for food, or—if he did—would not dare filch or touch elegant brocade. The spirit of Ch’ü Yüan was eagerly and piously obeyed; and never has been hungry since. For many years his annual feast of rice went to him in its costly wrappings of rich silk, securely fastened by rich threads of many colours. After a time, those who actually had known Ch’ü gone on-high, bamboo leaves took the place of the expensive wrappings of silk; and now that many centuries have softened the acuteness of a race’s grieving, sometimes and somewheres the meal of rice is thrown unwrapped to the hungered wraith of Ch’ü Yüan; but always on the fifth moon’s fifth day China feeds Ch’ü Yüan’s ghost, and searches for his drowned body; calls to him, and supplicates him to come back.

From the first day of the Dragon Boat Festival month every house in Yün-nan (every house almost everywhere in China) has a bundle of artemisia and sweet-flag suspended above the doorway, aromatic preventatives to keep all evil spirits and influences away from the dwellings and from the presence of the martyr’s ghost, should Ch’ü Yüan deign to come when they call him.

In defiance and in mockery of the greedy dragon that robbed him so long ago, the boats in which they search for Ch’ü Yüan, and from which they feed him, are dragon-shaped. And that they are detracts nothing from the festival’s pulsing picture.

When the Hour-of-the-Serpent was in its mid-time they saw the boats coming, heard the musical liquid rhythm of many oars that rose and fell on the gold-and-silver Yang-tsze.

It was swift racing the boats were making—and the rapid, swirling river raced them all in its deep-cut storied channel between the mysterious jungle hills of Nosuland and the fruited fields of Q'ūo Chung, with the gypsum cliffs behind them o'er-topped by purple-misted distant mountains.

The Chinese bank of the swift-gliding river, usually silent here but for bird-songs, stray pedestrians, occasional horsemen, now and then a caravan of merchandise, reverberated with the human hum of the Chinese that crowded it. Q'ūo's *chia* was almost lonely in its wide isolation. Where had all these eager lookers-on come from? From scores of tiny hamlets, solitary hill-perched homes, minor villages and towns that all lacked a water-course long enough, deep enough, wide enough for the boats' racing. And, too, Q'ūo's own servants and labourers ran to hundreds—the men alone did; not all of them were monogamists, none of them were celibates.

It was a joyous, excited, chattering crowd.

The Nosu bank kept its wild and deep-gloomed silence. Not a Nosu parted its jungle vines to watch the Chinese festival.

Thirty boats or more were racing; racing each other to locate and find the sacred body of self-martyred Ch'ü Yüan. Q'ūo Lou was in the first boat. He stood on the prow, shading his eyes with his lifted left hand from the morning's glare. He was looking out for Ch'ü Yüan. His right hand waved rapidly over the water, scattering rice as they sped.

The boat was so narrow that it looked but a thin fantastic wedge driving through the river's molten ripples. But it looked, too, a living demon; dragon-shaped and scaled; and dragon-coloured, if those water reptiles are scaled in many brilliant black-and gold-edged colours. Its fins were gaudy crimson wings. Its hideous head, lifted high above the water, had hot fire-belching nostrils, its long, down-hanging, hideous tongue dripped vinegar, its great white glass eyes flashed hatred and vengeance from between the broad phosphorescent belts that circled them. It was designed to affright the demon-dragon that had kept Ch'ü Yüan riceless in the cold deep of the Mi Lo-kiang. And it looked fierce and—for all its slimness—formidable enough to do it. Its long length lacked no inch of a hundred and twenty feet. Ninety men paddled it, never one paddle blade a hair's breadth out of beat with the others; a drummer standing midship conducted their perfect unison with the loud whacking of his two drum-stick batons on the huge hide drum's resounding

silk top. Fore and aft, youths, bedizened in purple and gold, rent the day with the brazen screechings of the gongs they beat without ceasing. They paid no attention to the drum-stick batons of the liquid orchestra's conductor. They had nothing to do with him, or he with them; their noisy office was to terrify all the evil and famished water-demons that, unaffrighted, might molest and devour the ghost of glorious Ch'ü Yüan. And they did it, if noise could do it! Paddlers, drummer, gong-beaters, look-out rice-thrower, all were splendidly clad, in richly dyed silks and gaudy paper. Bright green branches and gayer flags ornamented the long dragon-boat wherever flag or tree-branch could be securely fastened.

All the other boats, resembling the first one closely, crowded after it at their excited swiftest.

On the shore the hissing of thousands of fire-crackers split the shrill human noise every few minutes; bells rang, fifes shrieked. It was incredible, Mr. Kwan thought, as he had thought at least a thousand times the past thirty years, that even an excited concourse of holiday-making Chinese could so fever themselves with their own throat-splitting, ear-splitting noise all through the gruelling hottest hours of an inordinately hot day. But they kept it up, racing along the river's edge in the wake of the passing boats, eager to miss nothing they could avoid missing. And the missioner knew how much sincere, and not tawdry, emotion ran deep and in all seriousness under the explosive expression of mad hilarity. He knew his Chinese—as nearly as a Western can—knew them a very emotional people who rarely allow their emotion the safety-valve of open expression, and knew the noise these were making now but the superficial froth of a more real feeling they would not show. How many of them knew the old story that this gorgeous raree-show down on the river commemorated, he wondered. In its outlines, probably all, he thought. For the story is told again and again by every fireside in China, in every courtyard, at inns, on temple-steps, by strolling actors, and the itinerant story-tellers that earn a good living in the poorest parts of China.

He did not follow the boats, nor did Q'ūo Chung until Q'ūo Ssu made him. She had forgotten her dream! The glowing boats pulled her after them. She could not look at them long enough. And when this was over she should not see it again until twelve slow moons had waxed and waned. Why could it not always be Dragon Boat Festival?

There were quite a lot of things that the little spoiled Chinese girl would have done to life to make it more radiant and sweeter if she had had the power; and small doubt would have lived to have regretted most of them, perhaps all of them, if she had!

She ran nimbly along at the very edge of the river, throwing a laugh here, a word there, breaking into a soft gurgle of song now and then, her black-black eyes growing brighter and brighter, the roses under her paint growing pinker and pinker, redder and redder, her heart gayer and gayer; and indulgent Q'ūo Chung plodded after her as well as he could; and Kwan Yin-ko's American brother was half tempted to follow with Q'ūo Chung. But he had work to do in his own *chia* before sunset, and a sick man to see two or three *li* on its wall's other side. And when the boats were all out of his sight, and the noisy, happy horde that followed them to gape and cry out the longer was a little less loud in his ears, he turned and went back to his own little domain—the sanctuary-home he had made him in China, and had lived in for many quiet years.

He walked more slowly than was his vigorous wont, leaned a little on his stick, his head a little bent. It was scarcely noon, yet he felt oddly tired already to-day. A glass of port, or a spoonful of Bourbon, perhaps, when he got home. His years were gathering in at last! He must hold time at bay, though, considerably longer. His work was not half done. And none thwarted him in it. No enmities, no regrets forbade and punished him. They were all kind and considerate to him, these dear Chinese of his. The magnolias in Virginia! The roses in Maryland! He could smell them. It was almost June at home. There, there! A soldier must march with his regiment, camp where it camped. His Commander-in-Chief had detailed him to China. He loved China.

He rested his stout mahogany stick against a great flower-filmed camphor-tree, took out an old briar, and when he had filled the pipe, lit it, and went steadily on—went slowly, smoking as he went.

All in all the man's life in China had been happy—was securely happy and well harboured now.

But an old wound had opened suddenly as he stood watching the gay dragon boats pass on their mock search for the body of one who had flung away the saddened life that treachery and ingratitude had poisoned. Had Ch'ü Yüan loved a woman deeply once? Or had he given all his love, all his longing and manhood to a heedless king's ingratitude and to a stricken, helpless people's need?

"Sharper than a serpent's tooth." There there!

Mr. Kwan smiled at himself reproachfully. But he knew that to-day in his Chinese courtyard he must keep tryst for an hour with an old sorrow—never quite out of his thought; newly sharp to-day.

Quinine for Lou Kai-shek, whether Lou Kai-shek consented to take it or not. No doctor had a right to his diploma who did not know how to contrive to

get his own way every time. Lou Kai-shek was going to take that quinine—a good stiff dose of it.

The medical missionary chuckled softly, and walked on more briskly, leaning less heavily on his good stick, even swinging it jauntily once or twice, smoking his pipe. His old briar was filled with Virginia tobacco—one of the man's self-indulgent extravagances. He liked that better than he did the best tobacco that grew in Kunhsien or in Amoy.

Did Tom still smoke their old brand? Was Tom still living? Was—— Tut! Tut!

FOR three jubilant days, from ten in the morning until four in the afternoon, the Dragon Boat Festival was kept up; all its ceremonial, as detailed and observed on its last day as on its first, none of its noise, even for an hour, muted or scanted. At four the boatmen rested on their paddles; a little tired, but very happy. They are a water people, the sinewy country-folk of Southern China; none of them all more so than the Yün-nanese are. Three days' hard racing on the turbulent Yang-tsze and on the Niul An stimulated and gladdened them far more than it wearied them. Not one of them was exhausted; just comfortably tired. Their pipes tasted good as they slowly smoked them, resting for an hour. Then came guild dinners in all the towns and large villages, home feasts, great play in the gambling houses, ecstatic hours at improvised, open-air torch-lit theatres.

Q'ūo Ssu devoured it all. She all but forgot the lover who had leaned over her in her dreams.

The guild-dinners were not for her, nor the orgies of chance in the gambling-house; but all the rest was hers, and she made the greedy most of it. There was feasting every night in Q'ūo Chung's *chia*; more than she could eat of all that she most liked to eat. And each night her father and her brothers took her with them to watch the actors outside the Snake-god's temple on a not-far hill's willowed side. For three days and for two nights the Festival rivalled So Wing, and all but ousted him from his dominance in the little Chinese girl's vagrant mind. She was too tired, perhaps, when she tucked herself under her quilt on her sleep-mat, and snuggled her drowsy head down on her hard rattan pillow to dream. For two nights of heavy slumber So Wing did not come to her as she slept.

The third night he came; handsomer and more importunate than ever. She was throbbing to his gentle wooing when she woke; and her queer little conscience pricked her sharply that she had more than half forgotten her plighted "lord," scarcely had remembered to look for him after the first few hours three days ago! She had robed herself for him, painted her face for him, worn her best shoes out to the river's spray-splashed and feet-churned bank—and had forgotten him before the Hour-of-the-Monkey had come.

Q'ūo Ssu dug her knuckles into her eyes hard to waken them—and her, and as sleep went the farther, repentant tears came.

She said some hard things to herself as she changed her sleep-jacket for the first day-coat her hand found; as careless of her toilet as she had been concerned when the moon's fifth day had dawned.

Her guitar lay on the floor where she had dropped it when tired of making it sing. Q'ūo Ssu snatched it up, shook it, as if the fault of its rough displacement had been its and not hers, propped it up on her high robe-drawers, lit a taper before it, and did it obeisance; pretending that the misused guitar was the goddess-of-Fidelity, and vowed it a vow.

She might have hesitated to make such a substitute do duty for a god-one, but almost anything, in an emergency, could be deputed to impersonate a mere goddess, she considered. Of course, she would not have taken such liberty with Kwan Yin-ko, but the other goddesses were lesser-ones; little Miss Q'ūo had no qualm about treating them rather casually.

Q'ūo Ssu *ko-t'owed* three times, and vowed—with her arms outheld, her palms upheld—that never again should So Wing fade from the first place in her thought, never for one breath of time slip aside from the throne of her heart. Until her spirit mounted the dragon to be carried by him into the Great Beyond, and her body lay in its coffin, she would be loyal and true to So Wing. She swore a solemn oath solemnly, sealed it with her face on the floor at the feet of her old goddess-masquerading guitar, and rising, registered it in her own conscience-stricken bosom.

Q'ūo Ssu's eyes still were troubled, and they were red-rimmed, when she went listlessly into the hall; none of her morning duties even thought of—much less performed.

Well for Q'ūo Ssu that her honourable father's was not an over-formal household, or his rule—at least over her—even remotely strict. She was a loving daughter, if not one notably unselfish, but she so often forgot or neglected her filial observances, that her parents had grown sadly accustomed to such disrespectful delinquencies. They rather amused Q'ūo Chung, or he pretended that they did; the father of a child whom he himself has over-indulged and spoiled rarely is able to wear his heart quite unveiled on his sleeve. They vexed Q'ūo Zat sorely; but what Q'ūo Chung condoned, Q'ūo Zat dared not reprimand. Q'ūo Chung never had over-indulged or spoiled Q'ūo Zat.

A Chinese daughter, still unwedded, living with her parents, must rise from her sleep-mat long before they do, and when she has bathed and dressed carefully, hasten to their mats-sides, inquire how they have slept, inquire solicitously how they find their venerable health, then meekly beg what food

they will condescend to command her to prepare for their fragrant first rice. Most of which Q'ūo Ssu usually omitted; and not infrequently she omitted all of it. Now and then she danced into them as they woke, asked nicely, How had they slept?—and danced out again. She rarely went farther than that. And Q'ūo Zat had scratched her own back for years now!

Back-scratching is a creature luxury in which most Chinese indulge, even the cultured and high-born. Chinese skin is soft and peculiarly sensitive; even the work-calloused coolies' usually is. Rough-barked trees and charitable scratching-posts serve the peasant-ones for—what they so much enjoy. The gentles take their share of the almost universal national indulgence more privately. But they take it; and take it as much as a matter of course. A back-scratcher lies on every well-to-do Chinese's toilet-table. T'zu Hsi's were of jade, exquisitely made. She left one behind when she hurried away from Peking in her tragedy of 1900. It is in London now! Quite a number of stolen intimately personal Chinese belongings are. Q'ūo Zat's back-scratcher was roughly whittled out of pine; two of its fingers were broken and jagged. Negligent Q'ūo Ssu's own scratcher was ivory.

The father saw the dejection in the girl's face when she came into the big—scarcely at all furnished—hall that was the family living-room. He looked at her anxiously; saw the red tear-rims under her eyes. Perhaps she only was tired from the long festival into which she had plunged so wildly, enjoyed so riotously. Probably it was but that; tired and overwrought, depressed in reaction. It could be nothing else. She never had had a trouble, not even a slight illness, until that black curse of lassitude, which the rice-thief Nung Fing had failed to cure, had broken and crushed her. All the gods grant that it was not on her again! And he himself would be her medicine-man this time. And he had a drug up his sleeve—(a time-honoured Chinese expression)—that would make any invalid girl in all China radiantly well and radiantly happy.

He would administer it at once.

And he did; blurted it out: A very rich *ta-jên* had accepted her for his number-one. The augurs were gracious; the lotus-and-jade nuptials were not to be delayed. Already her bride-clothes were making—even in Yün-nan Fu where the richest silks were to be bought, and where the most highly skilled (and paid) tailors lived. Already the bride-cakes were cooking in Sze-chuen; the bride-chamber being plenished and decked.

This and much more exultant Q'ūo Chung told her exultantly.

And Q'ūo Ssu's eyes widened in horror.

She did not lay herself down in gratitude at his feet. She swayed strickenly

on her own.

First she pleaded refusal; and when the father denied it, her eyes hardened, and blazed in rage. And she spat him termagant resistance and defiant disobedience.

Daughters have been slain for less in China.

Even Q’ūo Chung was annoyed. It was all put on, of course. It could not be sincere. But it vexed him that she did not express very differently the daughterly reluctance that she was in honour-bound to pretend. She owed him, and her maidenhood, tears. But this attitude, these words, were offensive. For the first time in her life Q’ūo was deeply vexed with his daughter.

However, she was Q’ūo Ssu—and he was Q’ūo Chung, always her partisan, until now her tool. So, the affronted father only shrugged and went off indignantly and riceless to his orchard.

He drove his farm labourers and all his workmen hard.

And Q’ūo Ssu was left alone in her life’s first great dilemma.

And none of the women helped her, not even mother or grandmother. Except to envy her, none of them paid any attention to her; they were far too busied with the many preparations that Q’ūo Chung had commanded for the great marriage that his lily-one’s loveliness had achieved.

There were scores of things to do, and to have done; and the time was short. The trousseau itself was only part of the important and delightful all that overwhelmed and fascinated everyone in the *chia* except only the gaunt-eyed bride. But the trousseau alone was enough to have busied half a dozen households. Most of it was being made or bought at Yün-nan Fu; but every stitch had to be ordered, and ordered intelligently. For every detail of it, even the smallest, is significant, and of lasting influence beneficent or baneful. A wrong tint, an incorrect blending of colours, a garniture wrongly designed, ill-executed or misapplied may mar a marriage—even injure its descendants.

Ko had sent the money for the trousseau’s cost, of course. He had sent an enormous sum. But the procuring of it was up to the House of Q’ūo. Not only the *right* materials and designs and the best tailors and needlemen and needlewomen must be secured; but all who cut or stitched must be strong and fine of body, noble of mind and unimpeachable of character. It was essential that every garment the bride was to wear, from her wedding-day until her years of child-bearing were past, should be made only by happy, healthy, and lucky hands, because the qualities of those who make a virgin’s trousseau—dyers, weavers, cutters, embroiderers, and all the others—enter into the garments, and

from them into the bride. All clothes influence the wearers—but especially those of a new-born boy (girls don't matter), a virgin bride and the dead.

All-important as it was, Q'ūo Ssu took not the slightest interest in her costly, lavish trousseau.

Little love-sick-for-So-Wing Q'ūo Ssu was in misery. And she was terribly frightened. For she had but now sworn a great oath, and its words still burned clear and hot in her mind. Q'ūo Ssu was distraught. And the more she raved and protested, the less they believed her—the little at all that they heeded her.

Alas for her dream!

Alas for her oath!

When the Lotus month was dying they carried Q'ūo Ssu to Ko Ching-lin.

But they had some ado beforehand.

Greatly as the great match—it undoubtedly was that—pleased Q'ūo Chung, and perturbed as he had been about Q'ūo Ssu's future, Ko's offer had not much surprised him. But it had swept Q'ūo Zat and old Q'ūo Xink off their feet. For Q'ūo Chung had kept his own counsel, and had given wife or mother no hint of what he had seen in Ko Ching-lin's quickened eyes in the wax-trees orchard.

Q'ūo Zat and Q'ūo Xink were all but demented in the tornado of their amazement, pride, and joy.

Not so Q'ūo Ssu.

She stormed and wept, wept and stormed.

And her kindred beamed upon her, that at last she was behaving as a Chinese girl should.

Only Kwan's own brother, the American missionary, believed that Q'ūo Ssu's shrilled and sobbed refusing to become the number-one of rich Ko Ching-lin was sincere reluctance and not a very fine and perfect observance of bridal etiquette.

And Mr. Kwan was powerless to help her. He had braced Q'ūo Chung's determination to spare her the agony of feet-binding years ago. This time Q'ūo would not even listen to him. And after a second interview between them, persuasive and diplomatic on the missionary's part, stormy and vitriolic on Q'ūo's part, and finally abusive and insulting, Q'ūo Chung forbade the other to

enter the Q'ūo *chia*, and took sure care that Q'ūo Ssu did not go to the missioner's again.

Short of abducting the little Chinese girl, and contriving to hide her in safety, there was nothing that Kwan's white brother could do to serve or to succour Q'ūo Ssu, except to pray for her.

Mr. Kwan did that fervently.

And he canvassed the abduction plan earnestly.

It is not improbable that, but for an accident, the American would have done it—for he had been born in Virginia. His Southern blood was up as it had not been before in China—as it had been only once in all his life.

There were Nosu who would aid him. The more desperate the venture the more it would appeal to them. He felt sure that he could trust them. They not only would scale Q'ūo's cactus hedges, and batter through all his defences, but they'd rush Q'ūo Ssu into Nosuland with them, and would keep her there in impregnable safety, in all honour, and in as much creature comfort as the sturdy little Chinese girl—remotely "Lolo" herself—would find essential.

But what then?

Could he hope to negotiate ultimate peace-terms with Q'ūo Chung?

More like, he knew, that his own life would feed the maw of Q'ūo Chung's righteous anger. The missionary did not forget that it would be righteous in the Chinese soul of Q'ūo Ssu's outraged father.

Fond of life still, contented in the Yün-nan home he had made, deeply devoted to his work here and keenly anxious to continue in it, he was as ready to die as the next man. But what really would best serve Q'ūo Ssu? She was only asked to do what all Chinese girls had done for thousands of years. What was to become of her, if she were not given in some such marriage? The new republican ways had not penetrated into Q'ūo Chung's stoutly fortified *chia*. Q'ūo Chung had shown no inclination towards Christianity—nor, for the matter of that, had Q'ūo Ssu. Appeal to Q'ūo Chung, argument with him, were worse than hopeless. *Why* did Q'ūo Ssu rebel? He wished he knew that; wished he could learn it. He knew how preponderantly happy just such Chinese marriages were. His religion disapproved them; they revolted his American blood. But his observation here in China—Chinese, unwesternized China—had slewed his judgment of such Chinese marriages, in spite of his taste and in spite of his conscience. He knew Ko Ching-lin; liked and respected him greatly; knew him kind, cultured, generous, upright. He believed that Ko would be kind to his young wife, if Q'ūo Ssu became that, as no doubt she

would, if he himself did not contrive and pull through some desperate escape for her. And what if he did? She could not live her life out in Nosuland. He could not wish that for her. And how could she return to her father's home; how live elsewhere in Yün-nan? A Chinese girl betrothed but never wedded would be hideously discounted, Q'ūo Chung would not relent. Q'ūo's word was pledged. Frankly, the greatly perturbed missioner was not without sympathy with Q'ūo Chung in all this sorry tangle. Q'ūo had given his word. And Q'ūo had secured an excellent settlement in life for Q'ūo Ssu. From every honourable and reasonable Chinese standpoint Q'ūo Chung's attitude and persistence were unassailable.

But little Q'ūo Ssu forced into a repugnant marriage! Given to a stranger against her own consent! Again the man's American gorge rose. Again his Christian conscience protested. What was he to do? Which side lay his duty? Which side did his best judgment really advocate?

But troubled Mr. Kwan did not have to make the decision after all. It was taken off his hands.

Fond and proud of all his Yün-nan garden grew, he tended it himself as much as he could. He was pruning a peach-tree, and worrying over the Q'ūo-Ko broil at the same time. The high ladder slipped; and the perturbed missionary knew that he had sprained an ankle, hurt his knee, and dislocated one of his shoulders; and knew beyond a doubt that his anxiously contemplated platonic Lochinvar act would not be performed.

He did not see Q'ūo Ssu again; could not speak a parting word to her, nor manage to send her a message of friendliness and consolation. The damaged missionary cursed his luck, and hers. Truth compels the statement that he did—greatly as it pains a lifelong and ardent admirer of all "foreign missionaries" to make it.

He'd visit her in Sze-ch'uen before long, he resolved.

Q'ūo Ssu was ominously quiet when they shut her in her crimson bride-chair. She almost seemed indifferent. Her mother thought her wisely determined not to mar her paint or crush her splendid garments by any more tears, contortions, or desperate thrashings-about. Q'ūo Chung thought that pride and happiness had overcome dramatic ability at last, and that it was all she could do not to show openly how glad she was to go. Sorely grieved to part with her, almost unmanned, Q'ūo the father even was hurt that at the last—their last together—she could part from him so calmly. Both parents would have had no doubt that she had come to her senses at last, had either of them for a moment suspected that her reluctance and wild protests had been

unassumed. But neither had.

If Q’ūo Chung had known of the poison-pellet in her pouch, the slim dagger in her vest, it would have cost him his reason.

Had the American missionary who loved the child known that she had them, he would have smiled even while it distressed him. He loved Q’ūo Ssu, but he did not over-estimate her strength of character, or her adamant physical courage.

It was a long, long way they took her. Often a Chinese bride has to cross half China on her lonely way to wedlock. No matter how long it is, from her father’s door to her bridegroom’s she must sit alone; silent and uncompanioned in her fast-locked, close-shuttered bride-chair. She may rejoice or she may grieve; she may while away her journeying’s long tedium with sleep if she likes—and, if she can sleep in the pandemonium of noise without which no first-class bride’s-procession moves an inch. But, under no condition whatever may she crush her finery, tear her red veil, knock her pearl-hung crown about, or deface her paint with tears, or crack it with a smile.

Q’ūo Ssu gave no thought to those, or any other, commandments. She was going to the cold Yellow Springs, not to Sze-ch’uen. Only her corpse was going to the *chia* of Ko Ching-lin. He could wed with that if he liked!

Then she suddenly remembered that just such marriages did take place sometimes! She crouched far back in her narrow bride-box, shuddering with a new terror, appalled by a new dilemma. What if he did that? What escape then? It would seal her his for ever. No hope of a spirit-marriage with So Wing her beloved when his ghost came to hers down there in Ti-Tsang Wang’s kingdom, and wooed her spirit there, wooed her again as they had wooed and given and loved each other the day that Fan Tan had leapt across the dangered stream, carrying her from girlhood to womanhood.

Honourable suicide would save her living body from the detested ownership of Ko Ching-lin; it was for that that she had planned it; for that, and to keep her oath inviolate—her oath and her loyalty to So Wing.

Her high enterprise was thwarted of all its sweetness; only the pain of it remained. And she knew that she shrank from the pain; that all her quivering flesh did; and feared it. But, bereft of all its lure, even so what better was there for her? Nothing. She would perform it, even as she had purposed.

At the Snake-god’s temple gate she would perform it.

A slave-woman whom she sometimes had befriended, and oftener had bribed, had cut a small peep-hole for her in one side of the chair, deftly covering it with a crimson silk-patch. Q’ūo Ssu—a terrible thing for a Chinese bride to do—thrust a stick-pin’s sharp point through the silk patch, and tore the patch out. She could see but little; one eye at a very small hole told her little.

But she persisted.

And long, long after she was sure they must have passed it, she saw certainly, if not very clearly, the blue-tiled roof of the temple gate and the pink-flowered oleanders growing beside it.

Here she would do it; here where she had squandered her last laughing happiness, so short moons ago, with her father. Sweetest to mount the dread dragon here, since she could not at some perfumed spot where So Wing’s sleeve had touched her coat.

She would do it here—and quickly.

Which?

She drew out the poison-pellet with fingers that shook until their rings clattered. She must drink to swallow it. She had no drink here, no means to get one.

Q’ūo Ssu repouched the poison.

She must be quick—ere they had left the Snake-god’s temple behind them!

She fingered the slim knife with steadier hands; slid its edge across her arm with great care—to test it.

It was sharp-sharp.

Now!

And yet—no—she would live a little longer: a little longer to think of So Wing. Could ghosts think—when they first went over? Had she not heard that they could not? She would live a little longer—to think of So Wing to the utmost that she could. She would pretend that he was the bridegroom waiting for her. Sweet to dream again!

The way they went was long. They took it proudly—not too fast. They carried the red chair and the precious burden in it carefully. They took main-roads where they could; for her greater comfort, and for Q’ūo Chung’s greater dignity—and for Ko Ching-lin’s. They threaded towns and villages, when it did not cost wide detours; did it that all the world might see and envy the long and costly bridal train of Q’ūo Chung’s daughter being carried to the princely

kuei of rich Ko Ching-lin, the splendid procession of the luck-born who was going, with unmatched pomp, to be a *ta-jên's* number-one; threaded towns and villages that all China might see and envy; all of it practically available—for even their leisured time-table had its limit. The auspicious marriage-day had been determined and selected. It would not tarry for the bride. And great Ko Ching-lin must not be kept waiting.

But they made all the show they could, and all the noise. And neither in garish display nor in tremendous noise was their achievement mean.

Chinese endurance is phenomenal. Chinese women have their full splendid share of the heroic asset. And all Chinese are immuned to tremendous noises from their birth-hour. Even so, Chinese brides have died in their bride-chairs, literally slain by the noise that was battered and shrieked about them as they journeyed to their bridegrooms.

If it shocked Q'ūo Ssu's nerves, she did not know that it did. She—and they—were drugged with other suffering. It did not disturb her, except that every blast and spit cried aloud, "So Wing," to her, and at the same time told her that she was carried nearer and nearer to O-mei Hsien.

When they reached Ping-shan Hsien she would do it. She would live in Yün-nan while the gods permitted it.

The procession neither hurried nor tarried. It took none of the rough short-cuts that the insect-porters had. They put her chair down at the Hour-of-the-Sheep, and again at the Hour-of-the-Dog, while her bridesmaids fed her, and gave her drink. When they did, she did not speak to them, nor they to her. Her brothers—one before her chair, one behind it—riding on their bedizened, painted mules—did not come to her, much less speak to her, when she ate and drank. They would witness the nuptial rites; but they would not look upon her face again until she had been a wife for moons—nor then, unless her lord permitted it.

The long way seemed to grow longer. Again, and yet again, she fingered her death-pill, fingered her knife. Again, and yet again, she postponed.

At last Q'ūo Ssu knew that she could not do it!

But the Chinese girl's resolve held.

Her hand was too weak. She must accomplish it more meanly than she had purposed—that was all.

IN A YÜN-NAN COURTYARD *CHAPTER XX*

WHEN Q'ūo Flee and Q'ūo Toon returned to their father's homestead they reported to him that through all the long trying nuptial rites Q'ūo Ssu—Ko Ssu now—had borne herself excellently; with sweet and dignified docility. Q'ūo grunted his approval; and wondered how soon Ko Ching-lin would invite his wife's father to visit them.

And a listening slave woman slipped away stealthily; and when the chance served, she stole a perfumed taper, and lit it at Kwan's shrine out in the rice-patch.

Her brothers had told but truth-words of her. She had showed no emotion whatever; not when she was lifted from her red chair, and carried over Ko Ching-lin's threshold, nor during any of the long nuptial ceremonies that seem calculated to wear out the physical endurance of even the sturdiest.

If Q'ūo Ssu felt fatigued, she did not show it. When a spark from the nuptial-fire of peach-wood and charcoal snapped up and caught in her jewelled scarf, the bridegroom cried out, and crushed out the hot spark against his own face: but his close-veiled bride stayed passive and motionless in his arms. On the bridal dais, when she was tied to Ko Ching-lin wrist and ankle, when the red-tied wine-cups were lifted to their lips, when her husband led her to do obeisance to the tablet of his family she did not falter. When the women bore her to the unknown room in which she must sleep from now, set her on the bedecked bed she did not flinch.

For hours the women stayed with her, and mocked and teased her, saying aloud to each other that her back was humped like a camel's, that her pearls were mock ones, her clothes but rags and tawdry compared to those that both of Ko Ching-lin's other number-ones had worn, that her breath was onioned, that her procession would have shamed a coolie wedding, saying and tittering how they pitied the Lord Ko Ching-lin for the cheated bargain he'd been trapped in, and that of sureness he would soon divorce the hag that a lying, thievish go-between had palmed off on him, she sat upright where they had placed her, did not move, gave no sign, spoke not. Try how they might, and they tried in every way—and most of the ways they tried were horrid—they could not make her speak. And at last, at the sound of a gong, they left her alone with her own thoughts in her new, unfamiliar room, and trooped away giggling to report of her to the bridegroom.

She would make an excellent wife, they had to tell him, for she could not be roused to anger, and she was speechless. Ko Ssu justified the go-between's report. If she but bore him many sons, her husband's satisfaction in her would be entire.

And the bride had passed triumphantly through the hardest trial of all the nuptial ceremonies that culminate a Chinese girl's betrothal, marriage-journey, and final espousal.

As the late day drained away into the west slave-women came in softly, tended the long candles, and went as softly as they had come. They stole furtive glances at the motionless crimson-clad figure sitting immovable on the long, low bed. It did not stir. The new wife took no notice of her slaves.

Another long hour passed before the bridegroom came to her. But she did not move, did not lift her long veil, not even to take a stolen first peep at this strange new room of hers, the room where her sons would be born. She did not move, neither wept nor sighed, until she heard a step at the panel, heard a hand thrusting it back.

Then she rose, took a few steps, and stood veiled and motionless waiting her bridegroom she never had seen—waiting for him and for his verdict: the stranger-husband who means all her future to a Chinese bride.

Is the Chinese bride glad to hear his footsteps? Does she wish that his coming might be delayed a little longer? Some are glad, some would choose more respite. But, little doubt, that most of them welcome the stranger's final footstep, if only because feminine curiosity is stronger than girlish shyness.

Ko Q'ūo Ssu had no curiosity to see what Ko Ching-lin looked like. She had no curiosity concerning him, no interest in him; none. But, the little she could feel gladness, or ever would again, she was glad that he had come; wishful to get it over—the hard last of it—before the trembling little of her sick courage quite oozed away out of her icy, painted finger-tips.

At dusk Ko Ching-lin sought his wife.

The red felicity-candles were lit in the bridal-room. The crimson quilts were folded on the carved red-wood and ivory couch. The bride's brass-studded box of fine red leather stood open at the low bed's end. Emblems of love and of fruitfulness decked the room. Over the bed bells and tassels—both of many colours, sizes, and materials—dangled down from cords of silk and of silver; that many boys should be born of the marriage.

Beautiful and costly bells, as well as exquisite lanterns, hung from the ceiling and hung from the tasselled lanterns. Bells bring a wife good luck—keep her husband's love hers, and do her a dozen other valuable good-turns. In Chihli bells always form part of a bride's dowry. And travelled Ko Ching-lin had seen to it that his girl-wife's chamber was well decked with bells.

A coronet of blue kingfishers' feathers lay on an ivory table. Such coronets replace or are part of a bride's crown in some parts of China; not in Sze-ch'uen or in Yün-nan. They are peculiarly lovely—even in beauty-crammed China; and because of their exquisite, melting loveliness doting Ko Ching-lin had had the turquoise-tinted coronet made for his bride; that she might wear it when she chose.

The bridegroom bowed to his bride.

But the bride stood as motionless as rock.

He overlooked it—his bride was young, frightened, and shy, overwhelmed; even perhaps, in spite of the great honour he had done her, in spite of the great advancement he had given her, reluctant. His love should win her. His tenderness should reassure her. His patience should put her at ease.

He went to her, and lifted the red bride-veil very gently.

Ssu met his eyes squarely. She did not flinch. But she did not move.

She was fairer even than he had seen her at that stolen-glance time. She was adorable. The man's heart leapt. His being quivered.

Her very stillness intrigued him. A smirking bride would not have pleased Ko Ching-lin. His first bride had giggled a little when he first approached her, and though he had held it to her for shy, girlish nervousness, it had taken all his chivalry not to count it in her disfavour then or after. His second bride had shrank from him unmistakably before she had smiled at him ingratiatingly. He had not liked her face. It had cost him something to take her hand in his and draw her into his arms. He had grown fond of them both. He had grieved for their grief when the sons they had born him had died. But for neither of them had his fondness ever swelled to infatuation; he never had been blind to their faults.

This girl-bride of his infatuated him. He knew himself wax in those small, soft, ring-laden hands. Whatever her young faults, he would accept them, love them even, since they were hers, part of her self, and because of the love of her that was mastering him, and that he knew would master him more.

Whatever she felt now, she should return his love. He swore it.

Ko Ching-lin drew the red veil quite away from the splendidly dressed, motionless figure, laid the veil gently down on the red-leather bride-trunk. He drew the dagger of repudiation out of his boot, held it towards her a moment, the jewelled hilt towards her, then he threw the dagger as far as he could across the room.

Ko Ching-lin had taken the bridegroom's last, ultimate marriage vow. He had crossed the Rubicon of marriage. No escape for him now; no withdrawal. He was hers until death claimed him—unless only she gave him one of the seven causes for divorcement. The graver of those *she* never would give; as for the lighter ones she should do as she liked. If she chattered all day, and with her chattering made his nights sleepless, never would he chide her. Ko Ching-lin knew that he never would divorce Ko Ssu. He was hers while this earth-life held.

His love and welcome broke from his lips—broke softly, for tenderness not ardour is the wooing most acceptable to a Chinese girl.

"Lady and queen," he murmured—but his eyes, in spite of him, burned on her face, "as a shrine holds its god shall always these your husband's arms enfold you. Your heart shall beat in happiness on my bosom. I take you, flower of my being, music of my life, fragrance of my days, jewel of all my nights, in ecstasy, in gratitude, in tenderness, and devotion that never shall fail you, never shall lessen. I clasp you in marriage, dear-one of all the great world-ball, fairest-one, sweetest, my beloved-one!"

Almost his arms were about her.

Still she scarcely moved. Certainly she did not shrink. She held her eyes to his. She pointed one jewelled hand to the dagger he had flung away.

"Take up your knife, lord-one," she bade him. "Sheath it now in my throat. But touch me not. For I am with child."

SHE had said it coldly and bravely. But now, although she did not draw back or flinch, she trembled piteously, and covered her eyes with her hands that she might not see him strike.

Ko Ching-lin did not strike.

Frozen in horror he gazed at her as motionless now as she had been a few moments ago. The misery that came in his eyes, and stayed there, must have earned him her pity and her remorse, if she had seen it.

Ko Ching-lin knew that she had spoken the truth. He had heard truth in her voice, he saw it in her desperate defiance and in her adamant aloofness of bearing that was no less aloof now that it had broken up into the more cringing attitude of a woman physically afraid of the knife and the death she had challenged and invited. He knew that she had told him the truth. And he had loved her. Only a moment ago he had craved her—had craved her as he had not craved before, and as, with all his experience and observation of life—he had not suspected that manhood could crave.

Ko Ching-lin shuddered and sobbed in his beard. She had shamed and degraded him. She had shattered his self-respect, she had polluted his pride.

“Now! Do it now,” the cowering girl bleated hysterically. “End quickly my torture. Give me the blow before I go mad.”

“Why should I consider you, soiled-one and wanton? Wait my pleasure,” the man hissed at her.

“Now! Now!” the girl wailed, and sank down to the floor, huddling there an abject, crumpled mass of misery and terror—and bejewelled, red bridal finery.

Ko Ching-lin watched her with hate and contempt. Only his eyes moved or showed life.

Out in the city the curfew drum sounded its four beats.

From Heaven’s Well came amorous music; the pulsing nuptial-hymn, soft but passionate, timed as he had commanded.

Ko Ssu did not even hear it. Cowardice was sealing her senses.

Ko Ching-lin heard it.

He reeled back drunkenly, and flung himself down on the casement bench, displacing a bowl of crimson roses he himself had placed there to please her, deep red fragrant roses to perfume his wooing! The bowl fell to the floor, striking and overturning the delicate ivory table, the water was spilled, the coronet of turquoise feathers was drenched, the roses were scattered. The man bowed his face on his knee, and wept.

A girl laughed softly out in the *kuei*-courtyard.

The bridal music grew louder, more passionate—the flutes were less of it, the drums and the gongs were more—triumphant, significant. Then it melted into whispering tenderness, and passed in lingering sweetness into absolute silence—silence of even more significance, more moving—a silence that maddened addedly already maddened Ko Ching-lin. His face hardened. His limbs knotted, and his hands.

“Foul one,” he cried, straightening up to glower down at her, “unfit to live in the harem of Ko Ching-lin even the least of his concubines, unfit to be the slave of his slaves, unlit to herd with his swine in their sty”—but the girl was not listening. Her body was quivering—well, so was his; her shoulders were heaving—so were his; her face was prone on the carpet, one long sleeve shrouded the little head from which the bride-crown was gone.

Her sobs lessened and ceased. The huddled body showed stiffer, not less lax.

He knew that she did not hear him. He thought she had fainted. He was wasting his curses. Contemptible of sex that she was to shelter her own degradation in unconsciousness! And there were foul-ones who prated now that woman was equal to man, had place beside him, was fit to companion him instead of living always his chattel and slave! Kwan’s Brother had said it more than once in his hearing. It was untrue. The old ways were the wise ways. The gods of China had known best. The gods of China knew best.

What a small thing it was, crouched in self-proclaimed disgrace there on the floor, how small a thing to have shattered a man’s life, embittered his past, poisoned his future. How small and how vile!

All the gods; no! It should not be. He would save his face. He would hide and disguise his own disgrace before he destroyed her. The market-place should not laugh at him—nor his own people. He could not mend the shattered porcelain bowl that strewed the floor with its fragments. But he would mend his affronted manhood. The soiled-one should be punished and discarded. And when she had gone—down to the Yellow Springs or to banishment and penury—another bride should come. In the meantime this cheap-one, false as no

Chinese woman had been before her, should serve his purpose. Never would his clean hand lay on her, or on garment of hers. But she should serve him, and aid him to hide his failure and shame.

How?

He would consider it.

And none should know.

His angry brooding eyes chanced on the crimson bride-veil where he had laid it reverently on her red dower-box. The red veil of bridal, emblem of virginity, promise of union, presage of motherhood! Ko Ching-lin spat at it with envenomed eyes. It should go to the soil of the flower-boats. He loathed his hands that they had touched it. His nails tore at his palms' unclean skin.

"With child!" Gods! what those words would have sounded in his ears, perhaps before many moons, had that there on the floor been what he had thought her!

The man sobbed anew. His body swayed and shook with the storm of his pain. His throbbing head swam and burned. His soul sickened and reeled.

The hour had not come when he must go out jauntily to the great decked *k'o-tang*, swagger among his guests, kinsmen, and retainers, and boast of his satisfaction in the bride he had taken to wife. But time was on its inexorable wing. The hour was coming. It was his to prepare for it now.

First to drill the unspeakable thing-one in the part she was to play before he slew her or drove her forth!

With child!

Ko Ching-lin went a step toward the prostrate girl—to command and rouse her to heeding and obedience.

Perhaps her fear of him, her fear of his dagger, sensed him nearer. She moaned and crouched closer to the ground.

"Lift your ears to hear what I speak to you," the man ordered her roughly.

She dragged herself up tremblingly until she sat hunched on her heels, and half lifted a wild, terrified face. Her paint was streaked and smeared from her tears.

Another love-song crept in from Heaven's Well—sweeter, softer, reed-music swooning in ecstasy over the roses; tender, drowsy music of reeds, flute, and softly thrummed harp, all drenched with the perfume of a thousand flowers.

Ko Ching-lin laughed hoarsely.

A nightingale answered the flutes.

Ko Ching-lin moved on his bride. She shrank from him piteously.

Ko Ching-lin laughed again. “Think you I would touch you, Pollution? Think it not. Never shall my hand lay on you, soiled-one of Yün-nan. The hands of Ko Ching-lin are clean.”

She lifted her lovely eyes to him in abject pleading. “Kill me now, I entreat you, sir,” she begged him meekly.

“Are you not afraid to die? Afraid of the cut of the knife?”

Her trembling answered him. “This miseried-one is more afraid to live,” she gasped brokenly. “Kill me now, she entreats you. Let it end now, and down in the Yellow Springs for ten times ten million moons I will pray for your eminent happiness so shrilly that at last Kwan up on-High over the day-star shall hear me and grant my prayer.”

Was it Kwan’s name? Or was it that already Kwan the ever-merciful had heard and pitied? Or was it some note in the girl’s own voice, some look in her face, some movement of her fluttering hands?

Something had snapped suddenly in Ko Ching-lin. Some miracle-change had come in the room where the red bridal candles flamed in the intruding moonlight, and fallen roses strewed the carpet.

“Quiet your trembling—child,” the man said. “I, who thought to cherish you on my breast, and to guide you with my hands, will not harm you. Some terrible miscarriage of life has harmed you enough. May all our gods avenge it. Never can we mate, never be together in marriage. But we need not wound each other in strife. I will not deal you cruelty. Sorrow has come to us both. We need not add to each other’s sorrow. I will consider this bitter tangle that has come to us, in more calmness presently. I will find the way of most comfort for you. Accept from me friendship and service. Such, I swear to Kwan, will I give you, but never intrusion.”

The girl’s eyes were wild and wide upon his face. She was trembling less.

“It shall be our secret,” he told her sadly, “and none about us shall share it: the wrong you have suffered, the scar that because of it I must wear under my vestments, and the strangeness between us—what is between us, and what is not between us—we will keep it our thorned secret, well. No others must surmise it. I would that they know not, or suspect it, to laugh and gossip of it,

that we have not drunk and drained together here the spiritual wine-cup of marriage-sacrament, as we tasted together the porcelain cup or nuptial ceremonial out in the witnessed *k'o-tang*."

Ko Ssu bowed her head meekly—made no other reply.

"Be in peace here," he added. "Dwell you here for the present in my *kuei*. Nothing shall molest you. All shall serve you. So I see it best for your immediate comfort and security. As the days go we will consult together of your future comfort—and the child's——"

Ko Ssu's eyes fell to the carpet.

"As the days pass it may come that you will trust me; for I can better plan for your future stowing, if I know all that you could tell me. Nay, wince not so. Never will I demand your confidence, or press you for it. Rest you here now! I shall stay me outside your panel. For I would that none shall surmise what it is between us. For my pride's sake, I ask that we keep it secret. In the ante-apartment I will search my mind until the day breaks, and pray the gods to point to me the way your best peace lies, and how Ko Ching-lin may find it. When the day breaks, and I must return me to the festived Great Hall, and make gay subterfuge to those who wait and feast there, your women shall bring you rice. Eat and drink, that it may nourish you. Have no fear, child-one; no harm shall reach you that Ko Ching-lin can keep from you; and my limbs are strong."

Ssu's eyes were wide on his face—they had lost their wildness—she no longer trembled. She swayed a little towards him as she sat.

Ko Ching-lin crossed the room quietly, and took up the dagger. He smiled a little—sadly—as he hurled it through the open casement.

"Sleep well, my guest-one, in the *kuei* of your adopted father," he said a trifle quickly—as if in fear his voice might a little lose its steadiness, and turned him to the outer panel.

But Ko Ssu stayed him, crawling to him. She laid her forehead on his foot.

"May Kwan Yin-ko pay you, lord," she sobbed.

"Kwan show her mercy to us both," the man said huskily. Then more bravely, "Kwan will pay," he added confidently.

Then Ko Ching-lin bent down and lifted up the red-clad figure he had sworn never to soil his hands by touch of, and carried her to the painted ivory couch.

And Ko Ssu did not repulse him.

Ko Ssu did not doubt him. She had no fear of Ko Ching-lin.

Gently he put her down among the silken quilts and pillows of the gold and crimson-decked bed. “Sleep well,” he bade. “You have journeyed far. This day that has gone has been long and hard for you. Rest now.” But before he left her Ko Ching-lin lingered a moment to draw the casement closer, lest the night breeze intruded on her rudely to her chilling. The Hour of the Ox was upon them—and its grey coldness. Ko looked about the room, moved again, and took a padded quilt, light, softly padded, from the lacquer quilt-shelf, and laid it over Ko Ssu. Unlike all the couch’s furnishing the quilt he brought and put about her was not crimson. It was blue, soft, but bright blue: Kwan Yin-ko’s own sacred colour throughout China, as throughout Christendom it is the colour of Our Lady, Mary the Mother of Jesus.

Then he left her.

OUT in the ante-room Ko Ching-lin writhed in pain and shame. Too, he prayed.

Why had he so spared her?

What had so swayed and gripped him?

The bitterness of his disappointment surged through him, battered and twisted him. Shame gnawed him.

He wished that she had pleased him less when he had lifted her bride-veil and looked upon her. He wished that he never had seen her standing laughing under the pink-flowered oleanders.

If only she had been the maiden he had believed her! If only!

When the new day broke, and spilled its blazonry of radiant colours over the gardens and courtyards, over the up-curled eaves and burnished tiles of the fish-guarded roofs, and glittered softly on the blue porcelain temple on the hillside Ko Ching-lin rose, and forced a pleasant calmness on his face, and went to make merry with his guests in the great *k'o-tang*, carrying himself bravely and with dignity.

But first he listened a moment at his bride's closed panel. All was still in the husbandless nuptial chamber. He thought she slept. Kwan grant it! Kwan give her rest! Poor little soiled flower-one that he had taken to his friendship, to whom he had vowed his manhood's service and loyalty!

Why had he promised to befriend her? What craven impulse had sealed him to it? How wisely had the Sages forbidden a gentleman to speak or to act from sudden, unconsidered impulse! Would to all the gods he had considered it. Then he must have withheld the rash words that had pledged her his mercy and kindness—and something almost a partnership in her own shameless degradation. Ko Ching-lin cursed himself for a moral lout and weakling.

But he had promised her. Cost him what it might, that promise must hold. No Ko ever soiled or rescinded his word.

He must deal with her gently. Even must he shield her.

How could he save his own face in the humiliating catastrophe in which the abandoned girl's treachery had enmeshed him? That troubled him most—far more than the girl's plight did, more even than his own disappointment, his

own burning sense of shame. He must find some way to save his face. Found, no matter how thorned that way was, no matter how sour its conditions, or how rough its footpath, he must tread it to its end. He, Ko Ching-lin must save his until-now-honourable face.

No one must know.

His bitterness against the frail girl rose again and galled him.

But the feasters in the great *k'o-tang* tarried his bridegroom presence, lacked it.

And Ko Ching-lin went to them.

And among them Ko Ching-lin, the bridegroom-host, bore himself greatly. And when at next day's twilight Q'ūo Flee and Q'ūo Toon and all Ko Ssu's lesser kinsmen took their departure, turned them back towards Yün-nan, the tortured man sped them warmly and spoke them softly.

But Q'ūo Flee carried sorrow in his heart and perplexity in his thought all his long way back to Yün-nan. For when—by Ko Ching-lin's great and almost unprecedented favour he had gone into her gay-decked *kuei* to take his last leave of the bride, his sister, he had found her pallid and wordless, no glow of young wifehood about her. She neither blushed nor cast down her eyes.

Q'ūo Flee thought her frozen in misery. She did not even weep when he saluted her girdle for the last time. She did not attempt to delay him, showed no wish to cling to him. And she sent no message to her home-ones. To Q'ūo Flee it seemed that her girlhood had died, and that its offspring, marriage, with her had been stillborn. Q'ūo Flee who loved his sister dearly scarcely could respond serenely or with decent adequacy to Ko Ching-lin's warm and elaborate leave-taking. And when his cortège had passed beyond the eyes of Ko's watch-towers Q'ūo Flee's head sagged on his neck and his heart chilled. It was but homesickness, of course. It would pass. And Q'ūo Flee, rarely prodigal to the god-ones, vowed Kwan Yin-ko a temple newly builded among the red cedar-trees—that for it Ko Ssu's homesickness might pass the more speeded. Without making hint of his true reason for wishing to do it, he would find means to win their father to the pious purpose—Mr. Kwan and the necromancers should aid him to accomplish it. For Q'ūo Flee had no intention of grieving Q'ūo Chung with knowledge of the ill thing he himself believed. To lay that sore and burden on a father would be no way to win the gods. And he shrank from betraying his sister's sorrowing even to their father—felt that to do so would be an indelicate disloyalty that could but wound her deeply, if she learned it. The marriage made, nothing but Ko Ching-lin's own will could release her from it. Grief enough to a girl to dislike her wifehood; sorer hurt to

have it known.

IN A YÜN-NAN COURTYARD *CHAPTER XXIII*

EACH day Ko Ching-lin sought his young wife, letting the bar fall across the ante-room's door before he went to her in her chamber or found her in her own courtyard—and again in the night hours. And none knew or suspected how short the longest time he stayed with her, how few the words they spoke, or that at night time Ko Ching-lin never neared her nearer than the ante-chamber.

Ko Ching-lin saved his face well.

It was of that that he thought very much more than he did of Ko Ssu, and thought more intensely. It interested him many times more than she did. His own bad plight was more to him than her plight was. She had brought his misery and shame down on him; why should he particularly consider her—what she was feeling, what was to be done for her—when all his thinking was not enough to solve his own sore riddle, all his devising and prayers impotent to purge his own shame, rehabilitate his own injured life, his own despoiled manhood?

Except as a thorn festering him, Ko Ching-lin thought little of Ko Ssu when he was not in her presence; and all the thought that he gave her was bitterness.

The hours hung heavy at Ko Ssu's girdle, dragged heavy at her feet; she poor shuttlecock and pawn of "face"—forced into a hated marriage to save her father's face, saved from the punishment a Chinese woman's unchastity earns her, to save Ko Ching-lin's face.

But when he went into her, in her chamber or in the courtyard, some change beyond his control came to Ko Ching-lin. It was not great. It was more a softening of hatred, a suspension of final judgment, than any rekindling of liking, or any quickening of the friendship that he had promised her—a surface weakness, he himself deemed it, knowing it the nothing fundamental which was all it could be; knowing it could not be in any way fundamental.

When he was with her Ko Ching-lin was sorry for the girl—a young creature so evidently stricken and so irretrievably at his mercy.

When he went back to his bride, after her kinsmen had gone—it was his first return to her—courtly, world-bred Ko Ching-lin was painfully embarrassed. The girl was not. She was merely numb and dumb—listless, indifferent. Her penitence of the day before, her pathetic gratitude, if either still

was, gave no sign.

And as the days passed what lay between them did not mend. The girl hardened, he thought. She seemed sulky, and even defiant. Such bearing of hers—she who so had wronged him—was a gross impertinence. Ko Ching-lin resented it. It embittered him addedly. Yet, sternly determined to be just even to her—and, because she was at his mercy, more than just—he reflected that it was but in their common nature that to her her own plight was preponderant, and to the exclusion of all distress at his plight, even as with him his own distress came first and last, made a cheap, small nothingness of hers.

It could not last.

Plans must be made and carried out; that was imperative and importunate. Days were passing—moons would pass. The situation, her terrible secret and his, brooked no delay.

Determination must be arrived at, and firmly carried out—by them both!

Probably it had not occurred to her—he hoped that it had not—but Ko Ching-lin knew that, if she was at his mercy in every way, in one way he was at her mercy.

There were details he must learn, a date he must know. There was revenge to take, punishment to deal—though, since in his weakness he had promised, not to her. Grim programme must be arranged.

Two weeks had ached them away—almost a moon. Weeks, even hours were vital in such predicament as theirs. Now she must speak. Now he must act.

Ko Ching-lin passed through the ante-room into his wife’s room more resolutely than he had until to-day.

She was not there.

Ko passed on into her courtyard.

Her woman, seeing her lord—and theirs—rose and withdrew noiselessly.

Ko Ssu did not look up; Ko was sure that she had not heard him, did not know he was there.

What a child-one she looked! How frail and unhappy! And how lovely! His to do with as he would. He could banish her roughly. He could do her to death. She was his—to reject, to brand, or to claim—his unclaimed wife.

Whom he never could claim!

She sat with her idle hands lax on her lap, her eyes sightless on the distance. The courtyard woman's gaze usually is bounded by her courtyard's wall. But above Ko Ssu's courtyard a mountain rose high and green, laced with feathery bamboos, lashed with wide cascades of petulant foam, pricked by a pagoda, blessed by a temple, holied by tombs.

His bride was not seeing the hill her eyes were turned to; was she seeing Yün-nan?—Or what?

Ko Ching-lin sighed—for them both.

If the outraged man had not come to upbraid, he had not come to cajole, still less to philander. He had come to speak, while he spoke to be heeded and answered, when he had spoken to be obeyed.

But there are two law's above all others which no Chinese ever may scant: the law of gratitude and the law of hospitality. This wounded frail-one was his guest—pitifully, terribly his guest, since he claimed her not in wifehood; and Ko Ching-lin greeted her graciously.

"Honourable lady, this worm craves your perfumed attention for an hour. He seeks the inestimable advantage of your counsel and advice."

Ko Ssu turned a little where she sat—Ko Ssu, his wife and chattel, who should have risen and bent at his shoe, then have stood before him meekly with her hands hidden in her sleeves. She did not rise, but she turned a little and looked in his face. Her eyes did not flinch. And she smiled at him wanly; a smile sadder than weeping.

She wore no paint to-day. Ko Ching-lin had not seen her paintless since the fatal day he unseen had seen her laughing up at the pink oleander flowers.

It stirred him oddly.

It hurt him sharply.

Each day since she had come her women had painted her thickly, whether she forbade them or did not trouble to forbid—each day and again at dusk-time. To-day she had driven them off, asserted her will and her place against them. Let the old man keep up the mockery, if he chose; she would not.

How she had aged—in a moon! Whatever her fault, however deep and poisoned her stain, this was a girl-one stricken and broken. And Ko Ching-lin knew that he would, he could comfort her. He knew that she could not be comforted—or cleansed; hers the one ill for which there is no cure.

Poor broken flower! Poor stricken child!

More than once as he sat brooding it alone he had questioned: Had the hideous wrong done him been contrived by Q'ūo Chung—a hellish plot to get rid of a soiled daughter, and to save the insect farmer's own face? But, no; that could not be. Q'ūo could not have dared it! He—Ko Ching-lin—was too powerful, too able to crush and destroy Q'ūo Chung, and with Q'ūo Chung all the Q'ūo breed and fortunes. Q'ūo Chung would not have ventured it. Q'ūo Chung knew nothing of it; had been as wronged and deceived as he himself had. Ko Ching-lin had put the foul suspicion from him—ashamed even to have canvassed it.

Because he saw her here in his *kuei*-courtyard, unpainted, undecked, he saw her in a sudden new intimacy—felt a new intimacy, even a quickened right. How sweet—it might have been.

She had aged, but her loveliness was not disfigured; it was fined—she the fairest flower in all Heaven's Well.

He had come to question her, in the first place, of her despoiler. He could not. His caste, centuries of caste, made it impossible for him to question her as he had intended. He must learn the man's name, for how could he kill him, rend him limb from limb, if he did not know of him even his name? But he must learn it else-how; he could not probe it from her. To torture her with his demand and insistence for the particulars of her shame's stenched story was as impossible, now that he had come to her, as it was to forgive her. He might punish her yet, adding his punishment to the lifelong punishment already hers, but he could not do it meanly. Some peasant husband, learning what Ko Ching-lin had learned, might have grunted coarsely, struck with a thunder-fist, and have condoned, adopted perhaps, even almost have half forgotten as the toil-choked years passed. A Chinese gentleman cannot.

He let it go—here.

But much of his errand could not be evaded. Neither of them could escape it.

He asked her if there were altering of her courtyard she would command. Did the flowers please her? Served her women to her entire pleasing? What would add to her liking of her apartments? More birds? Another dog? Was her new lute in tune?

Ko Ssu answered him perfunctorily but not discourteously—very wearily, almost a little gratefully; or with a tinge of what might have been gratitude, had not weariness of soul and hopelessness so numbed her, so drugged her

from all kindliness of feeling, all appreciation of another's kindness. She answered his with the fewest words, smiling again at him drearily.

How was he to begin! How word what he must say! To say it as imperative for her sake as for his own!

Ko Ssu began it for him.

"What are you going to do with me?" she asked him.

Ko Ching-lin spoke quick on the cue she had given him.

"Only kind deeds, lady. It is to consult with you about them that brought my footsteps to you here. Will you confide to me what I must ask you?" He requested it almost coldly, so stern was the effort he made to keep out of his voice the embarrassment he was suffering.

The man turned his eyes away from the girl. "When, lady?" he asked her.

Ko Ssu was not embarrassed. She did not even mind the man's coming and going, now that she sensed that he never would molest her. She disliked his presence no more than she did the presence of her waiting-women. Perhaps his embarrassed her less than theirs did. She had been waited upon at home in Yün-nan, but less elaborately, less formally than she was in the Sze-ch'uen that prisoned her, and all her young life she had lived among men, moved among them and spoken with them freely. She had liked the men of her kindred better than she had its women. On the whole she disliked Ko Ching-lin less than she disliked the serving-women he had allotted her, and he bored her less. He was welcome to dawdle an hour here, if he would.

"When?" the man repeated gently.

"When? When what, sir?"

"That we may arrange for it, tell me, I entreat you, in which moon will come the birth-hour?"

"Birth-hour?"

But still her husband did not look at her—would not. Or, perhaps, he could not.

Ko Ssu laughed—a natural involuntary ripple of girlish amusement.

Ko Ching-lin looked at her squarely then in his shocked astonishment.

"When will the child be born?" He put it plainly at last, desperate to make an end of what must be said between them.

The girl met his eyes blankly. Then her paintless face crimsoned painfully.

She understood him at last.

“I do not know,” she stammered hanging her head.

“You can make guess?” the troubled man urged gently.

Ko Ssu hid her face in her sleeve. “I can make no guess,” she sobbed. O Kwan, Hearer-of-cries, she had not thought of this. She had had no foreseeing of this! She had thought to be secure in death on her chamber floor on the nuptial night. She had depended upon Ko Ching-lin, the outraged bridegroom, to slay and release her.

She was distraught, and cowered away from Ko Ching-lin in misery and fear. What would her end be now—when he knew? And she had forgotten for a breath just now, and had laughed at her dogs at play! Dogs that this man she had so flouted and wronged had given her! How kind he had been to her, how merciful to her unworthiness, her vile treachery! Had ever a man been so kind before? In misery’s selfishness she had not thought of it before. It hit her now suddenly. Her sleeve fell from her quivering face, and she studied the man’s face for a long breathless moment. Her eyes filled with tears that were not all for herself.

THE moons came and waned. Autumn flamed on its splendid death-bed of crimson and gold, rose, orange, and russet. The lemon lilies withered on their stalks. The *yug* bird grieved. Winter came in its robes of snow, veiled in grey, dark with storm clouds, jewelled in opal icicles, blasting mountains and valleys with hurricanes, turning the tarns into ice, slashing the heavens with lightning, shrieking anger and menace; ominous, threatening. All the Country-of-the-Clouds was chill and drear. Winter came and lingered, then shivered and whimpered sickly and feebly away. And spring came again, tender blades of grass in her hair, delicate wild flowers in her gentle hands. Pasque-flowers snuggled their scented rings of purple among their grey flannel-like leaves. The brooks whispered again; then they sang and chattered and laughed. Violets crowded the cuckoo-flowers. Daisies of every colour and tint and tufts of purple vetch smiled among the lovely wild asparagus—ever so much more delicious to eat than any that Covent Garden can boast. The tree-toads limped out to sit in the sun. Wind-flowers and dragon's whiskers feathered about the willows, forget-me-nots winked back at the laughing harp-flowers. The cicada sang again. The trees were in leaf. Summer was coming.

Each day Ko Ching-lin resolved to press his question to her again; each day he deferred it once more. Each day he grew a little less concerned to save his own face, a little more concerned to spare the girl who had deceived and degraded him. But, as yet, Ko Ching-lin did not know that this was so. Self-analysis, from youth his habit—as it must be with every Chinese who studies and clings to the Sages—let go its grip of him. He studied Ko Ssu instead. And every day his venom against the unknown man who had betrayed and soiled her grew more inexorable, his oaths of vengeance against him more ugly and more intense.

Little by little they became friends—the husband and the wife so terribly placed.

Little by little Ko Ssu took her first-wife's rightful place in her husband's home—in all but the most.

Ko Ching-lin, watching her, thought she grew happier—or at least more contented. How was it possible? Was she so ignorant in her unschooled immaturity that she gave no thought to it that her time grew near—did not quite realise it?

It seemed impossible.

He watched and waited. He had it all planned now. Sometimes birth came prematurely. It should be said to have done so now, she should meet her time of trial here in the tendance and honour of her husband's *kuei*. Perhaps the child might die. If not—a way might be found. Unless she loved it! The thought tore him. If it proved so, he would not harm it. He would journey with them far, make some distant home for them, returning to Sze-ch'uen would report them dead. Then he would adopt a son to serve his gathering years, worship at his tomb. Not again would he lift the red bride-veil from a woman's face.

If the child died, she should stay in peace here while she would. He would journey across the world.

However it turned, however the gods willed it, he would not leave her until her hour had come and gone. She should not meet her peril alone—for he had promised her his friendship and his service. A Ko must keep his word, no matter what it cost him.

If any woman of his homestead saw or suspected that the child was full-time, he would silence her. Never had Ko Ching-lin dealt hardly with a woman. He could do it now—in defence of Ko Ssu.

And come what might, when her peril-time had passed, before aught else he would find the fiend-man, and torture him before he killed him.

Marvelling at her seeming indifference to her coming trial, to its possible exposure—do the utmost he could to prevent exposure, Ko Ching-lin questioned hourly, was Ko Ssu brave beyond all other women, or was she above all others dense or callous? Which?

As she grew in friendliness, came to welcome his visits, Ko Ching-lin learned for a certainty that she was not dense.

As the strain that had withered and greyed it a little lessened, her mobile, vivid flower-face forbade him to believe her callous.

The more Ko Ching-lin studied the riddle, the more it baffled him. Nor, do what he could, would it leave him. It gnawed him like a hungry tiger.

And again and again, not meaning to, not knowing that she did, she hurt him in little ways. Sometimes she spoke of herself as Q'ūo Ssu; and each time Ko Ching-lin winced. There was many a sign-post on the way he was going. But Ko Ching-lin did not see them.

Once, moved beyond himself, meaning not to do it, Ko Ching-lin begged

her to tell him, then almost tried to force her to tell him, her lover’s name.

She trembled in her fear of him, but she convinced him that not even torture ever would wring that confession from her.

Ko Ching-lin did not know why her loyalty to that disloyal other so hurt him. Ko Ching-lin did not suspect that he was jealous. But that night alone in his own room far from the *kuei*, writhing on his lonely couch Ko Ching-lin sobbed aloud in a strong man’s torture. And then Ko Ching-lin knew—and the knowledge shamed him, knifed and lacerated his self-respect—knew that it was in him to forgive her—everything, if she would have it so. And he wondered, cursing himself that he did, if he might not yet find it in him to adopt the Sin-child of Ko Ssu.

Gods!

IN A YÜN-NAN COURTYARD *CHAPTER XXV*

IN a wretched hovel in a miserable hamlet a few *li* south of Shan-hai Kuan, not far from the Great Wall, So Wei lay dying on a huddled heap of filthy rags and straw.

So Wing knelt beside his mother.

The one poor lamp hanging perilously from the low worm-eaten, weather-broken ceiling scarcely served to show the tiny one-roomed home's abject penury; but they lay and knelt just beneath the dirt-crusted lamp, and its meagre light, falling straight on them, served to show the love they gave each other.

Poverty had separated them years ago. Loyalty had reunited them.

In a famine year, when grass had been their only food for days, So Wei had thrust her sleeping, famished, almost unconscious child—a boy of ten—into the slowly passing cart of two Jesuit Fathers journeying Peking-ward. The priests had not seen her do it. For a moment they were as surprised as So Wing himself was when he woke, cried out, and they discovered him. But in a moment they understood. Such desperate bestowals of one's own flesh and blood were all too common in famine times.

"One less mouth to feed," the younger priest had said with a shrug.

"One less child to see die of hunger," the older Father rebuked him quietly.

They fed the Chinese boy, and tried to comfort and appease him. But the child only wailed the harder for his mother. They kept him with them—what else was there for Christian priests to do!—and when his strength grew he fought and scratched them, demanded to be put down and freed, that he might make his way back to his mother. He believed that they had stolen him; and no assurances of theirs altered his furied mind. They had to restrain him by main force. The nuns they left him with near Peking had to do so also for a time. They dared not let him go. All the countryside he had come from was stark with famine. The peasants there were dying by daily hundreds. If the boy could find his way back, which he might only by direct miracle, and lived to get there, which was even more improbable, certain starvation was all he'd find left him there, the nuns argued.

At last the Reverend Mother won the boy's sullen confidence a little. His wild grief for his mother had greatly moved her, and her sympathy showed her

a way to win him the little that she did. He knew the name of his native village, knew its nearest town, insisted that he remembered the way back to it, and he begged piteously to be allowed to return. They dared not let him attempt it. But the Mother promised him that she would send, when it was possible, a messenger with food to his mother, and that, if she still lived, he should go to So Wei or So Wei come to him in the convent's hospitable shelter.

The nun kept her word. Jesuit opportunity served before long—relief patrols were travelling all the famined district. The young priest found the little hamlet. It was a morgue. Only corpses littered and stenched it. Not a goat, not a pariah dog lived.

So Wing had heard the sickening news in silence.

For days they had to feed him by force. But presently youth and sex reasserted themselves, and So Wing took up the burden of young, bereaved life. He would live, he would work, and when he had earned ten gold pieces he would go back to his birthplace, keep his time of mourning by the grave the priests had given his mother, and he would build a tomb above it secure and strong—that the north storms nor the wild beasts could not harm it, and he would make it beautiful—because it was his mother's. He would make a garden about it, flowers should bloom there for his mother in all the moons of summer.

He watched his chance and ran away.

So Wing did not turn his steps homeward. Perhaps his courage failed him to face yet that poor grave and the empty hovel that had been his home. And famine still stalked in North-East Chihli. He could not hope to earn there—or even to live. When he had gold pieces he would go back. Now, to earn them!

So Wing never had seen a gold piece. But he knew they were. And even one of them symboled wealth and power.

He crept out of the convent when all the nuns slept; unbarred the outer door and climbed silently a tree in the convent garden, and from its sturdy branch, the wall, and sped through the dark into China. They never found or traced him.

He took plunder with him when he went. So Wing never had stolen before. There had been ideals and virtues in his mother's hovel. So Wei had not been born in a hovel. Woman's tragedy was her story.

He might have stolen food from the convent, some small article that he could have pawned the next day in Peking. But he did not.

And when the Superior missed what the Chinese waif had stolen—it was her own personal belonging, and she prized it—she was glad, and blessed the theft. The little Chinese thief had stolen a small holy picture: Our Lady holding Her baby Jesus in Her arms.

“Pax!” the wet-eyed nun had murmured with a smile.

It took the boy nine months to work his way down from Peking to Ngan-king on the Yang-tsze. For more than a year he laboured on the Great River, before he attached himself to the coolie-retinue of Ko Ching-lin when the rich man was journeying from I-chang back to Ch’eng-tu Fu.

So Wing worked at many trades, both before he entered Ko Ching-lin’s service and after he left it—crudely at most of them, not too successfully at some of them; but always he worked. And always his one driving motive was in his mind: to honour and worship his mother at the desolate graveside.

He never swerved from his one intention. Sometimes he made mistakes; lost ground even. Little of it, that he did! If a man has common sense and character, mistakes are the soundest investments he ever makes. They point the way, sorry sign-posts though they are, as nothing else can. So Wing had abundant common sense—he was Chinese. He had character—few Chinese lack it, and So Wei had born and nursed him. And in all but conscious sex the ten-year-old Chinese boy was a man.

When he set his boat with its prow to the North, and Q’ūo Chung’s chopped contract in his loin-cloth, he had three intentions garnered in his mind, clenched in his purpose and will; return to his mother’s grave, wealth and success for himself, marriage with Q’ūo Ssu. She was his first love—accidental, but vivid. His strenuous life had been virginal. It was so still when he knelt by his dying mother.

Had So Wing suspected or sensed that his master, rich Ko Ching-lin considered and weighed his adoption, it might, or might not, have held So Wing in Ko’s service. But no inkling of it had come to So, and it might not have altered his course if it had. It would have meant immediate ease, but it would have been bondage, and ambition curtailed and circumscribed as well as gratified. North-born So Wing itched to carve his own fortune out of life’s hard rock, and to direct his own days to their end as he had from the night he had given the nuns in Peking the slip. He intended to select his own bride. And it would have stung him to renounce his mother’s name, revolted him to have worshipped at any other “mother’s” grave.

The chances are that So Wing the penniless coolie would have refused Ko’s munificent offer, if Ko Ching-lin had fully determined to make it, and

had plainly made it.

Ko had not fully determined, and he gave no hint.

So Wing wished to earn more than Ko Ching-lin paid him, wished to barter and trade and amass for himself. And his soul was the soul of an adventurer. And trebly spurred and prodded—by mother, self, and girl—he left Ko Ching-lin almost as abruptly as he had left the convent nuns, and set off to take life by the throat in earnest, and shake the fulfilment of his triple desire out of it.

Being Chinese he made haste slowly, and for that the more surely. Had he not been convinced that his mother was dead, So Wing could not have curbed himself with the tough thong of so much deliberateness.

He worked and succeeded as only a Chinese can.

Because there was famine there, and he remembered what their own famine sufferings had been, his mother's and his, So Wing filled the cart he journeyed "home" in with food; a little that he should not too much hunger there, chiefly that he might feed some who starved where once So Wei had.

He did not remember the way as accurately as he once had told a nun he should. But he found the hamlet, and reached the hovel he had been born in. That he did surprised him. And almost it angered him. It showed no sign of human habitation, but he seemed to sense that it was not untenanted; and in that hamlet of penury some must have pulled it to pieces for firewood and for stones to patch their own poor wind-blown hovels, did no one claim it and live in it. It galled him that some other lived now in the home that had been theirs, his mother's and his.

Who?

That would soon be answered. So Wing clambered down from the rough Peking cart, and thrust his shoulder through the insecure door. The door gave at once; and So Wing saw his mother lying on the rag-and-straw heap which was all the furniture the room boasted.

She knew him at once. A great light came into her wasted face, a lovely kindling lit her faded eyes.

So Wing snapped an order over his shoulder to the driver in the cart, and flung himself down beside his mother.

He had come too late. And yet, had he? It was everything to her that he had come. The hour they had together outweighed to her long years of loneliness

and cankering want. That he saw her again, heard her voice again, was able to wet her parched lips with warm wine, give a few grains of white rice to her burning hunger, tell her that he loved her sweetened all his after life. It never is too late for love and loyalty to work great miracles, to redeem and revivify—not while human longing and consciousness last.

They said little to each other; the woman was too weak for much speech, the man was too deeply moved. And they had no need.

The clothes he wore, the coin he gave the Pekingese cartman, and the errand he sent him to the nearest town, the food and wine he gave her, the rugs he heaped about her, told her his story, boasted her his success. A whispered sentence gave him the clue to how it had come that the Reverend Mother's messenger had misunderstood and mis-reported. And So Wing's agile mind needed but a clue. Unexpected succour had found her, and taken her to Shan-hai Kuan to share for a time a home a little less foodless than her own; the home of a poor man whose child when a toddler So Wei once had snatched from the canal. She had not been here when the French priests had searched for her. She had returned when scant crops once more had grown about the hovel's wayside. And here she had watched and waited ever since, believing that So Wing would remember, believing that, if So Wing lived, some day he would come back to her.

Before the skill and comforts So Wing had sent the cart to find in Shan-hai Kuan had come, So Wei died. But her death was happy.

For a twelvemonth So Wing stayed with her; kept his sackcloth mourning at her graveside.

Then he turned back again to wrest fortune from Peking, or from Ho-nan or Shansi—where and how he could.

So Wei should have her costlier tomb. He should realise his own ambitions; and when he had they should feed all his after years fat. Q'ūo Ssu should share his fortune, wear his tenderness about her, if he found her waiting for him where the Yang-tsze flowed between Lololand and Q'ūo Chung's insect trees in Yün-nan. Probably he would not find her waiting. The years were passing. And the years already gone had taught So Wing much. But he would journey back to Q'ūo Chung's distant *chia* when his purse-pouch was sufficiently plenished. The maid was very sweet. He had given her an oath. He would keep that oath, unless Q'ūo Ssu had shattered it for him.

The night before he left her So Wing lay all night long beside his mother's grave, and washed it with his tears; did her spirit humblest worship; was sick and sobbing when he left it.

And So Wing knew that he was a "love-child"—China has a rougher word. The children of illegitimacy are the pariahs of China—past hope, past cure. Angered gossips' rough, rude words, brutally flung at a little child, had told So Wing what he was. It had pitted his soul as the scarifying pox pits the skin.

He never had doubted that the foul thing was true. It explained much that had puzzled him; why they had no kindred, why his mother had softer ways, even more education than their few neighbours, why she never told him of her own childhood, a score of other things.

It quailed and fevered him. Then, with the first great spiritual gesture of his character and manhood, the heroic boy of eight had thrown it off—and it became the obsession of his being that So Wei never should know that he knew, even as it was hers that he never should learn it.

He gave her an added tenderness, a closer love, a truer reverence. Dwarf trees grow in China, but not dwarf souls.

Even she once had showed the child a solitary grave in the Great Wall's bleak north shadow, and had bade him worship there when he was old enough to perform the *sacra* at his father's grave. And he had given no sign that he knew it was the grave of an alien traveller who had been killed and robbed by bandits long years ago, and whose body passing peasants had hastily buried lest its ghost haunting near them should poison and rot their crops.

So Wing did not grave his mother's coffin in the Great Wall's bleak north shadow. He made her a garden, cypress-guarded, where they had gathered wild flowers and wee sweet strawberries on the first day he clearly remembered.

And he burned their hovel, hers and his, to the utmost last of ashes, that other woman never should dwell there.

Then he put off his whitish hempen mourning, and turned toward Peking.

IN A YÜN-NAN COURTYARD *CHAPTER XXVI*

IN Western China the new Republican dispensation has not penetrated far into the home-life of such conventional Chinese as Ko Ching-lin. But it has pricked and trickled its way in somewhat.

Ko's new wife had far more liberty than either of his previous number-ones had had or ever had dreamed of. She talked much less than they had, but she roved farther afield, and was licensed to do it—partly because Ko Ching-lin, hating all, or almost all, the new innovations, in spite of himself and for the most part unconsciously, moved with the times a little, as we all have to do. Moreover, why should he guard and curtail, as he would a wife he had claimed and intended to hold, a "wife" who was nominal, whose stay here was but disguise, save-face, and temporary?

She went to the large outer gardens when she chose, amused herself in them as she liked. Her mule-borne litter was not too closely shuttered or curtained, and her mule-drivers drove them wherever she directed. And now and then Ko Ching-lin himself accompanied her on horse or on foot when he chanced to know that she intended to explore the river's bank or to be carried up a hillside.

It was pax between them now—as strange a camaraderie as ever was yet between Chinese man and woman. It was not conjugal, nor was it father-and-daughterly. Ko would have been horrified to know how intrinsically it resembled not unusual camaraderie between Western men and women, though in itself not a possible Western relationship.

There were days, twice there was more than a week, when they did not see each other at all. There were stretches of time when Ko Ching-lin hated with all his first revulsion and venom not only the scalding wrong she had done him, but, too, the girl herself. Then—at other times he did not hate her at all, and knew that he did not. Once or twice at least for a sunny hour the man forgot the wrong she had dealt him; forgot its impending consequences; and when he realised that he had, Ko Ching-lin marvelled that he could have forgotten even for a moment an unnerving embarrassment that drew so near.

He was still in the dark. But each of his wives had borne him a child; in his younger years his concubines had not been childless. He believed that he knew the signs of imminent motherhood. As moon followed moon into the long obscurity of China's history he grew confident that the actual date of Ssu's

confinement might not absolutely betray her shame and his own disgrace to his household or neighbours, if he decided to keep her here until after the polluted birth-time. That, as he now believed, it was so was a great relief, but, too, it was an added torture to know that she had come to him so soon—so quick from her unspeakable sin. There were moments when for it he regretted, or all but regretted, that he had not obeyed her, and cut to her false heart with his bridegroom dagger, letting her life-blood pool on the bride-chamber floor. It would have been the one righteous way out. It would have been the easier way out.

What was to be the final outcome?

It did not occur to Ko Ching-lin that it was not too late—that still he might pay Ko Ssu the death she had earned. Sometimes on the lonely hillsides she left her litter or chair, and they wandered together along some high-overhanging, bamboo-feathered, bean-sweetened path across a beetling cliff, where only sparse but majestic wood-oil trees grew among the rocks. One misstep of hers, a sudden thrust of his hand, and she would lie motionless far down in the chasm below, hiding for ever her shame, saving for ever his face—accidentally dead, shrouded by the spotted tangles of the melon-vines' great leaves and big golden flower stars. But Ko Ching-lin never once thought of it. When they went even in far sight of peril his hand held hers, or her arm, very securely, lest she slip and fall. All who by chance saw them so thought how tenderly Ko Ching-lin treasured his young wife, how lucky the girl was to have so entirely pleased and won the approval of the exigent man.

Except Ko Ching-lin himself, the girl had no friends. Except herself and the pet animals and birds which he so lavishly gave her, she had no playmates. But after the first few anxious weeks Ko Ssu was not lonely. She was used to amusing herself; roaming about alone, poking her pretty inquisitive nose into the private affairs of flowers, of brooks, of birds, and of shy but only half wild woodland creatures. Numbers of bright-eyed furry things had leapt to her when she called them, and she had had a cordial nodding acquaintance with several families of snakes. Most of the wild animals of Yün-nan are more than half tame. Centuries of Chinese kindness have bred them so. The Chinese kill to eat, for flesh and for pelts, but very, very few of them ever kill for sport. They haven't the time to waste, and they haven't the flair. And such leisure as they have or filch they spend more congenially gambling, watching the theatrical performances of which they never tire, watching and sharing in the festivals, weddings, and funerals, picnicking at the temples, hob-nobbing with nature, drinking deep all the beauty they can—if it is only a clump of asters at the hut door. They kill, when they kill, because they must; they do not kill for fun.

Friendly little Q'ūo Ssu had had no difficulty in winning the friendship of beasts (the smaller sort) and of birds. Had it been difficult, probably she would not have accomplished it. For, with all her wayward wilfulness, Q'ūo Ssu lacked persistence. Her persistent refusal to rejoice in her betrothal to Ko Ching-lin had been her first inconvenient-to-self persistence; it and her clinging to her dream of So Wing and wedlock with him. Would it last—this first hard persistence of hers—prove itself a granite trait of actual character, or prove but an emotional flash-in-the-pan?

She liked the luxury that laved her now. She loved the beauty heaped and panoramaed about her, as she had the perhaps rougher and scantier beauty of her childhood home. She rested and recuperated in an atmosphere of beauty, as all Chinese do; and she loved all beautiful things intensely, as all Chinese do, and, like many of them who are illiterate, toil-burdened, loved and appreciated without knowing that she did. Whatever her faults were, introspection was not one of them.

But Mr. Kwan had known how beauty moved and held her. He had seen her breath quicken at a turquoise-bird's sudden flight through the silver air, and her face kindle over a rose. And knowing it of her had been one of his sureties concerning her. On the other hand, it had made him addedly doubtful of his right to intervene, if he could, between her and her father's marriage-plan for her. Her life in Sze-ch'uen would be saturated with beauty. Her life in Yün-nan, estranged from her father, even perhaps unwedded, might be drab and ugly.

Well, Ko Ssu had a world of beauty about her now, and a world of fascinating varieties, of exhilarating changes.

Sze-ch'uen not only is China's largest province, but, too, the richest; and nature loves her well.

O-mei Hsien is exquisitely placed. Ko Ching-lin's estate (one of his several wide holdings; not his largest or his richest) lay a *li* or two beyond the city's wall. His many acres of wax-trees were not enwalled, nor were his groves of varnish-trees, his fields of tobacco, his tallow-trees, his beans or melons, his terraces of cucumbers, his meadows rippling with grain, his long avenues of fruit-trees. There was no need, for this was China, the richest part of China, where as a rule only the birds steal. Walls would not keep the greedy birds out or off; that office was up to the scarecrows—and they performed it more or less efficiently.

Bandits, stray thieves, and beggars did not trouble Ko Ching-lin. There are some of all three in Sze-ch'uen, of course—as there are everywhere, though

not always called by those names. But Ko Ching-lin, like the wise man he was, paid an exemption tax to them all—to their leaders; and it left him and his cucumbers secure to sleep in peace all the year round. If now and then some stray miserable, or a marauding urchin, stole a bellyful or even a sackful, Ko Ching-lin did not seriously mind. And it cost him infinitely less than stout stone walls and wall-building would. And where his trees and crops ended and his next neighbours' began needed no demarcation, and got none. Every Chinese husbandman knows to the breadth of a grass-blade where his holding ends, and he neither encroaches nor pilfers—unless he has had the advantage of the international education of some treaty-port's or sphere-of-influence's environment.

Ko's dwelling houses and their gardens and courtyards were well and truly built—high, thick, strong. For he came of a clan that for centuries had casketed and guarded its jewels; its womenfolk, of whom they spoke with contempt, if they spoke, but kept and cherished both tenderly and with adamant care. Ko Ssu went very much where she would, but she passed through heavy gates when she chose to leave the immediate dwellings and gardens.

O-mei Hsien lies at the foot of Sze-ch'uen's Sacred Mountain, Omei. The great hill is peppered with temples and shrines. In summer it is alive with pilgrims—most of them penitents; but cheerful, confident penitents. For a few joss-sticks burned on Omei will work miracle unfailingly; and if the incense won't, the monks and priests will. Men and women throng up Omei's steep climb, to pray, pay, and be made clean.

Ko Ssu expressed no desire to climb Mount Omei. And Ko Ching-lin had no wish that she should, or should risk brushing her garments against the coarser garments of its toiling, sweating pilgrims. The climb up Mount Omei has to be done on foot—where it does not have to be done literally on hands and knees.

But she liked to look up at the glorious summit and slopes, and wonder lazily how it felt to stand way up there and look towards the Glory of Buddha—see it.

But the lower hills and the more this-worldly marts pleased her best, and sufficed her for pilgrimage and frolic.

More than once indulgent, deeply wronged Ko Ching-lin took her to Chia-ting Fu—a jaunt of more than twenty English miles—and let her bargain and buy all she would.

It took a lot of shopping to satiate country-bred Ko Ssu. She spent magnificently. That mattered less than it sounds, for most that she bought

already was Ko Ching-lin's. Silks were her leading expenditure. The best silk-shop in Chia-ting Fu belonged to Ko Ching-lin; and was but a little of what he owned in the rich *fu* city.

Chia-ting overlooks the Min River where it joins the T'ung River soon after the Ya Ho and the Ta-tu have mingled to form it.

Sericulture and silk weaving are supreme in Chia-ting Fu. Ko owned thousands of its looms; all but owned the hands that plied them. He could afford Ko Ssu's extravagance. A million English pounds would not have impoverished Ko Ching-lin. He was very rich, even for wealth saturated Sze-ch'uen. And, if she bought the more recklessly, he spent the more. One neck-chain of pearls and jades that he bought her cost more than all her yards of brocaded and painted silks. And Ko Ching-lin did not own the jewel-shop. And he bought her many stick-pins, too.

The gay, happy crowds in the Chia-ting streets and squares delighted Ko Ssu quite as much as the shops did. Sze-ch'uenese are the most light-hearted of all the sons of Han. She liked their happy laughing voices she admired their twisted turbans of many gorgeous colours.

She made no friends in the *fu* city; and she did not suspect, though it was so, that Ko avoided her doing it.

But she was not dull in Chia-ting, in O-mei Hsien, or on all the hillsides and canal-and-river banks. A handful of beads, a donkey load of embroidered silks sufficed her beautifully. And staid, courtly Ko Ching-lin contrived to answer all her need of a playmate. If he did not romp with her, he came strangely near it now and then. He liked her mirth when it came, and showed her that he did. She gave it no thought, but, if she had, she must have concluded that at times her indulgent host was quite a satisfactory playmate; a much better and kinder playmate than Q'ūo Toon or Q'ūo Lou ever had been.

For a broken-hearted Ko Ssu at times was almost frivolous. She amazed and puzzled Ko Ching-lin as nothing in all his life's varied experience had puzzled or surprised him before.

For all his chivalrous gentleness with her, Ko Ching-lin's heart was heavy with pain; pain and shame for him, more for her.

The more he studied her, the less he could read or understand her.

Sometimes his pity almost unmanned him. Often his anger was terrible, hot, and vindictive. But he hid it from the girl—for he had promised.

Moon followed moon.

Ko Ching-lin’s eyes followed Ko Ssu with a strange and growing question in their oblique depths.

To-day he stood a long time at the edge of the outer garden watching her intently, keeping well in a great oak-tree’s shadow, that she should not see him yet.

His scrutiny was searching and long. Ko Ssu was romping with her little dogs that he had given her, throwing bright silk-bound balls as far as she could, then darting after them almost as fast as the excited, barking dogs did, racing with them lighter-footed than they; for the over-fed little dogs were disgracefully fat, and Ko Ssu was lissom and slender.

Back and forth they ran and chased madly. Once she reached a purple and orange ball first, and snatched it up exultantly before either doggie had reached it, pirouetted about on one agile foot, and dashed laughing away from them again, rushing across the garden, up steep marble terrace-steps lightly—no whit breathless, slender, unwearied.

On and on they romped, the tireless dog-ones and the girl as untired as they.

Ko Ching-lin watched her with the question and perplexity that had knotted his brow for moons now gathering deeper on his face—and a new tenderness brooding on his mouth, kindling in his eyes.

The dogs tired first. One of them lay flatly down on the sweet grass and panted his distress frankly, his air-famished tongue hanging out limp and parched; the other whimpered reproachfully, and waddled slower and slower.

Ko Ssu mocked at them gleefully, and dashed across the garden again, throwing the ball high up in the air as she ran, and springing up lithely to meet its descent, and to catch it in mid-air.

“*Oi-ye! Oi-ye!*” she mocked them again tauntingly. But neither dog stirred. They were winded. Ssu pitched the ball back over her shoulder contemptuously, and sauntered off to the swing that hung, on long ropes of twisted silk, from its red lacquered arch between a great banyan tree and a group of splendid fan-palms and persimmons, sprang into it, and, standing on its painted board, began to swing faster and faster.

Ko Ching-lin moved slowly from the oak-tree and went to Ko Ssu.

She saw him coming, threw him a welcoming laugh, leaned perilously out from the swing, holding to only one of its ropes with her left hand, wrenched a

persimmon off and pelted it at the man as he neared her, recaught her right hand's hold of the rope, and swung herself far out over the heart-shaped leafage of the lovely, graceful taros beyond the banyans, high up above Ko Ching-lin's head.

Ko caught the fruit-missile dexterously. He had not run wild on the Yün-nan hills, but he, too, had been born and bred near the hill-banked Yang-tsze; and the Sze-ch'uen hills are steep. Adult, he was not old—manhood and life still surged in him virile and strong. The dotage of Ko Ching-lin had many a year to wait before it found him.

"Push me, Ko Ching-lin," she demanded. "Let not me do all the work—like those two lazy ones lolling there in the clover."

Ko Ching-lin obeyed her.

But presently when the swinging slacked a little he put out a determined hand, and stopped it altogether.

"I am not tired, Ko Ching-lin," she chided him.

"So see these eyes," the man answered. "But I want you. Come."

The girl eyed him naughtily, made as if to disobey him; then with an impish laugh jumped free from the high swing. Ko caught her as she did, caught her and held her, and carried her so and put her down gravely on an old soap-stone bench. He sat down on its seat's other end, and turned on it facing her, looking at her gravely.

He had carried her in his arms. Except his hand on her arm protectingly, when they rambled the steep hills, he never had touched her before since their marriage dusk. Perhaps, for all his virile strength, he had found her light weight heavy, for though his face kept its calm he was breathing sharply, the beads of jade that neck-laced his coat clattered a little on the satin brocade.

Ko Ssu's face had flushed. Their lids hid her eyes. She was not facing Ko Ching-lin.

"Flower-one," he asked gently, "why did you so lie to me?"

"Lie, sir? When?"

A smile quivered Ko Ching-lin's grizzled moustache. His eyes were very kind. Hope was warm in his heart.

"In the nuptial chamber," he told her, "when I lifted your bride-veil. Ko Ssu, you are not with child."

A troubled sob that tangled softly in Ko Ssu's throat was all she answered.

She was crimson neck and unpainted face. He saw her little hands tremble before she knotted them, twisted in her girdle on her knee.

“Why did you lie it?” Ko persisted, but his voice was kind; it caressed even more than it probed. “Was marriage—and love—so distasteful to your shy, virgin heart that you preferred to it descent to the dark Yellow Springs?”

Ko Ssu threw her arms on the old bench’s back, hid her face on her arms, turning her back on Ko Ching-lin. He saw her young shoulders heave painfully, he heard her frightened sobbing.

He gave her time—his life had made him wise concerning women—he waited patiently until her grief—or was it only embarrassment?—grew quieter.

Then—“Why did you trick me so, little flower-one? Why give me such terrible hurt? Why do your fragrant self such grievous wrong?”

The girl lifted her head a little, not turning her face to Ko Ching-lin, but resting her quivering chin on her arm. “Q’ūo Ssu did not wrong herself,” she told him brokenly.

Q’ūo Ssu! The man winced that she named herself so—and did not know why he did. Q’ūo Ssu! After all these friendly moons; week after week of waxing friendship!

“Pearl-one,” he insisted quietly, “that thing you did. Ko Ssu, my lovely bride-one—lovely and loved,” he whispered, “wronged Q’ūo Ssu with the utmost wronging. Why?”

“I longed to be rid of my life. I had a poison drug the wizard at home had sold me. I had it hid in my bosom; and a knife in my sleeve. I intended to do it before we crossed the River-of-Golden-Sand, that my last earth breath might be in Yün-nan; but my courage failed—or, more true words, I think, I had no courage; all my bravery was but my vain, senseless dreaming. I tried—twice after I knew that they had carried me into Sze-ch’uen. I tried to do it. I could not do it. I am a no-worth coward, Ko Ching-lin.”

Ko laid his hand on the girl’s slender bowed shoulder; his touch was kindness.

“There are much-many kinds of courage, Ko Ssu. I hold you a very brave one. Because of how you defied me there in the red-decked, flower-sweetened chamber, even more because of how you have borne yourself all these trying moons here, I count you hero-brave, Ko Ssu.”

She turned to him then, and regarded him gravely. “I hold you much kind to me, Ko Ching-lin. I owe you thanks, Ko Ching-lin. And night and morning

Q’ūo Ssu pays them to you with tapers and prayers to Kwan Yin-ko.”

The man’s eyes filled. But again he had winced.

“Has greatly the sickness-for-home gnawed you here in my *kuei*, cherished flower-one?”

Even yet he did not know that he was wooing her; nor did the girl.

“I know not, sir. Not the much has it been the sickness-for-home, I think. No”—nodding her head in emphasis of the negative—“it is not that that makes me the torture, I think.”

“What has it been, Ko Ssu? Will you not trust me, child-one to whom I have vowed my friendship and service? I will keep my oath, Ko Ssu.”

“I know that, Ko Ching-lin.”

“Let me prove the quality of the friendship I have given you, lily-flower. Let me show you the strength of the service I will do you. Let me know what it is that cankers you. Let me know that I may help.”

“There is no help, Ko Ching-lin.”

“May not I judge that? Will not you trust me, prized-one?”

“I do trust you, my lord.”

The man flushed and trembled that she called him that. “Ko Ssu,” he cried hotly, “have you found no happiness, no contentment here in the home of your husband?”

“This garden is very beautiful, Ko Ching-lin. Much your kindness has helped and eased me. I like your fragrant garden. I like much the freedom you have given me, generous Ko Ching-lin, the jewels you have given me, the many sweet-meats, the little loving, greedy, pranking dog-ones. My moons have not all been sad or sour, Ko Ching-lin.”

“Counted you the moons as they went?” he asked curiously.

She nodded her head in denial.

“You have been here full eight moons, Ko Ssu.”

“So?” the girl answered idly.

Again the man flushed deeply, that she did not understand the significance of “eight moons”; and loved her the more that she did not.

Very skilfully, very kindly, sparing her, helping her, Ko Ching-lin at last drew her story from her shy telling. But she told it—told all its essentials. So

Wing's name she did not speak. That she would not. Nor where his home, whence he had come, what his rank or trade. But she told the rest, told Ko Ching-lin more than she herself knew. Young interest kindled, an hour by the river, vows exchanged out in the coppice under the banyan's shade. She told it haltingly at first, of course, but her tongue smoothed to it as she went on. It was relief to her to share it with someone. It was great relief to her to share it with kind, gentle Ko Ching-lin; greatest relief of all to have given him stark honesty at last.

What the hearing cost the man who heard it so quietly, Ko Ssu did not suspect, could not gauge.

Childbirth at its worst is not the extreme of pain.

But Ko Ching-lin gave no sign.

Lily-flower! Lily-flower a little damaged. Bent, all unknowing, for an innocent hour "low i' the dust"!

It was not much. The man of the world—his own Chinese world—did not exaggerate it—or its soil. But it gnawed him. It twisted his soul. Only a lad, he sensed the lover. A children's fancied love-tale, all of it. Yet, gods, how it cut! That slender slip of girlish womanhood carried across a brook in other arms! That delicate face, Ko Ssu's face, nestled against another's coat. Gods!

"What are you going to do with me?" she demanded suddenly. "Tell me my punishment." She begged it passionately.

"What I promised, and more," Ko Ching-lin answered quickly. "Your punishment—from me to you, flower-one! The word wrongs us both, Ko Ssu. Speak it not again. Think it never again. You can punish me, Ko Ssu, if you will. It is in your power. Kwan grant that it be not in your heart. I cannot punish you, Ko Ssu. It never will be in my power, because never can it be in my heart."

The girl's eyes fluttered and fell.

"Show me mercy, if it comes that you can, Ko Ssu."

"How?" she whispered.

"By being happy here—finding your happiness here, letting happiness find and claim you here, if it can—claim and cherish you as long as you live."

"If only I could forget!"

"Ko Ching-lin prays Kwan that you may," he said gently.

Then he spoke of other things; a theatrical performance that he thought

would please her, an ivory shop they must ransack together, a song-bird he had bidden the bird-shop send for her inspection, a picnic they'd make in the moonlight, on lovely Felicity Island, where the herons nest, and sweet potatoes run wild riot among the indigo and azaleas. She had had enough for to-day, he thought. No more strain should torture her now, if he could divert her young mind from all that had mis-filled and choked it.

They supped together—to the scandal of a conservative household that had had many such shocks these last six moons.

Even he won her to a little shy merriment as they supped. Ko Ssu was very young.

"Sleep well!" he told her as she left him.

When night fell, Ko Ching-lin did not go into the ante-room he so often had lain in. He kept his solitude far in his own rooms.

ANOTHER moon sickled, filled, waned, and went.

Sometimes Ko Ssu sang at her embroidery-frame—not often, for she cared but little for her needle. And badly indeed she plied it.

Her Chinese eyes saw how ill she pulled the flowers up from the silk she was sewing; and to-day she flung the unoffending frame across the room petulantly, and it landed square on Ko's shoe as he came up on to the veranda.

He laughed and bent down and picked up the lacquered frame. "How has it offended you, lady?" he asked her, as Ko Ssu, who had heard him laugh, came to her room's veranda door.

"I sew like a crow," she muttered disgustedly.

"Apparently it is not your favourite pastime," Ko owned, laying the frame aside with an indulgent laugh. "Why sew you, then? You need not. Order your women to do it. Come and feed the goldfish. You always are amused when you watch them grab and gobble. I will chase you to the jasper-pool. Will come?"

But Ko Ssu was out of tune to-day. She sank down on a veranda step dejectedly, and made no reply.

Ko seated himself a few steps lower. From there he could see every shade or light that passed over her mutinous face.

What troubled her? Or was she merely bored? Ko Ching-lin smothered a sigh.

So Wing was troubling Ko Ssu, the unclaimed wife of Ko Ching-lin: a dream that had dimmed and lost its lure, a callow "love" that still pricked but no longer fed or satisfied. Love cannot stand still. It may be at peace—at its best it *is* peace—but it cannot stand still. It may not change—at its best it does not change—but it cannot stand still; it must grow or lessen; increase by what it feeds on, or revolt from its daily sweetened bread. It never is so great that it cannot grow more. But the great love comes only to those who are great of soul and stanch of character. Q'ūo Chung's daughter was sweet, full of small faults, dowered with many small and admirable virtues; she was not big. She had strong and generous impulses; but she had but limited strength of

character. She a little lacked the “staying” quality. She was no rock. She undertook heroically. Fulfilment and its hard demands overtaxed her, found her wanting. And she was very young, inexperienced, undrilled.

The anomaly of her position here in indulgent Ko Ching-lin’s *chia*—pseudo-wifehood, bounty for which she paid no return—did not trouble the girl. She did not even realise it now. She liked the luxury of this new life of hers, and she liked the ceaseless kindness of her wifeless husband; liked and enjoyed them both so much that literally they had drugged her, slowly but surely numbed her natural shrewd intelligence. Only the gods—if they!—knew how long she might have drifted on, contented and pleased with things as they were.

That she took all (and it so much) from Ko Ching-lin, and gave him nothing, did not trouble her. But her conscience pricked her most annoyingly—though not because of Ko Ching-lin.

Conscience does not “make cowards of us all”—far from it; for quite a few of us have none, and a very few of us live up to their exigent conscience consistently and persistently. One can be quite happy without a conscience. A demanding conscience can be a great inconvenience. Those who have no conscience often are entirely happy; those who have a great deal, abide by it and obey it are scarcely less so. It is those of us who have a halfway conscience, and give it halfway fealty, that have a bad time. And that was the sort of a conscience that Ko Ching-lin’s Yün-nanese number-one had.

It never had troubled her before; for it never before had had any real opportunity. It had found opportunity now, and was making the most of it. She began to know that in her heart she was growing disloyal to So Wing! And it hurt her. She had planned such a splendid loyalty to him—heroic self-slaughter—and then when her will failed her of it, swift death at the hand of outraged Ko Ching-lin. She despised herself—when she thought of it, she did not dwell on it at all constantly—despised herself that she had flinched from the suicide she had planned so magnificently. And she despised herself very much more that she no longer pined for So Wing, no longer much wished for him.

This was entirely foolish of Ko Ssu. She had no right to blame herself for what she could not avoid. But she did. At times did it bitterly—chiefly when time hung a bit heavy on her little newly jewelled hands. Too—it cut to the sensitive quicks of her feminine vanity and her Chinese pride that she had lost face in her own eyes. Where was So Wing? What was he doing? How fared he? Her head hung low because she knew that she questioned but perfunctorily; that she did not too greatly care. She condemned herself that from the pictured height of glorious self-slaughter she had slumped

ingloriously down into a softly padded, perfumed slough of contentment; held herself disloyal to poor wandering So Wing because she no longer hated Ko Ching-lin, no longer loathed life in the richly kept Sze-ch'uen *chia*.

Had she confided all this to Ko Ching-lin himself, he might have laughed and coaxed, even have reasoned, her out of it. For Ko Ching-lin was wise and had lived much; and he no more over-estimated the girl's abiding strength of character than Mr. Kwan ever had.

But he thought her, as did the American missionary, charming, sweet, and companionable. That, added to her glowing prettiness, was attraction enough for Ko Ching-lin; all he desired. He had strength of character, intellect, and education enough for two; and he was of the not uncommon man-type that prefers beauty, charm, and pleasant femininity to all other wifely qualities, likes to think for two, and has neither use nor respect for women over "educated," advanced, and emancipated.

Whatever it was that troubled, or even only was boring, pretty Ko Ssu, Ko Ching-lin was determined to find it out and to fight—sooner or later.

He would be patient, but not slothfully nor stupidly patient.

At midnight a nightingale out on a white-lilac-tree wooed his love with song. Ko Ssu stirred on her couch, lifted her head to listen. Her casement window was open wide; the night was warm. How sweet the roses smelt! She propped her dimpled chin on her pretty dimpled hand, and listened with parted lips and wistful eyes.

The ante-room panel slid back. Ko Ching-lin had not spoken before he opened it. He did not ask if he might come in.

Ko Ching-lin, softly clad in shimmering silk, came in and closed the panel behind him.

He had not crossed this private threshold of hers since that first hideous torture-time.

His face was calm.

He carried a long slender taper. The taper was lit.

The room was much as it had been—that other time. But no bowl of roses stood near the casement. And none were needed to perfume Ko Ssu's sleep, so rich the fragrance of roses that came in from the courtyard; all the sweet night-time fragrance of Heaven's-Well perfuming the sleep-hours rest of little Ko

Ssu. And the tall carved candle-sticks were candleless. That mattered as little. For Ko Ching-lin had long, thick crimson candles in his arms—red nuptial candles.

One by one he made them secure on the sharp spikes of the splendid holders. One by one he lit them. Then he blew out his taper and put it down.

Ko Ssu, her chin still propped on her hand, a pale-blue sleeved elbow propped on her crimson pillows, watched him with widening eyes. The hint of a soft smile hid on her curved red mouth.

The nuptial candles lit, Ko Ching-lin turned and looked towards the couch—clear now in the many candles' soft light.

Their eyes met.

The woman did not stir.

Ko Ching-lin moved.

He went quietly to her where she lay on her cushioned ivory couch, stood a moment looking down at her the longing and tenderness he had held in stern leash—long enough.

The man's fine face was very grave—as grave as tender.

The hinted smile did not fade from the woman's curved red lips.

Ko Ching-lin slipped down to the carpet of crimson silk, kneeling there by the painted ivory couch, and gathered his wife into his arms. And Ko Ssu did not repulse him.

The nightingale sang—sweeter and sweeter.

The roses incensed the midnight.

The red candles burned.

At day-dawn the nightingale sang no more.

The red candles had burned to their sockets of pure gold.

The roses out in the courtyard still incensed the sleep-room.

Ko Ssu still slept.

A javelin of brilliant daylight pierced through the casement, found the closed eyes of the girl asleep on her silken quilts. She smiled before she woke. She stirred and woke.

Ko Ssu snuggled her happy flushing face against her husband’s sleeve. “My lord!” she whispered. And Ko Ching-lin did not repulse her.

IN A YÜN-NAN COURTYARD *CHAPTER XXVIII*

THE old Poughkeepsie garden, sloping down to the Hudson, terraced up to the low, long house, was at its loveliest. Indian summer had come, painting the banks of the great wide river, painting gardens and woodlands of Dutchess county with a deeper, more salient brilliance than Turner ever had seen or Turner's brush would have ventured to use, for the autumn leaves were in all their glory. And the Hudson throbbed with the splendour they lifted above it. There are only two parts of earth where autumn is at its regal best: the continent Christopher Columbus is said to have discovered, and the old Empire in which Confucius was born.

It had begun to rain a few hours ago; a slow, quiet rain that had dwindled gradually at last, and now was over. A garden is never so sweet as when rain has just left it, and the flowers are lifting up refreshed faces, and the trees are dripping the silver moisture from their grateful leaves. There were many blooms still in the well-tended garden; a generous harvest of fruit hung ripe for the plucking. Helen Rathborn, gathering grapes for dessert—her father's and hers—was singing an old Creole love tune that her mothers had sung in the South a century before her; but she was not thinking of the words she sang, and certainly not thinking of love, unless subconsciously thinking of the only love she ever had known, her love for her father. She held in her arm a wide basket of sweet grass, which the Indians had woven and had embroidered gaily with dyed quills. The sleeve had slipped back from the exquisite arm stretched up to the great purple clusters; and the face she lifted, considering anxiously which was the best bunch on the bunch-heavy vines, was indisputably the face of a beauty. The girl was not pretty, nor was she handsome. She was simply one of those rarely beautiful creatures that Nature achieves now and then, almost as if to show what she can do under sufficiently favourable circumstances.

Once in a very long while Nature makes a really beautiful woman. Why not often? Is it that we too persistently, too crassly thwart her? Every year she gives earth flowers of absolute beauty in countless millions. A poet has called the varied beauty of the sea's breaking waves monotonous; a musician has felt the same of its voice. We overlook half the cowslips and violets that grow too thick in our path; that we do has taught Nature a lesson, perchance; and she makes human beauty rare both for our sake and for its own.

Nowhere are there many women so perfectly beautiful that all eyes must

see them so. This girl's loveliness claimed instant recognition, and invariably got it. Few men ever had seen her without longing to see her again. Even women who liked her least admitted that she was very lovely; they had to. Physically the girl was without a flaw. The slight wave in the soft dark hair was natural. The pallor of the skin was the creamy pallor of magnolias. The girlish figure was neither tall nor short, neither thin nor plump. Every line of her was exquisite. From spring to winter there was not a flower in the garden lovelier than the girl tiptoe at the grape-vine. An artist could not have flattered her. Few artists could have drawn or painted her except to libel her. No feature, no part was lovelier than the others—not even her hands, not even her feet; for all were right. Even her ears were right. And ears betray most of us hideously; deform so many, that the ugly and unnatural coiffeuring that covers and hides them is charity to most women, and must be envied by most men. Regrettably often a human nose discounts its involuntary wearer—but ears! Can't science do something about it, or one of the wonderful new cults? Human ears no doubt are useful; but they cry aloud for their Burbeck. Helen Rathborn's ears were lovely; and, still more exceptional, they matched each other exactly.

Nor was all this physical perfection muted or discounted, as such beauty often is, by expressionlessness, lack of visible individuality. The mobile red mouth was eloquent. The long-lashed dark blue—if they *were* blue—eyes spoke—thoughtfully sometimes, laughingly sometimes. The face sparkled with intelligence, showed character and individuality. Helen Rathborn was quietly graceful. Her low-pitched voice was music. Very oddly this girl was not spoiled. Her father was comfortably rich, and adored her. She was his only child. She could not remember her mother.

They were chums; the radiant girl and the father, whose fine face, for all its geniality, wore the brand of an unalterable sorrow. For Thomas Rathborn remembered his wife. The one thing he almost grudged Helen now and then was that he could not but see that the child was even lovelier than the mother had been. He had thought his young wife the most beautiful of all women, but he had to own, as he came down the veranda steps and saw Helen there by the grape-vine, that unquestionably she was more beautiful than her mother had been.

They smiled at each other when she turned and saw him. But they did not speak; not even when she came to him, and he took her basket from her, and they stood together watching the garden until the gong sounded, and Helen tucked a hand in her father's arm and pushed him prettily towards the dining-room.

Often there was much chatter between them. But they never made talk with

each other. Their intimacy never needed words.

Doctor Rathborn no longer “practised”; partly that he might devote himself more securely to the research and experimental side of his great profession, partly that he might have more time to give to his motherless girl. No night-bell ever rang in his house—to disturb perhaps Helen’s sleep. No meal that she expected to eat with him ever was kept waiting. He always had time and quick willingness to go with her where she would, whether to some simple neighbourhood function or half across the world. Helen was more to him than all the art of medical succour; and he was a great and (as a great physician must be) a devoted physician. But Helen came first.

He no longer practised in the sense of accepting well-to-do patients or any sort of fee. But the poor were always with him, his healing and help eagerly at their service.

Such physicians as Thomas Rathborn make theirs the greatest of the priesthoods. And they never really “retire” until they die—perhaps not then.

At the close of their merry meal (they always ate together merrily) they went out to the veranda again, and had their fruit brought out to them there, and after the fruit the coffee.

“Jim Adams came to see me this afternoon, Helen. He stayed quite a time,” Doctor Rathborn said as she gave him his cup.

“Poor Jim,” Helen laughed—not unkindly.

“You are perfectly sure, Nellie? Jim is all wool and a yard wide.” Rathborn spoke rather wistfully.

“A yard and three-quarters,” the girl answered cordially. “But I am not going to marry him, Daddy. And I’ve told him so often enough and distinctly enough. I don’t thank Jim for pestering you about it. It’s not nice of him. Nagging the life out of you won’t make me swallow his medicine.”

“I think a great deal of Jim, Helen.”

“I know you do. So do I, in a way.”

“He’d be good to you, Nell.”

“He’d have to! No, Daddy dear, you can’t tempt me—because Jim does not tempt me in the least. Look here, tell me something. Why are you anxious to have me get married? For you are! It sticks out all the time. You don’t want to be rid of me—I won’t pretend that I think that you possibly could. You’ll

suffer like fury if I do leave you one day; we both know that." She had finished her coffee. She put her cup down and went and perched herself upon her father's knee. "Why? Tell me at once."

"You are twenty-three, Helen."

"Not till next week," she reminded him. "I see, you are ashamed of having an old-maid daughter. Poor me! What an absurd, old-fashioned father I have! Girls don't marry straight out of their cradles now, dear. We have changed all that. Thirty is quite a nice young age for orange-blossom wreaths and white satin now."

"A great deal has changed," the father admitted a bit grimly.

"All of them for the worse?" she teased him.

"It seems so to your old-fashioned father, Helen," he said with his cheek on hers. "Your mother was seventeen when you were born. She was not twenty when she died."

For a time neither spoke.

Then, "Twenty-three seems quite some age to me," he went on, "for a woman that is. I believe in early marriages, Nellie. Growing up together's the best way, I think. And, too—selfishly, I always like to get a bad wrench over. It will be a very bad wrench indeed to me—the second terrible wrench of my life."

Again they were silent.

After several moments: "I shan't be altogether sorry when you've made up your mind—decided which one."

"You wouldn't like me to marry Jim Adams just because you care for him, think so well of him, would you, Father?"

"God forbid!"

"That's all right, then. For I simply couldn't do it, Father."

"You will have to marry someone, Nell."

"Why?"

"Look in the glass. Someone will make you."

"Perhaps."

"All our women marry, Nell. They marry young—have up to now."

"You'd hate me never to marry?"

“Like the very devil, I should. A woman’s no business not to.”

“What about the men not going round? They don’t go round now, you know.”

“They’ll stretch round to you. We’ve had considerable evidence of that.”

“Well—come rack, come rope, I’ll have to wait for Mr. Right, Daddy.”

“You haven’t seen him, Helen?” The father spoke very softly.

“Without you knowing? Spotting him, too? How could I?” the girl laughed, leaning across him to find his cigarette case on the veranda table. “When have I ever been out of your sight long enough? We never have been apart for a single day, have we?”

“Not for a day!” He held the match he had struck to the cigarette she had taken—then lit a cigar for himself.

“Now we’re cosy,” she cooed, nestling her head on his shoulder.

The man did not answer. But his arm drew her a little closer.

After a little: “Daddy! Would you like to hear my secret love-story? It’s the only secret I’ve ever had from you. Would you like to hear it?”

“Very much,” Rathborn replied lazily. He was not disturbed.

“It was in Vienna——”

“Never! What’s the joke, Nell?”

“Yes—in Vienna. And what’s more, I did it twice.”

“Did what?”

“Fell in love——”

“Rubbish!”

“Well, but I did though. Sort of fell in love. One of the times it wasn’t the least bit serious—more pique than anything else, I guess. The other time went deeper. It has haunted me ever since—more sometimes than others, of course. But it haunts me now and then. I keep remembering it. I believe the other time, the other man haunts me too—sometimes—a little. Don’t let that good cigar go out, Daddy. Smoke up.”

Thomas Rathborn was growing a trifle anxious. Nell often teased him. But his quick love (and they were closely tuned) had caught something in the soft laughing voice—something that disturbed him oddly.

He drew on his Havana obediently—very slowly.

“You know the night we dined at the British Minister’s?”

“Yes—I remember.”

“I liked the man that took me in to dinner. I liked his face and his voice. They both were direct and manly. A square-cut, rather rugged English face; more like a soldier’s than any sort of diplomat’s, I thought. But he was of the Minister’s entourage all right. They both treated him like that—one of them, you know. We had ever such a good time at dinner—it was a very long dinner, too—at least I did. I thought he did, too. Well—he never came near me after dinner, never spoke to me, or looked towards me once. Wasn’t that funny, Daddy?”

“Ill-mannered brute—or ass. Probably both. A good many foreigners are like that.” Rathborn spoke hotly. An alien son-in-law was the last thing he wished.

“No. It wasn’t that. He simply had forgotten my existence. And I have remembered him all these years—five years, Daddy—because he did. I suppose my vanity was hurt. We never ran across him again—and that was funny; for we were in Vienna six weeks longer, had tea at the British Legation twice, went to a dance there, too.”

“Ever ask about him?—who he was?”

“Of course not!” Helen exclaimed indignantly. “But I remembered him—and a lot of little things about him that I liked; the little things that count so. One thing, he wore his evening clothes as if he’d been born in them. Except some English and Austrian men, no others do that.”

“What’s the matter with the way I wear my dress-suit?”

“You wear it beautifully, Daddy dear, but you wear it indignantly; most American men do—when they don’t wear it with a sort of apologetic grin. A frock-coat’s your own special wear, my own daddy. His were very beautiful evening clothes, and perfectly worn——”

“So you fell in love with a dress-suit! With a dress-suit and a dress-suit manner!”

“A bit like that. But I fell out again almost as soon as I had, because I fell in so much deeper with something else—something very different. But the other man I never saw.”

“What are you giving me, Nell?”

“Straight stuff, Daddy.”

“Well, I’m blowed!”

“So am I, dear—very much blowed! And my second love-affair in Vienna cut a lot deeper than the Legation one did. No—I never saw him. But I heard him.”

“Fell in love with a voice?” her father gibed at her tenderly.

“No—with a violin, and the man who was speaking through it. I suppose it was a voice, though, really; three voices, in fact: the voice of the soul of the man who was playing, the voice of the soul of the master who wrote the exquisite music, the voice of the perfect violin. It was a living thing—that violin, Father; as truly an individual, breathing entity as you or I are.”

“Some violins are,” her father agreed gravely. Then, more lightly, “And which of the three voices, may I ask, did my daughter give her heart to?”

“That’s just it, Daddy; I don’t know whether I lost it to the man who wrote that music or to the man who was playing it.”

“Maybe a woman was playing.”

“Certainly not,” Helen Rathborn said indignantly; “it was a man, a real-real man.”

“And where did all this happen? Where was I?”

“You had gone to look again at the frescoes in the Altenchenfelder Church, and then on with Colonel Barnes to a German lecture about something very learned that I couldn’t have understood, even if I could have understood one word of German. You remember the day I mean?”

“Yes, perfectly. It was a magnificent lecture.”

“Bessie Grey took me to a little cheap dressmaker someone had told me about, and said was a perfect gem. We drove there, but walked back to the Grey’s hotel. Bessie’s old German maid was with us. Something in a little shop window caught Bessie’s eye, and she went in to buy it. The maid went, too, to speak German to the shopkeeper. I stayed outside. I hated those small, stuffy, second-class shops. And it was a hot day, stuffy enough outside—without going in. It was not a fashionable part of the City we were in there; not poor, not even exactly shabby, but rather drab. But right up against the little low shop was a tall grey building, substantial and clean in an almost humble sort of way—flats or apartments, I suspect, for the curtains were different every few windows. It was not exactly of the *zinspalast* order, I think, though

it had the funny frescoed pictures on it; but it had a comfortable, homely look—the look of a nest of well-kept homes. I liked it. Just one flat—if they were flats—had window-boxes; well-tended ones, full of flowers. Its windows were open, and inside one of the open windows someone began to play—a violin. I can't tell you about it. There aren't any words. I don't know what it was he played. I never had heard it before—never have since. It was maddeningly sweet. Perfect music, perfectly played. No matter how long I live, I shall never forget it. I can feel the throb of it yet. I always shall. I hear what it said, its message. I always shall. Again and again and again I have tried to find it, pick it out, recover it on the piano, tried to hum it. But I can't. It always evades me. But it always is haunting me—and I know that it always will. If I could have just one wish granted, I think I'd wish to hear that music again—just as I heard it then. I don't know why I try to recall it enough to play it to myself, and butcher it. No, I don't want to hear it ever again, unless I can hear it just the same—a delicious little masterpiece played by a master. Oh, hum! I tried to find that flat building again. I tried two or three times before we left Vienna. I never could. I couldn't even find the street. I hadn't noticed at the time. The Greys left Vienna two days after that. But I don't suppose I'd have asked Bessie or her maid if they hadn't. So, there endeth my second love-story, Daddy."

"I hope there'll be a third one before too long, little daughter."

"I hope so, too, Daddy," the girl said, caressing the hand that was fondling her hair.

At breakfast the next day Doctor Rathborn had something, more serious than her half-joking Viennese reminiscences of the night before, to tell Helen.

He wondered how she would take it; not, he knew, half as lightly as he had taken her loving moonlight prattle. She might raise passionate objection to what he was about to do; and, if she did, for the first time in all their years together he would have to thwart her, perhaps grieve her bitterly. For he *had* to go. She would not feel their separation as much or as long as he should. Youth could not. The very thought of it flayed him. But he was going.

He waited until he carried his cup to her the second time before he spoke, cheerfully, with a troubled heart.

"Another! Three cups of very strong coffee! What a doctor! I ought to be stricter with you—but there, here goes!" And with an indulgent laugh she lifted the heavy silver pot.

“We do spoil each other, don’t we, Daddy?”

“Pretty thoroughly, Nell.”

“And I hope we always shall. Don’t you?”

“Sure. And I want you to be extra good to me just now, little daughter. I had something I meant to tell you last night, but we got to talking about Vienna”—they both laughed, then he went on stirring the sugar and cream through his coffee almost wistfully—“and I put off telling you until this morning.”

Helen studied her father’s face, or tried to; it was bent over his coffee cup.

“Doctor Thomas Warren Rathborn, have you sprained Nero’s leg, or broken his neck? Tell me the worst at once.”

“Nero’s all right.”

“Then why so dejected? I can stand anything else.”

“I am going to China, dear. Almost at once. At best it will take me some time. It may take a very long time.”

“You are going where?”

“To China, dear; next week or the week after.”

Helen ate her toast thoughtfully before she said: “Please make it next month, the end of next month—that will give me six weeks.”

“I ought not to put it off, Helen. I have given my word not to lose any time.”

“Six weeks isn’t a lot of time. Please give me just six weeks. I’ll need every day of it. First I must find out what sort of things I’ll need to wear in China; then I’ll have to hurry at least a brace of dressmakers up like fury. I’ll have to have six weeks.”

“Darling, I can’t take you with me.”

Helen laughed.

Her father felt distinctly uneasy.

“Your cousin Bell would be delighted to have you while I am away. Your cousin Mary would like very much to bring both the girls and stay here with you——”

“You bet!”

“Or, you might have six months in Europe—make up a jolly party. How about young Mrs. Robertson for a chaperon? You never tire of her. And he’d go along.”

“He certainly would if she went,” Helen agreed.

“I shouldn’t mind what it cost.”

“Neither should I—if I did it. Me go to Europe without you! I am ashamed of you, Daddy. Me let you go to China, or anywhere else, without me! Father, do you think you are quite well? Oughtn’t you to see an alienist?”

“I cannot take you with me, Helen. And I must go.” Rathborn spoke severely, almost sternly.

Perhaps he had put off speaking insistently, peremptorily too long. Helen paid his determined tone of authority not the slightest attention.

“I am going with you, Father,” she nodded to him lovingly over the grapes, peaches, and carnations. “And I promise to be quite ready to start six weeks from to-day.”

Doctor Rathborn groaned softly.

“I have got to go, Nell. No getting out of it.”

“That’s all right, dear. I am going to let you. You know how obedient I always am.”

“Oh, Lord! Listen, Helen dear, I may have to rough it for months at a time. I don’t even know just where in China I may have to get to.”

“And China’s big, isn’t it? Bigger than Dutchess County!”

“Considerably. And parts of it are considerably less safe just now. I cannot take you, Helen.”

“All right, give it up, then.”

“I have promised.”

“Then we’ve got to go.”

They were well on their way across the Pacific before Doctor Rathborn remembered that he had not told Helen why he was going to China, not even given her a hint. And she had not asked him. What a wonderful girl!

And he told her so.

“Of course I am. I am the daughter of a very wonderful man. But, Daddy, I know why you are going. I guessed it straight off.”

“Impossible. You can’t have done.”

“You are going to China to find your cousin, Charles Tolover.”

“Good Lord! How did you guess?”

“I did not guess. I figured it out. And partly I worked it out by what lawyers call the law of elimination. You fully intended to leave me for six months or even a year, if you could pull it off——”

“I fully intended to pull it off.”

“And I knew there was only one person on earth you’d have done that for—your distant cousin, Charles Tolover. You are going to China to find him, and to tell him that his name is cleared at last, his innocence proved. I don’t know how you found out——”

“I always have known he was innocent.”

“Yes, I know. And I have known it, too, because I know that you make no mistakes about character, never trust or mistrust the wrong men. I mean that I don’t know how you found out that at last he could be proved innocent to all the world. Will he be very glad, Father, after all these years?”

“I doubt it. But your mother”—even to Helen he rarely spoke of her—“would have wished him to hear it from me, and have wished all the world to know.”

“Do you think you will find him, Father?”

“I shall, if it is humanly possible, and if he is alive. He was alive, and living in South-West China, and was well ten years ago. I learned that by accident, but positively. How much of the sad old story do you know, Helen? How much did Elsa Carol tell you before I came into the room and shut her up?”

“Not much details. I know that he was suspected of forgery and theft, that a warrant was out for him, and that before it was served he escaped. That is the strange part of it to me—that he ran away from it. Why should an innocent man run? How could he?”

“Charles Tolover ran to give colour to his supposed guilt. He ran away to avoid being proved innocent—as he might have been, even against his own will, if it had come to trial. His flight seemed to establish his guilt, and so kept all possibility of suspicion off of the man he was willing to give more than his

life to shield, glad to give his own honour to shield.”

“Splendid friendship!” the girl said warmly. “He is worth going to China for!”

“True friendship,” Rathborn echoed earnestly. He did not add, as he might have done: “And, too, it was supreme love—for a woman.”

Helen did not ask her father then or ever who it was that Charles Tolover had so supremely shielded. Nor did Rathborn ever tell her, or hint it.

That was characteristic of them both.

IN A YÜN-NAN COURTYARD *CHAPTER XXIX*

SO WING the bandit lounged on the temple's broken steps playing his flute. He wore a red flower in his stained khaki tunic. His brown shoes were highly polished. The red handkerchief that peeped coquettishly from his gold-laced cuff was of fine silk, and so were his crimson stockings. He carried a watch that had ticked English hours away in a Bond Street jeweller's a year ago; the monogram cut on its case in no way referred to So Wing. The diamond on his left hand was of value, and the turquoise and emerald ring on his right hand was real. There were gold coins in his pocket. There were five-pound notes and a cheque-book buttoned securely inside his tunic. So Wing was in clover. Most of his rabble horde were not.

They were bandits by desperation and hunger. Most of them were temporary bandits. So Wing, after trying several industries, had selected banditry as his for-sometime permanent profession; not because he preferred it to all others, but because, after searching deliberation, he was persuaded that it offered him the shortest cut to the goal he was determined to reach, and with no avoidable delay. Banditry should be his chief industry until he had squeezed its fruitage dry, won his way through it to his goal. Then, indeed, he might renounce banditry for some quieter, safer vocation, if any pursuit or industry could be called "quiet" or safe in China now. At the end he might be a banker or a Tupan. Even he might be Prime Minister, President, Dictator, and ultimately achieve what Yüan Shih-k'ai had dreamed and attempted; succeed where Yüan Shih-k'ai had failed. A preposterous dream for the once-starving coolie to dream! And yet, wilder, more preposterous dreams have come true in China—more than once. Every Chinese adventurer who knows his country, and knows something of its history, knows that this is so.

His sons should not be bandits, he resolved. There was a girl in Yün-nan whom he did not think of as a bandit's wife.

So Wing had travelled far, and he had lived much, in the five years since he had left the service of Ko Ching-lin. But what he had vowed himself when he stood looking off at Yün-nan from the top of the leaning pagoda he had kept true to, and had kept always in mind all the time since then. It had been his one path, and never once had he swerved from it. It was still his goal.

He had toiled incessantly. Day by day, hour by hour, bit by bit, patiently and strenuously he had made a dream come true. Wherever the Great River flowed and foamed from Nan-king to Fu Kwan he was feared. Warring rival

“generals” courted his connivance and his secret aid; knew his price, and paid it. He had not a friend, unless his flute was. He had no home, he had come through flame, ploughed his footsore way knee-deep through blood—and worse. There were deep scars under the soft silk vest beneath the absurd semi-European military tunic. Hunger, danger, want, cold, and humiliation had stalked him for several years, but he had defied and breasted them. And So Wing had won through—this far. He knew that his future was in jeopardy. But So Wing intended to go on winning through. There were several white men in Legation Street—diplomatic old-timers—who thought he’d do it, if a bullet or a skilfully offered drink of poison did not checkmate him.

So Wing, the master bandit, was lolling the afternoon away, because he had nothing else more immediately profitable to do, and because, with considerable other practical wisdom, the Chinese soldier-of-fortune had learned the sound value of occasional recreation. He would work, and probably kill, all the better to-morrow because he was playing old love-songs and classic hymns on his flute to-day.

This old temple, built on a mid-Yang-tsze island, was not So Wing’s headquarters; they shifted as constantly as desert sands—now in Sze-ch’uen, now in Ho-nan, sometimes in Chihli, always well chosen and well hidden, never far from the Great River; always migrant and temporary.

The island was his personal stronghold; in a sense, his camp-of-ease. None would molest him here—for several reasons. He was said to have great store of poison-gas in the temple vaults deep in the bowels of the grim rock it crowned; not the poison-gas of the West’s great World War; the poison-gas that was used, and used effectively, in Chinese warfare, even before Kublai Khan thought out and had made the six hundred miles of the Grand Canal in the thirteenth century. It was well known that the peacock that patrolled the island night and day was a god, disguised so for a thousand years, in punishment of a serious misdemeanour (not unconnected with another god’s wife) but still a favourite of Kuan Ti, and that Kuan Ti had laid a curse on all who trespassed on the island without giving the password which turned the strutting, screaming peacock-guardian into dove-like complacency. Some there were brave and rash enough to beard So Wing in his island pleasaunce, his temple retreat, to risk and test his reputed maddening death-gas; there was none who would front the curse that Kuan Ti had laid.

The proud and vicious bird was So Wing’s tamed and abject creature. It ate out of his palm. It cried for his caresses. When he slept in the heat of midday it fanned him with the outspread fan of its jewelled tail. It grieved when he left the island, and moped till his return.

There are many islands in the Yang-tsze. His choice of this one for his own well accredited So Wing's sagacity; his use of its dæmonic reputation more than hinted genius of him. From the great rock's summit the mighty river and its reaches that bordered it could be clearly seen, watched and studied; they a long undulated scroll unrolled for many *li* in all directions. The waters of the Yang-tsze are an indescribable medley of brilliant colours—not to be believed by anyone who has not seen them—a jazz of colours gayer than a Roman sash; purple, crimson, blue, a dozen greens, rose and yellows, black and burning browns, pearl-tinted creams—flowing, rushing side by side. So Wing loved the Great River's feast of gorgeous colours; and he found a new tint of strident loveliness woven in it every day.

The island of the impregnable rock-fortress was not all barren—on the rock's other side, So Wing had renovated the old pond and had added to its finned species.

If the ghosts of the ejected monks did indeed revisit their old abode, those among them who had loved its orchards and its gardens must have felt gratitude to So Wing, the outlawed bandit, for the care he gave their lilies and their pear-trees. If So, the bandit, owed his comfortable security to the island, he had repaid it what he could, and the island owed much to So Wing.

But not so the desecrated temple; the more sensitive of the devouter of the brethren, those of them who had loved their gods more than their fields and gardens, cared more for their altar and its rites than for their onion-beds and grain-patches, must have cursed him when they floated back at night-time to ease, if ghosts can, the earthbound homesickness they could not purge away in the perfumed waters of Heaven's Lethe.

Long, steep steps led directly from the river to the temple's wide portico. So Wing's water-carriers had a hard climb; all did who came to him from the Yang-tsze or went down to it at his bidding.

On the façade of the temple the carvings still were beautiful; dragons riding on the conventional curves that do duty for waves in Chinese decorations—of needle or of chisel or of painted lacquer—tigers dancing with fish-tailed apes, *yang* and *yin* (the universal Asian circled symbol of all that creates and propagates), winged men and man-headed beasts, feathery bamboos and slender palms. But inside the great temple-hall—its door was open—all was desolation and desecration. His gilding had peeled from the gigantic Buddha that grinned disconsolately above the cracked and ruined votive-table on which no wine-cup stood, no incense-burner, but instead of them a collection of So Wing's footgear (including blacking and brushes), a tin wash-hand basin, a box of cigarettes, a pistol and a field-glass, the "China Year Book" and several

newspapers—the London *Times*, *Le Temps*, the *Neue Freie Presse*, the *Washington Post*, half a dozen published in Shanghai and Peking; So Wing could read English readily now, and French measurably. Indefatigable in ambition, he had wrung considerable sound and varied education out of the hard, blistering years that he had fought and schemed through since he plucked a crimson feather from a crane-hen's pink breast. The temple lamps were gone—to curio-shops in Peking, London, Paris, New York, Madrid, and Tokio—their carved and twisted chains hung senseless from the shabby, tarnished ceiling. Kwan had fallen from her niche, Lung Wang had been stolen from his, kerosene lamps littered the side altars where ceremonial jades and jewelled vases of coral and jewelled flowers had attended and supplemented the great gilded Buddha. *Punch* and a broader, franker French journal lay on the padded satin quilt of So Wing's low bed; a box of Havanas and an abacus flanked his hard Chinese pillow. East and West had met, but not blended or united, in the bandit's temple-fastness on a Yang-tsze island midway between Hankow and Ch'ung-k'ing.

A gong sounded on the river; So Wing's sentinels trumpeted: "All's well. Pass friend."

So Wing smiled sardonically, and laid his flute aside.

The man who plodded panting up the steep, rock-hewn stairway has been much advertised in the West, periodically pictured of late in the London *Daily Mail*, *L'Illustration*, and Chicago's *Sunday Tribune*.

The General was short and fat. Possibly his complexion wronged him; it had the sickly greenish-grey tinge of the confirmed opium-smoker. But his eyes were clear and unabashed, and his well-cut lips did not sag, and, though he was sweating profusely, his slow steps did not falter. And when he spoke his words were neither hesitant nor blurred, nor feverish nor hurried. He was smartly and hideously clad in stiff grey linen uniform that aped and caricatured the service uniforms of several Western armies.

So Wing rose more nonchalantly to greet and receive the visitor, and more at his leisure, than old-time Chinese good manners enjoined. Allies now and then, nefarious cronies even at long intervals, the two Chinese hated each other, and their knowledge that they did was mutual and thin-veiled. And So Wing feared and needed the War Lord far less than the War Lord feared and needed So Wing.

All the prescribed introduction to a courteous Chinese conversation was omitted. The General went to the point at once. And all they said was terse, as brief as the urgency of their common business permitted, and almost jerked.

“I wish to defeat you to-morrow,” he said.

“The notice is too short,” So told him. “You require to make a good display of victory?”

“Naturally.”

“Three days hence.”

“Time presses me.”

So Wing knew that. However despicable his ragged bandit army, So Wing had an excellent intelligent service. His spies were well paid, and their pay never was in arrears. They earned it—in Peking, Canton, Shanghai, Hankow, Hanchow, and other cities, on junks and steamers, in *yamêns* and tea-houses, on mountain path and main road and in jungle. So knew that time pressed the portly General, and menaced him grindingly—and that more than time did.

“Three days hence, or four,” So Wing said smoothly. “If we can arrange it,” he added pleasantly.

The General raised a shoulder resignedly. They both knew that he would not balk their arranging, no matter how intensely he might dislike, and little doubt would, any conditions the bandit leader might impose; they both knew that the War Lord had to come to the outlaw’s heel, and at the outlaw’s terms. The General’s prestige had suffered several successive curtailments of late; nothing short of a notable military success, and an immediate success, would retrieve his damaged fortunes, save his face, preserve his “commission” and his squeeze.

“I would take five hundred prisoners, and carry a thousand heads and three score weapons back to the keeper of our arsenal stores.”

“Fewer matchlocks,” So Wing pronounced. “I have not fifty useless ones left. A hundred heads—to be returned, under sufficient forfeit. I will not give you prisoners. The last were not well treated; and less than half of them escaped and returned to me.”

“Prisoners are essentials.”

“Procure them elsewhere.”

The War Lord left his desire for prisoners in abeyance—for the moment.

“The price?”

So Wing named it indifferently, lighting a cigarette.

The General bubbled over. He could not pay that, or half it. So Wing’s

extortion was impossible.

“As you like.” So laughed. “I, too, value my reputation, General. Our defeat will not cost you less.”

“It would build a Manchu Palace! And it is beyond my power to pay you coin I have not, and cannot procure.”

So Wing shrugged.

The War Lord ran sweat, and fanned himself hysterically.

Another hour they bargained.

So Wing reminded the other that the bandits, whose return had been promised at their last arrangement, but who had not returned, must be paid for; he had counted it in, and he owned that it had a little swelled the present price.

The General wept. He had kept the previous bargain. The stipulated number of prisoners had escaped. That they had not returned to the army of So Wing was not his fault, could not in justice be added to the brushwood he, the War Lord, carried. They had not tarried with him; they had deserted to the Hell-cursed Tuchun of Ho-nan—another eminent War Lord.

So Wing shaved his price a little.

The other offered half of the shaved price.

So Wing laughed.

The General rose to go.

So Wing rose, too, more correctly courteous at last, and bade him gods-speed, even offered to call for tea.

The War Lord sat down again.

Presently the bargain was made, the place and hour of the prepayment agreed, the place, time, and details of the mock battle fixed.

And then—not till then—So Wing called out sharply, and bade the man he had summoned to serve his guest with tea.

They drank—but So Wing did not break a wafer of rice-cake. But the General less nice-livered, deliberately ate two, belched politely, and would have eaten more, had his host pressed him.

They parted with better show of ceremony than had garnished their meeting.

The General thrust his fan back into his belt behind his revolver and

waddled precariously down the now dew-wet and slippery stairs, and So Wing took up his flute.

The bandit's hard face softened as he played. The flute was sweet-voiced. So Wing played it sweetly. He loved its music. He stayed a long time on the temple threshold, draining companionship and tender song from his flute; stayed playing there until the delicate trees that plumed and sprayed the high rock, and the pagoda above them, were etched in black on the orange of the sunset.

The sunset burned hotter; the sky was orange flame; a liquid silver star pricked through it, then another; orange faded to dulled lemon; suddenly all the heavens were apple-green; the myriad stars looked white—but they sparkled, the Heavenly River was diamonds; Sirius grew blue, then bluer, and Mars wore his red.

So Wing played his flute.

A veil of grey swept the sky.

Soft rain dimpled the river.

Wild monkeys that were tame enough, for none would harm them, scurried from their gay gymnastics in the tall pine-trees to their sheltered lairs in the thick bamboos.

Wild geese screamed in anger.

Still So Wing played his flute.

Furious rain lashed the Yang-tsze. It was the Hour-of-the-Dog.

So Wing the bandit rose, called, commanding rice, and went into the temple.

Not all the war that So's bandit army waged was theatrical pretence.

Much of it was honest tooth-and-claw, and to-the-death. None of it was without risk; some bloodshed marked it all.

The bandit sold victory when that best served him. The War Lords did the same; slightly less heinous a crime, perhaps, than it sounds; since few of the foemen knew what they were fighting for, or why they fought except for the wage and rice it promised, and sometimes gave; and private aims rather than patriotism drove some at least of the Generals—selfish personal ambition rather than devotion to China.

But when sincere fighting suited him better than well-paid sham contests and retreats, So Wing fought valiantly, coolly, and to the blood-most end; he led his men far oftener than he directed them from behind them. So Wing the bandit was brave.

“Bandit” and “soldier” have been almost—perhaps quite—interchangeable terms in wide parts of China for centuries; more and more so since the Manchu fell. Is that discreditable, chaotic disorder of a great people’s national existence a little changed, modified now? No Western can state. Can any Chinese? Perhaps it will be purged and then ended—when China, having survived the international, benevolent deluge, has come again into her rightful own.

So Wing, the bandit leader, had tried soldiering—after he had tried and renounced more than half a dozen forms of industry and finance; some of them sedentary, some of them very active; work indoor and out; some of it agricultural, much of it rough. He had plied them all earnestly and with enthusiastic vigour. From each of them he had learned a great deal; and had garnered well and securely all that he had learned. Most of them had been straight industries, one or two had been more crooked. Two had been all but back-breaking; two had been in the outskirts of art. Not one of them but from which he had absorbed, dug, or wrenched, experience, education, self-discipline, and something of culture. And he had kept it all!

Convinced that there was but one difference between being a soldier and being a bandit, but it a determinative difference to him, he had walked out of an army that owed him six months’ pay, and immediately had joined up with the first bandits he had come across. He had taken with him all the arms and ammunition he could carry. His new comrades welcomed him; but showed no surprise. This *volte face* was no stroke of genius on the part of So Wing; it did not even show that he had originality. The occurrence is an every hour one in China’s zones of political trouble and disruption and of scanted crops.

The one salient difference between soldiering and banditry, the difference that had shifted So Wing from the one to the other, was that banditry was the more apt to honour its pay-roll, and offered better chances of promotion.

So Wing promoted himself—and soon.

Several War Lords have done it, too; but they have found the eminence they have seized or created rather persistently wobbly. So Wing made himself a prince of bandits; and the bandit place he won he held. He might be killed—that was not improbable; he might be taken prisoner—he did not intend that he ever should be; but he would not be degraded in rank or superseded. So Wing knew that he should hold his own. Few who knew him doubted it.

At the prearranged day, and in the prearranged way, So Wing was defeated by the short, thick-set General. The General took very few prisoners, and explained it by more or less substantiated statements of the wholesale slaughter he and his brave-and-loyal army had inflicted on the rebels. He produced a goodly bag of trunkless heads, and was congratulated warmly. A few of the bandits' heads were freshly severed; the heads of slack, well-nigh useless bandits whom So Wing had been content to excuse from his pay-roll, most of them better fathers than they had been bandits, for they themselves had consented cheerfully to sell their heads for a price that would keep their women and children in rice and quilts for a number of—perhaps not inconsolable—moons. And not one of them had doubted, as he fell grinning in the face of death, that So Wing would see that his death-price reached his family. So Wing had promised.

Before he fled defeated into his secret jungle fastness So Wing took two prisoners for every one he lost. There was nothing the indignant War Lord could do about it, if he clearly saw it from his dignified position in the rear; for he already had paid. So Wing would not have kept the tryst else, or—if he had—certainly would neither have retreated nor surrendered. And So Wing took a prisoner for every head he lost. None of which greatly mattered except numerically, for the prisoners he took promptly joined the bandit army, the prisoners the General took promptly joined the General's. The War Lord made a brave report to Peking of his new recruits, and did not mention those of So Wing.

The heads—most of them—were returned to So Wing's henchmen presently. Their story is not savoury, but it is a true one. They had lost their trunks, or their trunks had lost them—whichever way you like to put it—long ago. Recent trophy-proof of victory and valour was a rôle each ghastly one of them had played half a dozen times already, and probably would play again. When the General's emissary handed them over to So Wing's they were returned to their brine-chests in an airless cavern adjacent to the rock cellar in which So Wing's poison-gas was stored.

So Wing was not short of ammunition, but it had suited him to have a report spread that he was. And when he had been convinced that the War Lord he hated but trafficked with could not produce in money quite all the price which was the least So Wing would accept, the bandit had consented to take part-payment in gunpowder and bullets. When their day was lost the flying bandits leisurely dug huge, deep holes in the path they fled through; and a number of the General's most trusted warriors followed at a respectful distance, and put their lord's final payment in the earth-holes the bandits had

dug, covered the holes, as promised, loosely with mould and leaves, and hurried back after their fellows; most of them did. A few of them squatted down beside the final payments, and when bandits came back for it, assisted them to dig it up and to carry it, and offered themselves for enlistment with So Wing. Unbelievable? It happens in China not infrequently. Bandits and soldiers are the best of friends often. It's all rather in the family. Many a "regular" army detachment keeps foemen bandits in ammunition as a simple matter of amicable business. The retreating bandits leave coins in the earth-holes, the "regulars" take out the coins and put in the ammunition. Chinese civil war has some striking peculiarities of its very own.

Will a Westernised China keep a saner, more consistent pace? Time will see—if China can be Westernised. Is that written?

So Wing, for all the khaki that he wore, for all the English papers, and some French ones, that he read now, believed not. But So Wing was an instinctive sceptic, and he had not had the advantage of education in England, France, or America. All he knew, even of Western languages and theories, he had learned in China; snatched and paid for as he had been able. Only a Chinese could have done it.

WENTWORTH whistled unwisely, for the razor slipped and cut his chin.

"Damn! That's three!" he said more cheerfully than he had whistled, and lathered his third blood-flow copiously. "No business to shave myself; always was a dud at it. But, Lord! Ed's enough to make me cut my throat. I suppose I'll go. But China! And three kids to lug home!"

And he went. He never had refused his sister Edith anything; few men had.

He grumbled about it, from the day he read his sister's letter, propped up against his shaving-mirror, until the day he reached Hong Kong in as beastly a drizzle as even England could produce at her weather-worst. But Dick Wentworth didn't really mind. He flattered himself that he was in a devil of a temper, "Ed 'ud know it too when he blew in at Peking." But secretly Lady Arnold's good-natured bachelor brother was rather pleased than not. He had a few months to spare just now—he usually had—and he had been at a loose-end's quandary how to amuse himself next when the overseas letter that had made him whistle and cut himself had arrived. And nothing ever had made Dick Wentworth seriously angry yet. When he did fly into a rage, probably he'd do it very thoroughly; his sort do. But it would not be over such a small thing as running over to China and bringing a few infants back to England.

Perhaps he wouldn't scold Ed so very hard, he concluded as his train made its leisurely way to Chên Mên station's roofless platform one morning at ten a few weeks later; he'd be glad enough to see Ed, and Bob, too—jolly decent chap old Bob. As for the three nippers, probably they'd behave like three perfect little angels all the way back. They would, if they took after their father. Good old Bob! But, if they took after their mamma instead, and didn't conduct themselves like exact and abject angels, he'd jolly well drop them overboard. That would fix it—and them. Three of 'em already! And another coming! Lord! Well, all he could say was, he hoped Bob was shaking the pagoda-tree with good results. It was all very fine to be a famous Sino—Sino something and all the rest of it, but when people acquired four nippers in about five years the shakable pagoda-tree desirability was clearly indicated, if you asked him—especially with an appetite for clothes half the size of Ed's.

Let's see, what were the nippers' names? Blessed if he could remember. Ed wouldn't take that any too kindly. Trots! That was it; Trots was the first one. Splendid, he was getting on! Trots had been born in England. He remembered

Trots vividly. Trots had given the vicar a jolly fine punch in the eye at his christening—Trots' christening, not the vicar's. Fine chap, Trots! Hold on! What was his other name—his church one? You didn't christen an infant "Trots." It simply wasn't done. Richard was one of its names (hadn't the resultant mug cost two tenners!), but what the devil was the front one? Blowed if he could remember. He knew he had never met his third nephew. But had he or had he not made the acquaintance of the in-between one? And Wentworth was still grinning over his avuncular deficiencies when the engine arrived at Peking and stopped with a disconcerting lurch and a disgruntled snort of indignant exhaustion at Chên Mên platform.

Trots did not recognise him, nor did he recognise Trots. Unfortunately the baby-inexperienced uncle mistook his youngest nephew for his oldest. Sir Robert grew hysterical with delight. But Lady Arnold very nearly ordered her only brother to retire to the Wagon Lit.

However, it blew over. And Wentworth had an exceedingly pleasant time in Legation Street—until it palled. And when it palled, Wentworth left Peking, and betook him to the Yang-tsze. Having ordered her brother to her all the way from Norfolk, Edith Arnold could not make up her mind to part with her "heavenly triplets" just yet, or whether or not she'd do it at all.

Her husband, and luckily her brother, too, took her indecision calmly. They both had encountered it before.

Wentworth was in no particular hurry. But he wearied of Legation Street. He would wait Ed's pleasure willingly, he said, but he would not wait it indefinitely in Peking.

"The river isn't safe," his brother-in-law cautioned him; "not just now. None of the country is too safe. China isn't the boiling caldron that it is said to be at home; not by any means. In my opinion it never will be. The troubled patches are small and few compared to the enormous undisturbed stretches. But there are upheavals, and they seem to be increasing. The river is quite a little pirate-infested. That is nothing new. I wish you would keep off of the Yang-tsze just at present. It would upset Edith, you know, if you got into trouble. I'd suggest your going home now, and taking her with you as well as the boys, only I know she would not go."

"Not she!" Dick laughed. "No need to worry about me. Might as well see a bit of China now I'm here, don't you think? Shouldn't object to getting a snap-shot of a few pirates—or a few pot-shots at them, for that matter. What are they really like, anyway?"

“Harmless enough, poor devils, a good many of them. Others are cut-throats all right enough, unless you handle them politely. *That* is the one essential over here. Occasionally the Chinese bandit—bandit, pirate, or soldier are much one and the same, you know—is an out-and-out adventurer. As a rule, he is just hungry and desperate. Realise that, if you run against him; speak him fair, give him a share of your spare cash, and ten to one he will play the game with you rather decently. This is a nation of gentlemen; the majority of them gentlemen who can neither read nor write, who haven’t a decent garment, *but gentlemen*. No gentleman relishes being treated insolently. The poorer and the more up against it he is, the more he resents it. Keep that in your mind, and you’ll pull through, nine times out of ten, all right in China. All the same, I really wish you would not go up the Yang-tsze just now.”

But Wentworth would not keep off of the Yang-tsze. To do him (and incidentally Eton and Cambridge) frank justice, he scarcely had heard of the Great River a year ago. The *Sporting Times* rarely mentions the Yang-tsze-kiang. But he had heard a great deal about it since he had come to the Arnolds.

“That’s all right,” he said. “At the worst, you may have to ransom me out; but you won’t, for I shan’t so much as see a pirate—no such luck.”

Sir Robert had no doubt that the paying of a not exorbitant ransom would be the worst that would befall, and that it was most unlikely. So he said no more. It was little use trying to coerce either of them, Edith or Dick, he knew. And he would have liked nothing better than to have gone with Wentworth. The country was exceedingly beautiful now; the river always bewitched him, and Ch’ung Ching Fu called him. To his thinking one scarcely could have too much of Ch’ung Ching.

The steamer chugged along to King-chau, reached I-chang, smoked and snorted its way through morasses of junks, grunted past Kuei-chau. The gorges moved Dick Wentworth acutely, profoundly—amazed him as he had not been amazed before. He was not a dolt, and he had his eyesight. But now the river again was untroubled; the scenery, flat and undistinguished, might have been almost anywhere. On the whole Wentworth was rather bored. The second-class deck, on the other side of the low barrier, was infernally crowded, and the natives packed there kept up an infernal chattering, now guttural, then shrill falsetto; you couldn’t hear yourself think. Wentworth had no special desire to think. Profound meditation was not his favourite pastime. But he felt inclined for a nap, and he was not going to get one. Down in the cabin it was too hot and airless. Up here that cursed sing-song put sleep out of the question. How

the dead in those graves over there slept through it beat him completely. They were Chinese dead, no mistake about that. English corpses would have got up and walked off to a quieter cemetery; he knew his corpse would, even if it had been dead and done for as long as that chap in “Come into the garden, Maud.”

The first-class passengers were not noisy, but a very mixed crew; two or three of each of half a dozen nationalities; most of them merchants, he thought, and a family of missionaries. He wished someone of them would accost him—anyone of them. He’d like to talk and smoke with someone, anyone of them. Being English, and a-travelling, he made no advance to do anything of the sort. He maintained an adamant air of superior aloofness and icy indifference. There might be others beside himself on the steamer, but he appeared to be unconscious that there were. And he amused himself wondering what that short-haired (old-fashioned short hair) lady in the shabby brown serge coat and skirt, the old rain-coat, atrocious hat, and wide-rimmed, thick-lensed spectacles, would say if he offered her his cigarette-case.

The crew was all Chinese—even the Captain was. And so were the jabbering, crowded, and tight-wedged second-class passengers. Wentworth never before in his life had seen so much human flesh to the square inch of space. He wondered amusedly how the devil they did it.

A few Chinese, clean and clad ones, were travelling first-class; evidently well-to-do of the prosperous merchant and official castes. One of them had caught the Englishman’s attention from the first—not an easy thing for any native to do.

He sat absorbed in a book, not far from Wentworth. He sat on a folding stool that one of the crew had brought and placed for him carefully. The fellow was handsome, Dick decided—really handsome. He was scrupulously well groomed in the quiet silk gown of a Chinese gentleman who travelled at his leisure. Nothing about him aped the Western, or attemptedly Western, garb of Young China—although he wore no queue, unless he wore it tucked up under his Chinese, red-braid-buttoned skull-cap. And the queue has not entirely disappeared from North China. The beautifully kept nails of his beautiful hands were as short as the Englishman’s, and not “protected.” He was quietly but assertively a Chinese. His face bent over his book was grave; and yet the man looked debonair. A man of the world, in spite of his petticoats, Wentworth thought; with a strong, resolute chin, a fine, forceful mouth, and—for all its virility and alertness—a scholarly face. He paid no attention to anyone. Except the man who had brought him the stool and then disappeared without a word between them, none of the Chinese paid any attention to him. He did not once, Wentworth noticed, so much as glance toward the left bank or

the right. And both were full of interest just here. And both could be seen clearly; for, except for them, the river was clear of craft; no boat but their own was in sight. Wentworth wondered what the fellow was reading so absorbedly. And Dick saw that the book was uncut double-paged, and that he was reading it from back to front, up and down, and from right to left. How amazing! The Englishman, no reader himself, wondered anxiously what that queerly read, queerly got-up book was about. Printed on some sort of crêpe stuff, wasn't it? And Wentworth would have given a good deal to have known who and what the man was. This Chinese had aroused the idle, and usually incurious, Englishman's interest oddly, and stirred his curiosity extremely. And that puzzled Dick Wentworth every bit as much as the Chinese man himself did.

After a time, in spite of the noise, Wentworth dozed, and then he slept.

Pandemonium woke him.

He woke to a scene so unexpected and queer that for a moment he thought that it must be an ill-conditioned, undeserved, and highly disagreeable dream.

It was no dream.

They were up against it; they were at grips with real life in China. And it looked as if they hadn't much chance of getting the best of it either.

The missionary lady was struggling in the grasp of a brawny and apparently highly amused Chinese. Even when she managed to pull one arm temporarily free, and hit her captor a well-aimed, resounding smack square on his face, he continued to smile at her pleasantly; it is no exaggeration to say that he grinned. He grinned, recovered the woman's arm, and pinned it more securely inside his own. Her face was purple with rage, and if she loved her enemy, as surely every missionary should, her blazing eyes belied her. Overpowered, she was no whit abashed, and, if undeniably at bay and at much disadvantage, not yet defeated—not apt to be defeated while she lived and was conscious, Wentworth thought admiringly. But, Lord, he had had no idea that the meek and lowly missionary was ever like that; an enraged war-horse of a lady-missionary!

The angry woman drew herself back as far as she could—it was not far—and butted her head hard at her yellow captor.

He received it nonchalantly on an amiably up-shrugged naked shoulder.

The woman jerked back her head almost more furiously than she had thrust it at him; her hat slid to a ridiculous angle, her greying sandy hair struggled in unbecoming disorder about her infuriated face, and, in spite of their stems over her ears, her tortoiseshell spectacles fell off and clattered on the deck. An

interested Chinese spectator picked them up, and smilingly offered them to her with a courtly, ironical bow. Once more she wrenched a hand free, and shook a clenched fist at him. He bowed still more politely, and stowed the spectacles carefully in his belt. Twenty Chinese shouted and shook with mirth. Even Wentworth, wide awake now to the fact that the river bandits had come, and in overpowering numbers, smiled. He instantly was ashamed that he had, but he could not help it.

But the woman was English, and so was he. He got up and went toward her and the man whose brawny yellow arms clutched and prisoned her.

“Take your cursed hands off of this lady,” the Englishman ordered as he went. There was no reason to think that the pirate understood English, but Wentworth’s tone was not misunderstandable.

The woman’s captor gave him an ugly look—no other reply.

But another Chinese instantly covered the Englishman with a revolver, accurately pointed.

There was nothing to do—nothing useful. To throw away his own life would avail the missionary woman nothing. But she was English, and so was he. What the devil *was* he to do!

Before he could make up his mind, someone else did it for him.

The quiet, good-looking Chinese who had taken no notice at all of what was passing until now—the only one on the boat who had not been taking a great deal—closed his book slowly, and looked up with a lazy smile. Then he spoke a word, only one, in a low smooth voice; it sounded a careless word, carelessly said, but the pointed pistol fell immediately, the pirates crowding about the Englishwoman drew away from her, all but the man who held her, and he loosened his grasp of her to one more mannerly though still as secure.

The man who had intervened went a few steps toward her, bowing politely to Wentworth, almost apologetically, as he passed in front of him.

“Madame,” he said, in French almost as good as Wentworth’s own, which was poor even for an Englishman’s, “even a heathen Chinese resents and resists being beaten and scratched. The fortunes of War, bandit warfare, I must own, have made you my countryman’s prisoner. Promise to accept the present situation with more decorum, with the distinguished courtesy which, I am sure, is usually yours, and I will insist that the bandit releases you from his actual touch. Give me your word, madame, and he shall obey mine.”

“I’ll see you damned first!”

Damned! In spite of his own rising anger, Wentworth's mouth twitched. Certainly this missionary had quite lost her self-control. No wonder she had! But—damned!

Wentworth caught the Chinese's eyes, and sympathetic twinkles glinted between them and Wentworth's own. For a moment Dick Wentworth felt more camaraderie with the other than he could have believed it possible for him to experience with any Chinese.

If the man could not—as it seemed—understand English, Dick believed that he had understood the important word of the missionary lady's pronouncement; as well he might; there had been unmistakable swear in the woman's voice.

"*Il faut que nous parlons français, s'il vous plait, madame; si vous ne parlez pas le Chinois*," the Chinese told her. His pronunciation of French was atrocious, but his vocabulary was plenty and fluent.

"I'll do nothing of the sort, you vermin!" was the lady's retort.

Apparently no one understood her—except only her countryman, Dick Wentworth.

"*Il faut que nous descendons dans l'autre bateau, madame*," the courteous Chinese continued courteously. "*Est ce que c'est necessaire qu'il vous porte dans ces bras?*"

It was necessary.

And it was done.

Wentworth "went quietly"—and without assistance.

Oddly enough, the bandits took no one else down into their own small slipper-boat that rose and fell close to the captured and stayed steamer's side. But they took a great deal else. The Chinese Captain stood on the bridge and wrung his hands as box after box, bale after bale, was lowered from his deck, down into the pirate's skiff—but Wentworth, quietly watching and keenly alert, doubted how genuine the Captain's dismay and grief were.

Something the pirates took from every European passenger; and they took a good deal from several of the Chinese passengers. But only Wentworth himself and the missionary lady were transferred along with the other loot into the low-lying pirate boat.

The steamer's Chinese crew seemed about equally divided between stolid indifference, and distraught terror. Wentworth watching narrowly—he had

nothing more useful to do—believed that the indifference and the distress both were genuine. He doubted the Captain; and some of the now pirates he recognised as having been among the second-class passengers from the boat's starting at Hankow. But he was convinced that the crew were not in the game.

To be sure, they had shown no fight; no one had except the woman missionary—unless his own futile gesture towards her rescue could be called such. But fight had not been indicated except as impotent folly, and worse than folly. The pirates had swooped down in instant, incontestable victory; to resist and infuriate would have been suicidal.

Why they had taken him, and were bearing him off with them to some mountain fastness or hidden swamp lair, Wentworth understood easily. They knew who he was, of course, and were going to bleed Arnold white for ransom. But why the devil had they dragged the poor missionary along?—whose now lost tortoiseshell spectacles probably were the most valuable possession she had—earthly possession.

That beat him.

"Look here," Wentworth told her as the pirates pulled vigorously away from the distraught steamer, "you be sensible, that's a dear. They've got it on us every way. You be polite to them; it's the only way. I don't want my throat slit; and I bet you don't either. We'll get out of this all right, if we treat them pretty. If we don't, though, there'll be the dickens to pay. You take your tip from me; do. My folks will bail me out, and your Bishop will you." But did the missionaries have a bishop?

"Don't be an idiot!" the odd woman snorted. "The Bishop, indeed! Him! He hasn't much more use for me than I have for him, and that's less than none."

Evidently the missionaries did have a bishop; and as evidently not all of them were always on the best terms with him.

Wentworth persisted. "Tell them you won't take their lives, or try to, and won't scratch or bite them, or jump overboard, or let me say it for you in French to this gentleman here—I can't speak Chinese, as it happens—and you can be a lot more comfortable, don't you know. You can't sit in that blighter's arms for several weeks, you know; and it may be all that before they get our ransoms fixed up—it is sometimes."

"Why don't you jump overboard? Can't you swim?"

"I can swim," Dick told her, "but I do not desire to be shot as I make my first stroke. And I couldn't leave you here alone with them, could I?"

And at last he prevailed on her to give him her promise, she would give none to their Chinese captors.

Wentworth gave the pledge in not immaculate French. So Wing bowed and smiled, said again just one word, and instantly the woman was free of the naked arms that had carried and pinioned her.

“For God’s sake,” she demanded as she sat—a trifle shakily and more than a little stiff—down beside Wentworth on the deck; there was nothing else to sit on, “For God’s sake give me a cigarette.”

“A rum ’un in missionaries,” Dick reflected as he obliged her.

Then he suddenly bethought him to practise what he had preached, and he held out his cigarette-case to So Wing.

So Wing bowed and accepted a cigarette and held a match to Wentworth’s.

"NO," Dick told his sister a few months later, "it's no use asking me just what happened, or how it happened. I was fast asleep. Something jerked me awake, and I saw that hell had broken loose on the boat. And that's about all I know about it."

It was about all anyone, except the pirates themselves, ever knew, unless the Captain of the pirate-boarded steamer did.

It came in an instant, and it was all over in forty minutes; and the steamer was on its way again, with the bandits So Wing had left on her in temporary command; one at the wheel, one standing beside the Captain, and dictating the Captain's commands. And, whether Wentworth's surmise had been right or wrong, the Captain seemed to be taking it all in philosophical good part.

And the pirates down in their own smaller boat pulled lustily and steadily for the shore.

The Englishwoman, sulky and stern, smoked moodily. She did not speak again, not even to Wentworth.

But Dick Wentworth and So Wing chatted amiably in troubled French, and exchanged cigarettes until the bank was reached and the skiff beached.

The bandit chief's cigarettes were much the better, the Englishman owned frankly. And Dick Wentworth was no mean judge of cigarettes, and practised no economy in their purchase.

They journeyed up country far from comfortably; the indignant woman in a rough, dilapidated chair, So and Wentworth on ponies. Some of the band rode ponies and mules; others plodded on foot. Road there was none. They crashed their way through thick, tangled undergrowth, they skirted quagmires, they squelched and sank in slush that spattered them thickly; it was gruesome going, all of it. Tree-tall thorn-bushes stung and tore them; insects of twenty sorts assaulted them. Several times Wentworth's pony stumbled, and twice it fell. Dick Wentworth was as good a horseman as any county in England boasted.

At sunset they halted. Those who had ridden, dismounted, and the missionary lady, protesting bitterly, was dislodged from her chair, and was driven—with much show of courtesy, but with entire firmness—accompanied by Wentworth and So Wing, into a tumble-down shelter that might have been

once a one-roomed dwelling, but smelt like an ill-tended stable.

So Wing snapped out an order; and rough house-cleaning began rapidly, and hurried but earnest impromptu dinner preparations.

“Look here,” Wentworth told So Wing in the glibbest French he could muster, “what’s the use of dragging the poor old woman about like this? You’ll kill her, that’s what you’ll do; and a jolly lot of ransom you’ll get for her then.”

“*Madame est beaucoup plus forte que nous*,” So Wing laughed.

“That’s a silly remark,” Wentworth assured him sharply. “Look here, I’ll tell you what we’ll do. You send her back; send her back as comfortably as you can to wherever she belongs, where her special brand of missionaries hang out——”

So Wing rocked with laughter. Wentworth did not see where the joke came in.

But he was not going to be discouraged, and continued genially: “And I’ll pay her ransom; give you an IOU for it—see here, I’ll give you a cheque, and you’ll find the cheque good, and give you my word I’ll not stop it. You can get it cashed before I have any chance to. How much do you want for her? She isn’t worth much—clothes and all.”

So Wing screamed with delight; laughed until tears ran down his quivering face.

“I am extremely obliged to you,” the woman said icily. “You are insufferably insolent.” Dick gasped his embarrassed astonishment. It had not occurred to him that the old missionary dame might by any possibility know French. “Me a missionary! You are an imbecile as well as a boor, young man.”

“I beg your pardon. I do, indeed,” Wentworth stammered, genuinely distressed.

Then the woman laughed. “But there,” she said, dropping easily into very perfect French, “it was nice of you to offer to pay my ransom—and I shall not forget it. I don’t give a button what you think of my clothes. I dress to please myself, not boys from Clapham and Brixton. I rather agree with you about my looks; I never have considered myself a Lily Langtry. But, me a missionary! That’s the impudent limit. Missionaries are the curse of Asia!”

“I regret my mistake.” It was true.

The bandit broke in quietly, in his slow French. “I protest, madame, that

you are mistaken," he said gravely. "Many of the missionaries are a nuisance and worse. To many of them China is deeply in debt. What we owe the medical missionaries can never be paid. China owes perhaps as much to one English doctor as she does to Sir Robert Hart. His was the first great healing of China's sick. The great hospital he founded in Peking stands there to-day his living monument. China reverences such missionaries as he. The Catholic nuns are holy women. And the best man I know, or ever have known, is a missionary; an American missionary who spends his life for us—in Yün-nan."

"You are a fool," the woman told him.

The bandit bowed non-committally; a discreet reply, since he knew no English. She had not troubled to rebuke him in French.

"What is your name, young man?" she demanded imperiously.

Dick told her.

"Edith Arnold's brother, aren't you? Well, she ought to be proud of your manners. I hope Bob Arnold is! You wait till I see them, young man!—if I ever do," she added with grim significance.

Dick stammered another abject apology, to which the vexed woman paid no scrap of attention. But So Wing's Chinese eyes, sharper than Wentworth's, saw the lurk of a smile at her mouth's corners.

Presently: "It was nice of you to offer to pay up for me," she repeated with an open chuckle.

Who was she, anyway!

"Eldon will like you for it."

Good Lord! Was it possible? Was this Lord Eldon's redoubtable wife? The dominant wife of the richest and most powerful white man in China! No wonder the pirates had thought her worth capturing. But how had she come to be dashing about on the dangerous Yang-tsze in a third-rate, Chinese-captained steamer? And unattended—and those clothes! But, stay, he had heard a woman in Peking say that Lady Eldon dressed like a scarecrow, except when she dressed like a queen. And he'd heard it whispered that the great lady—which Lady Eldon was, by birth as well as by marriage and fortune—could, when she chose, swear like a trooper. *The* Lady Eldon, said to be the best bridge-player in China; and as good a judge of horseflesh as any in England, he'd heard men say at Tattersall's and in the shires; a virtuous rake of a woman who had been the first of her sex to wear breeches in Rotten Row. But a *grande dame*, every hair of her; and no "mixer" except of superlative cocktails. She a missionary!

No wonder she had been furious! And, trying not to, Dick Wentworth tittered.

“Dinner” was served surprisingly soon; dinner for three. The bandit must have had a rare *cache* of A 1 foodstuffs stowed here; and Dick Wentworth rejoiced that the bandit had.

They sat on the ground to eat. The ramshackle place had no floor. There were knives, but no forks. The knives were sharp and bright. The dishes of birch were smooth and clean.

The soup and the egg-plant were delicious, and the fried chicken was many times better than it ever is cooked anywhere on earth except in China and south of Pennsylvania. And there was fizz! It was excellent fizz.

The Englishman and So Wing the bandit fell to with relish.

Lady Eldon tried to eat; she was sensible enough to know that she needed the strengthening of good nourishment. But she only picked and sipped wearily.

Suddenly she burst into tears.

Dick Wentworth, her countryman, was amazed. Nothing ever amazed So Wing. Nothing ever startled him. It took a great deal to surprise him even mildly.

She sobbed, and tearing open her bodice pulled a chain over her head and threw it to the bandit.

“If you are So Wing—I believe you are—you know the value of pearls. I’d like to redeem those—at twice their full value. They were my mother’s. Get me to Chen-tu as quick as you can, no matter how I go,” she added passionately, “and I’ll redeem them at four times their value, and promise you, into the bargain, that not a word of all this ever shall pass my lips.”

So Wing picked up the magnificent rope and examined it searchingly.

“Is the bribe good enough?” she asked him contemptuously. “And how much more do you want to release Mr. Wentworth, and let him go with me? He might come in handy, if we fell foul of a few missionaries.”

Dick Wentworth blushed; So Wing laughed.

“You’ll take my word that I’ll pay what I had promised, and keep silent as well?” Lady Eldon asked a little anxiously.

“Madame said Chen-tu? Was it to Chen-tu that madame travelled when she

was interrupted? It would be a terrible journey. At Chung King you must change into a small, rough native boat, or go on overland most uncomfortably in a rough chair," the bandit said in his slow French, dangling the jewels thoughtfully and affectionately on his fine yellow hand. "Why do you wish to reach Chen-tu, and quickly?"

"My youngest boy—the other two were killed in the war—is very ill in Chen-tu," she answered, "dying perhaps." The bandit put down an untasted wine-glass, and dropped the pearls beside it gently. "His father is in Calcutta. I wired him, and started for Chen-tu the moment I heard. Let me get there. Name your own price. You will trust my word, won't you?"

"For anything, Lady Eldon," So Wing the bandit answered in excellent English. The Chinese of the North often speak it almost without accent. "You shall be in Chen-tu as swiftly as I can make possible. Please eat, make yourself eat, while I arrange for your journey. Eat and drink for your son's sake. We shall start in a few moments." He rose and carried the pearls and put them down beside her plate. "You will owe me no ransom, madame; I will accept none. But hide your pearls well in your dress. I thank you for having given me my feast of their great and exquisite beauty. Others might be ungratefully desirous for more than mere sight and touch of their rare loveliness. I have not seen such pearls before. Hide them well, Lady Eldon."

Lady Eldon glanced down at the pearls incredulously, looked up at So Wing suspiciously.

"Why?" she asked.

"I loved my mother," the bandit said gravely, and went from the shed.

MATRIMONY prospered in the *chia* of Ko Ching-lin.

His young wife pleased him well. He made no demands upon her, except to be happy and to welcome the gifts of kind and of love that he heaped about her. Ko Ssu found it easy, and was well content to do both.

He did not discuss philosophy with her, nor read the classics to her. He gauged her accurately, and happily was quite satisfied with her as she was. Eminent as many Chinese women have been—in government, in art, and in literature, and greatly as Ko Ching-lin admired them that they had been, he neither needed nor wished one such in his own courtyard. A wife, a beautiful and charming plaything, a mother of his sons was all he desired to find in Ko Ssu.

She grew even prettier moon by moon. She had abundant charm—at least for Ko Ching-lin; and it held.

But no child came.

Two years passed; no child came.

It grieved Ko Ching-lin, but Ko Ssu gave it little thought. All but once she took enormities lightly—perhaps the first Chinese wife that had not longed to be a mother: the mother of sons. Probably she would not have grieved, even if she had thought about it. Never had Ko Ssu craved pain. She was sunny rather than stanch. Her persistent—while it lasted—loyalty to So Wing had been less courage of soul and character than sentimental wilfulness.

Over-estimating her in nothing else, Ko believed that she was as riven as he that the son did not come to *chop* the one perfect seal on this otherwise so successful marriage of theirs. He believed—because he could not doubt it—that his own intense longing also was hers, and that her seeming indifference to their childlessness was but her superb hiding of the tiger that gnawed at her heart; the supreme proof of her love for him: that she would not add to his grief and chagrin by showing him hers. And so it came about, once more unique in China, that through her very childlessness, Ko Ssu’s lord loved her the more.

He loved her. Ko Ching-lin loved Ko Ssu more than often befalls anywhere.

But Ko Ssu was not hiding what did not exist. She was very fond of her husband now. If she did not value him at his full worth, she valued him with all her ability. And she greatly valued the perfumed and jewelled life he gave her.

She regretted now that she had told him of her foolish dalliance with a mean peasant-one on the chestnut-shaded banks of the narrowed Yang-tsze and the Niul An Kiang. Better far he never had known it. And there had been no need. Many a lie would have answered him more prettily, more to her credit and enhancement, than the ugly truth had done. A young girl's trembling shyness; that was what she should have pleaded. Ko Ching-lin liked all shy things—flowers that hid and sheltered under their leaves, birds that flew at a footfall, little fur-ones that scurried away from a sudden sound—and women. Or best of all perhaps, if she had been sensible, wise, and compliant from the first. Ko Ssu gazed into her round, polished steel mirror, often and long, and sometimes when she did she pouted at her own pretty face that she had so confided in her husband, called herself imbecile that she ever had repulsed him.

Yet they were not ill-mated. For each contributed abundantly what the other lacked and needed; and each was satisfied with the other. Nor was Ko Ssu's regret of her own truthfulness altogether base. It grew from her affection for him and her wish to hold always her first place in his heart; a sweet, dear thing she longed even more ardently to do than she wished to hold her delightful first place in his indulgence.

An untutored Chinese peasant girl who could neither write nor read, she gave life, and she gave Ko Ching-lin of her best. Who can do more? With the object of her allegiance ever near her, she was incapable of inconstancy, was faithful to Ko Ching-lin in all things—the things that are big and the things that we miscall small. And in truth her inconstancy to So Wing had been little more than inconstancy to a dream. In the early moons, when Ko's kindness and Ko himself began to wear her refusal of him down, she had kept saying to herself, "If only I could forget," not realising at all how nearly she already had forgotten: trying to forget, when she more appropriately and more consistently might have tried to remember.

In spite of the child that did not come, Ko Ching-lin was ardently happy in this last marriage of his. No matter what came, or deplorably failed to come, no other wife ever would come to courtyard of his. If Ko Ssu had died, Ko Ching-lin never would have taken any other to wife.

He was so perfectly happy with his child-wife, and able to make her happy, because they both had charm and he had stanch and fine character; but chiefly

it was because he himself was a child at heart; every Chinese is. And so it comes that disparity in age—provided always that the man is the elder—is less of a marriage-handicap in China than it can be anywhere else.

Ko Ching-lin was happy in spite of his hungry grieving; and Ko Ssu was happy because she did not share his grieving.

But one night, lying in her chamber, Ko Ching-lin murmured in his sleep, and tossing in his slumber's pain threw his arm heavily across her tender bosom—touching her roughly whom he never had touched but with deferent gentleness before. His unconscious blow woke her, and she caught his words.

Then Ko Ching-lin's wife knew his secret grief, and—because it was his, and he had made her young heart fast to his—she shared it.

She did not wake him, but drew his head to her arm, and nursed it so until daylight seeped softly in through the casement's bamboo curtain.

And when he had left her she dressed hurriedly and still riceless ran through the bamboos and cedars, and threw herself in prayer at the feet of Kwan in the blue and lacquered shrine in the high-perched temple whose copper-inlaid silver roofs were reflected, softly painted, in the fern-banked canal's green water.

Kwan Yin-ko would succour her, aid, and powerfully befriend. "Where even a fly is suffering, there will I be," Kwan the beloved Hearer-of-Cries has promised. While Chinese womanhood survives Kwan's promise holds.

After that they gave each other all their confidence. Ko Ssu was a better, stronger woman. Ko Ching-lin even waxed in tenderness of her.

And they set themselves industriously at work to wrench and to bribe Heaven's granting of their wish. All that childless Chinese can do to bring childbirth to Heaven's Well they did without ceasing—and there is much; too much to tell.

Not a god in Ko Ching-lin's *chia*, not a god templed or shrined within their easy journeying, but had new garments—of silk or paint, a new jewel—real or glass, or at least a larger gorge of rich food bestowed upon it.

Ko Ssu wrote prayers to the appropriate gods (most of the gods of China specialise) and burned them, to get them delivered. Fire is the spiritual postal service of the Chinese. She did not brush the characters herself, since she could not write. She paid a priestly scribe to do it for her. She paid him well. And she brushed her "mark" beneath the scholarly characters herself. And she stole away alone, unattended save by her devoted, slave-like *amah* Faithful Duck to

the Temple of the Morning Dew, and flung herself at the feet of the God of One Hundred Children, lit before him the costly tapers that Duck who had carried them took from a lacquered sweet-grass basket, and gave two by two to her mistress. There were twenty tapers. Ko Ssu lit them all—stuck them in the lovely soap-stone incense holders; and when she had prayed a little longer—Faithful Duck praying with her the more dramatically—Ko Ssu drew from her own bosom a tiny, embroidered, jewelled shoe, and laid it on the hem of the god's robe; rose, *ko-t'owed* again, and went from the temple not a little comforted. Was not this the jolliest, best-natured god in China? Had he not a hundred babies in the pannier slung on his back? Win his favour, and he'd give you one of them, turned to flesh and blood through the alchemy of triumphant motherhood, for your very own. And was not the bribe that most pleased him, that oftenest won him, the first shoe your lord had worn? Ko Ssu felt that One-Hundred-Babies-God would not fail her. Her heart sang all the way back to her husband's *chia*. But her pretty teeth chattered now and then as she hastened home, for it was cold on the hillsides in the bitter Plum Month. January wears stiff garments of ice in Sze-ch'uen. O-mei Hsien was cloaked in snow.

Through the Peach Blossom's Month, through the Tree Peony Month, Ko Ching-lin and Ko Ssu, his wife, supplicated and wrought.

But no child came.

When again the juniper was leafless, and the pear-trees' scarlet leaves turned a deeper ruby, and falling laid pools of blood on the garden's withering grass, when the rooks cawing flew southward, and the heron, standing at the river's rimmed edge, ruffled his cold feathers disconsolately, and the carmine of the bay-leaves made noon-time a sunset and incarnadined, Ko besought his wife to keep more closely to her chambers' k'ang-made warmth. But Ko Ssu did not altogether heed him. When he was not close at hand to stay her, she wrapt herself in soft furs and stole across the frozen stubble to kneel at Kwan's altar.

No doubt Kwan heard. But the weeks passed and Kwan did not grant. It is less her office to do that than it is to hear and to comfort, to heal and understand. Always her hundred hands of mercy are outstretched to protect, forgive, and comfort. And often she does grant the petitions that are made to her. But Kwan Yin-ko is not the giver-in-chief of desired babies to the babyless Chinese. That most important, and often urgent, business chiefly is in charge of other gods who attend to it exclusively; as well gods may to the most essential thing in Chinese life. There are several of the "baby-grant gods." Most of them are lady gods: a sort of "fairies' midwives" who divide their time between the delights of On High and the human necessities of China's

populating. Some of them are Taoist deities, several are Buddhist, at least one is of the Mohammedan hierarchy. Chiefest of them is the Niang Niang Sen, so head-and-shoulders above the others, so rarely failing, never failing if besought aright, that it seems odd that non-expectant but greatly wishful Chinese mothers ever supplicate the smaller fry of the heavenly baby-granters. But for one thing, Niang Niang Sen's temples are fewer, less generally accessible. For another thing her fees are high. No prayer of tattered red rag will move Niang Niang Sen. She charges in guineas, gold ones, and she rings them testingly on her altar steps before she cures. The Chinese are thrifty. "Why," they reason, "go to Harley Street until your less exorbitant local general practitioner has failed you?" Why indeed?

All the gods in general practice on and near Mount O-mei seemed to have failed Ko Ching-lin and Ko Ssu. So, when spring came back to Sze-ch'uen, when the violets lay fern-edged pools of blue and jade on the fast melting snow, and early almond flowers perfumed the warming air the eager *ta-jên* and his wife journeyed to the gold sands of the mighty Yang-tsze, and they journeyed into Yün-nan, pilgrims to the famous temple and the never-failing privileged altar of Niang Niang Sen builded on a hillside where the Niul An Kiang flows into the Yang-tsze.

SO WING did not go all the way to Chen-tu with Lady Eldon; he had other and less unselfish business that pressed, and the bandit leader was a busied man. But he set her far on her way, kept beside her until they reached a stretch of more settled country, less brigand-infested, and with telegraphic possibilities to Shanghai. Troubled as all China was in this springtime of the Year-of-the-Cow, the Chinese postal service still then was one of the best; the best in the world some English travellers, who have trusted and tested it, claim.

The Englishwoman had said, “no matter how I go.” They went roughly. But her eagerness never flagged, nor her endurance. So Wing eased it for her what he could; it was very little.

They rarely spoke to each other. The jolt and haste of their going needed all their breath and all their attention. The stoutest of the hardened men and beasts that So had selected for their companions in flight were pumped hourly. It was flight, slow flight, but pushed and speeded magnificently.

And what had either to say to the other?

He had set the pace, and chosen their way. She had gone beside him, silent, and without comment.

The night before they parted she drew her mule close to his mare, and said: “I want you to take my pearls, and send them to me, when you can safely. Send them to the bank in Shanghai or Hong Kong, as you like. I am afraid to keep them on me after you have left me.”

The bandit knit his brow consideringly.

“No,” he decided after a time, “on the whole, they are safer with you, I am sure. You will be well escorted and well protected until you are with your own country-people. The head-man I am leaving with you, I can trust. He has my command. And he has a password that would keep you unmolested by every bandit-band in North China. I think that you will encounter none. Whatever you encounter, you will be safe, I give you my promise. But I am never safe for long. A bandit’s life always is in peril. I go a long way when I leave you, and I go alone. I may reach my goal; I may not go far in its direction. My corpse would be rifled to its last thread. The lovely jewel is safest with you. But keep it hidden. Do not even glance down towards its hiding-place.”

“No fear,” Lady Eldon promised.

It was the most they spoke together from their starting to their parting. And until the parting came they did not speak again.

But when they parted, and So Wing would have left her with a formal Chinese salutation, she called him back to her, deliberately lingered for the first time since she had tucked up her skirts about her, and climbed unassisted on to the mule that Dick Wentworth held at the shed's door.

The Englishwoman held out her ungloved hand, and when the bandit gave her his she clasped and held it. And when she slowly released it her eyes filled with sudden brine.

"So long!" was all she said—but she spoke it softly.

Then she went her way; So Wing the bandit went his. And neither looked back.

He had given her several days of his busied life, and had given her such meagre creature comforts as he could, and closely guarded security in a most dangered part of turbulent North China. And she had not paid him or his even one brass *dam*; nor offered him one.

Her breeding held. And she thanked him best by not offering him the tawdry thanks of inadequate words.

And the Chinese bandit, well-bred when her ancestors had been woad-daubed savages, bowed again, and speeded her with a cordial smile.

And so met and parted the White race and the Tawny race that have most in common. There have been many such meetings and partings in China.

So Wing did not return to his own cohorts in the pestilent swamp-lands for some weeks, nor to his temple fastness in the Yang-tsze. His business at both would keep—must keep for the present. He had business in far Yün-nan, and grimmer business somewhere between Chiao-Chia T'ing and Tung-Ch'uan Fu, if he could find it. Both had waited long enough.

He would decide and conclude them now. He would go alone and now to a vengeance he had vowed long ago at his mother's grave, and to a love-pact, if still it held there, where he and a girl-one had made it.

He turned him to them.

To the murder he would do he went with the sharper appetite, the keener, sweeter, greater joy. But he had not forgotten his little child-love who had stooped her so graciously to his ragged-peasant wooing; and his face was very

tender as he thought of Q’ūo Ssu; Q’ūo Ssu among the larkspurs and golden-rod; Q’ūo Ssu under the banyans. When he had killed, and in killing avenged his mother, he would find some impoverished member of a distinguished family glad to adopt him for a sufficient price; that he might have name and clanship when he offered himself to Q’ūo Chung as a desirable son-in-law. That was essential, whatever maid of good condition he applied for, in every part of China. The social rehabilitation of a name secured, he would take a wife, and start upon the second definite stage of his ambition’s long and glorious journey. Q’ūo Ssu should be that wife, if she still wished it. Perhaps she already was wed. Indeed the years that had sped since their young love-trysting made it almost a certainty. Yet he felt that she was not. She had been very young, strong of her own purposes, and he had observed that the pretty creature ruled her father. Did she think to rule a husband some day? And would she? So Wing smiled indulgently, not untenderly, at the thought. Such soft rule need shame no man.

First he would find his mother’s despoiler; find and kill. That done, he would propose himself to Q’ūo Chung, if Q’ūo Ssu were still a maid.

But again he did not catch his quarry. The scent he’d come on proved a false one. It had been a chance scent; faint and faintly indicated. For even now So Wing did not know who had been his father, or where that other’s home-place. But while So Wing lived he would search for him; no clue so slight but he would track it.

Having failed—this time, he went on to Ku-chai. For he was near it; and as well discover if Q’ūo Ssu still lived, and if she still waited for him.

He sent no word of his coming. To whom should he send, and by whom? He would arrive in quiet; look, and decide, before he announced to any that he was there. The years had taught So Wing caution; banditry had, too: caution and the often value of retreat; and that sometimes its uses were sweet.

He would pursue his keener quest whenever opportunity served, or could be made. In the meantime he was almost at Q’ūo’s *chia*. Now that he was so near, it would be an economy of time to see how his Yün-nan wooing had speeded in his absence. And, too, he would look, he himself unseen, before he definitely took the most serious of all leaps.

So Wing was cautious; but the man’s handsome face was tender as he paused to rest at a temple doorway, not two *li* from the old banyan-tree in whose shade he had trysted with flower-faced Q’ūo Ssu.

IN A YÜN-NAN COURTYARD *CHAPTER XXXIV*

IF KO SSU went cheerfully with Ko Ching-lin to her old home, secretly she went a little reluctantly. The thought of going reminded her of So Wing, whom for some time until now she had quite forgotten. What if he had returned there with some preposterous thought of finding her still languishing for him in her father's home, of taking up their silly, infant episode where it had been broken off, of making some claim upon her? That would be an awkwardness—Ko Ssu disliked inconvenience of every sort.

However, her perturbation was not great. She had told Ko Ching-lin the foolish long-ago story—all but So Wing's name, and Ko Ching-lin had brushed it aside with a generous gesture, almost as he might have brushed a cobweb from before her face when they went together on the hillside. What her dear lord had dismissed once, he would dismiss again. But she hoped they'd not chance upon So Wing. It was most improbable.

Ko's wife journeyed back to her father's home like a queen. Ko Ssu liked that. And her people gave her great welcome. They had prepared for her, and for her lord the very rich *ta-jên*, greatly. Rugs of hide and of felt-embroidered felts lay on the great hall's stone floor that until now always had been bare and not always swept. There was a scroll upon the rough stone wall. There were stools, and here and there a cushion. The magpie had a fine new cage, and sulked and scolded that he did—homesick for his rough and shabby old one. There were tall tawny lilies in an unglazed grey and blue jar, long trails of berried ivy wreathed about the smoke-hole, the Stove-god was newly painted, and had a fine new wife. All the Q'ūos and all their retainers wore their best clothes; many of those garments brand new ones bought in Yün-nan Fu itself for the occasion.

Almost a moon Ko Ching-lin and Ko Ssu stayed gracious guests in the simple *chia* of her father. Having come so far to make such important supplications at the Niang Niang Sen temple, Ko Ssu intended to do it thoroughly; and Ko Ching-lin was well minded that she should.

If the roughness of her old home and of the life she used to share struck her, Ko Ssu gave no sign. It did indeed strike the pampered wife of enormously rich Ko Ching-lin. Secretly she shuddered at it: so soon and so cordially does a woman take to luxury, and claim it as if a very birthright, forsaking old poverty and lesser comforts with a passionate eagerness that almost disintegrates old-time memories.

She knew how she should dislike to live the old life in the old home again. But she did not dislike being its guest for a few weeks. She liked running about her old playgrounds, she liked being with her mother, with the old granddam, and with all her brothers. She loved being with her father. Perhaps best of all she loved going into Mr. Kwan's courtyard, sitting there with him, chattering to him, hearing what he said to her, dancing about the lovely courtyard as she used to do, stealing blossoms and fruit while he sat and smiled at her little affection-licensed thefts, in his old way.

She liked being with them all again—for a time. They all rejoiced to have her.

If there was not much in common between educated, travelled Ko Ching-lin and his young wife's unlettered, less cultured relatives, he fitted himself with silken courtesy into the less polished simpler ways of their primitive home-life's daily uncouthness.

Q'ūo Chung's joy and pride were almost more than he could carry with dignity. But (though she never spoke it, or any other suspected it—unless childless Ko Ssu a little did) it was Q'ūo Zat who found the greatest happiness in Ko Ssu's being with them.

And Q'ūo Zat did not always have to scratch her own back now.

Marriage (and the quality of the man who had taken her to wife) had sweetened Ko Q'ūo Ssu, given her womanliness, had made her tender to her mother.

The greatly important business that had brought them into Yün-nan was not neglected.

At sunrise and when the day-star was sinking slowly toward sunset Ko Ssu sought Niang Niang Sen in her temple and threw herself at Niang Niang Sen's feet, laid rich gifts on the goddess' votive-table, burned her many prayers of sweetened punk-sticks.

So Wing sat down on the temple terrace, glad to rest and glad to gaze. He had walked far; strong as best whipcord though they were, and had been ever since his earliest boyhood, his all but tireless muscles were a little wearied. The view was beautiful; Chinese eyes always are hungry for more and still more beauty, their appetite for beauty ever increasing by what feeds it.

Down at the low hill's green foot the blue, white-foamed Niul An churned rapturously into the yellow Yang-tsze that scarcely stirred to receive it, and was lost—as countless rivers are in the insatiable bosom of the Great River.

So Wing loved the Yang-tsze. He had watched again and again its broad emptying into China's Yellow Sea. He knew its gorges and its implacable rapids; loved even more than he feared them, he knew its quiet, friendly reaches, the pagodas and cities on its banks—knew well a dozen of its tributaries. He knew its peoples; the water-folk who lived on it and by it, the citizens and villagers and farmers that lived beside it. Some day, he planned, he would see it at its infant source in cold Tibet. He liked to watch lesser rivers pour their lesser waters in willing tribute into the Great Sovereign of all Rivers; China's greatest, most important waterway—forgetting neither the Ho Hang Ho nor the Canal—the Yang-tsze that drains a continent, the most commercially important of all earth's rivers; bridled here and there, cajoled, circumvented, and navigated, but for ever unconquered and unconquerable. To him it told countless stories, quickened a thousand thoughts, stimulated ambition; China's majestic, stupendous river rising where no man has seen it, rising in a gentle dew-fine trickle from beneath a thirstless thistle in Tibet's stony flat, or, perhaps, up in the unexplored ice-lands beyond, looping down prodigally to moat and buttress impregnable, unconquered Nosuland, to laugh and greet it, looping down to Yün-nan, looping back to Sze-ch'uen, journeying on like the Imperial thing it is, piercing its way through mighty rocks and mountains, alone and unapproachable for uncharted, uncounted miles, virgin, craftless, undefiled; tumbling, rushing, slow, leisurely, almost motionless—on to Ch'ung Ching Fu, on to Wu-shan Hisen, past I-chang, past Hankow on to Nan-king; thick with craft, crowded (sometimes slimed) with human life, great imperial sinew of imperial China, invincible, ever pulsing, on and on to the sea.

River of tragedy, river of wealth! Blood-stained from a thousand battles. River of a thousand colours!

Indescribable.

Across the river—narrow here, for all the Niul An swelled it—silver-throated thrush sang lustily, very sweetly in a score of jujube-trees; blue and purple hills rose above it. So Wing could see a dozen villages dotted at the river's side. Willows dipped their delicate branches in its coolness and it caressed them.

On the river's near bank children were playing. A sweetmeat seller passed a blind musician on the narrow footpath, offered a dumpling, and bought a flute song. Donkeys, mules, and a shaggy pony browsed the sweet-grass. A

family of hens and a family of pigs picked and nosed busily.

Yonder, hidden behind a fold of this hillside, was the homestead of Q’ūo Chung. So Wing could not see it. But he could find it. Presently he would go there.

The temple, for all its fame and all the power godded within it, was small and plain; stoutly built but scarcely ornamented, grey-white, not too well kept. But it was tapestried with early roses so thickly that the jasmines and honeysuckles to breathe and to blossom had to thrust through the red-stemmed rose-vines and festoon and cascade down from the roof’s edges as best they could; and only the naked doorway told clearly of what material the little prayer-house had been built.

So Wing turned and looked inside; and rose to enter it. Emancipated, agnostic, yet he was minded to give Niang Niang Sen a scented taper. Just for luck—and, too, for old custom’s sake.

But a girl knelt alone at the altar; So Wing drew back. A childless wife praying for a son. She should keep her solitude there at the feet of Niang Niang Sen. The place, the childless wife and her prayers were sacred.

The gods grant her the son she craved! So Wing wished it devoutly as he drew back softly.

But before he could turn away, the kneeling woman moved a little; he saw her face.

Q’ūo Ssu had wedded!

Well—he had half expected it; or he had believed that he did.

Let it go. Why should she have not? The gods forbid that he who had been her playmate in young love-play—it had been no more than that—should grudge her her wifehood, or the ease and wealth that it showed to have heaped on her. Her rich silken garments showed it so.

The gods be with her! Kwan befriend her while her life lasted her.

Wedded but childless!

He prayed all the gods to grant her a son.

As for him—there was many a maid in China, moon-faced, fair and gentle. He would find him a bride when the threatening, gathering upheavals were quietened for a time, and he would keep her gently and hold her dear. But he laughed at himself softly, as he went quietly down the temple steps—went quietly not to disturb a woman who prayed—laughed at himself because he

knew that his heart ached a little.

He would not go to Q’ūo Chung’s *chia*. He would go about his business; it was abundant, and it was pressing enough; and he would attend to it scrupulously and with rigour. He would back to his work on his island.

But first he would speak with his friend the American missionary, who was a man and a saint and China’s friend.

A man was coming through the cedars—a well-dressed man, evidently in no hurry, evidently waiting. The husband of course—waiting for the young wife who prayed there in the dusky, dim-lit temple room.

So Wing hoped he was kind to her, did not reproach or punish her that they lacked a son. Probably he was fond of her; So Wing had seen her jewels flash as she knelt at the altar. The man provided her generously; and he waited himself to guard her home when her prayers were paid and done. A husband, so evidently a rich man, would have left the wife to the tendance and escort of servants did he not dote upon her. So Wing smiled, and was glad.

The men met at the foot of the Temple’s threshold steps: a very sacred place—the last short stretch of the many long ways that led into the temple of a deeply loved goddess, the “privileged” prayer-place of distressed Chinese womanhood. Each moved softly, went slowly, as men who reverenced motherhood, reverenced the god-one who supplicated might bend down in mercy and grant it, reverenced and pitied the suffering of women.

Each drew back a half pace courteously to let the other more conveniently pass him.

They had not seen each other in long years.

Ko Ching-lin did not recognise So Wing.

So Wing instantly recognised Ko Ching-lin.

The day was warm; Ko Ching-lin had loosened a little the fine shirt from his breast. So Wing saw the four almost heart-shaped moles below Ko Ching-lin’s throat.

And the bastard knew that he looked at his father.

SO WING'S clinching hand sought the knife in his girdle—and then the hand fell trembling but knifeless at his side. He would kill, and curse as he killed, the father who had begotten him. But he would not stain the temple's threshold with dastard blood. He would not desecrate the shrine-house of her who bent a pitying ear to the prayers of would-be motherhood. His one-time master, whom he had respected and obeyed for years, should be the unmercied victim of his own surging filial rage; he would wash and avenge his mother's shame in the pooling death-blood of Ko Ching-lin; but not here, not now—not at the prayer-house of a sacred god, not within sight and hearing of that slender, longing creature kneeling there in supplication; an innocent girl whom Ko Ching-lin had wedded, no doubt, to companion and serve with her youth and fresh beauty his gathering years when his whim chose, and to bear him the sons he lacked.

He held her guiltless. Q'ūo Chung had given her to Ko Ching-lin, and she had but obeyed. Why not? It was the honourable Chinese way. Time had tested it and had proved it good. And Chinese So Wing respected and approved it. It was so that he would have his own wife come to him—not by her own brazen impulse or choice. And what other way had Q'ūo Ssu had? What else could she have done? He did not blame Q'ūo Ssu. They had been but children, he but a green-raw stripling. Their "love" had been but children's play. He thanked the gods that it had been clean play—disobedient, silly, undignified, but clean.

The gods guard her!

But it galled. Q'ūo Ssu—whom he had held in his arms, whom he had kept faith with, journeyed so far to see, on whose tender face he had lain his cheek in his first passion (still his only passion) and reverently—soul and body the chattel of Ko Ching-lin! Ko Ching-lin who had made So Wei an outcast and soiled! Ko Ching-lin whom now, in the Pomegranate moon of this year of the Tiger, he would kill!

His gorge rose, filling his mouth with sour bitterness. He turned and reeled away, quivering and chilling with nausea.

When it had passed, So Wing threw himself prone on the flower-spangled grass and sobbed.

The stars came out on the velvet of the sky's deep blue. The River of Heaven sparkled "like a swarm of fire-flies tangled in a silver braid." Night lit

her lantern which Westerns call the moon, hung it high, and turned it up to its radiant full, before So Wing rose and went on his quiet way.

His face was calm—calm and clear as an ivory a master's hand had carved in Ning Po. His brain and his heart were as calm—but relentless as the hungered panther that eats of the first flesh it has clawed from some still living prey. His purpose held, was even more than it had been. He had reprieved Ko Ching-lin for a briefness. And for it that he had Ko Ching-lin should taste but a bitterer death, pass down to the Yellow Springs through a road of crueller lacerations, sharper, more lingering tortures.

But Q'ūo Ssu should not see the slaughter. Had she grown to her lord in fondness? It was not improbable. The *ta-jên* had a charm. He himself, serving him as a coolie, had loved him, had grieved and hesitated to leave him when seductive ambition had urged. Whether she loved this lord they had given her to, or loved him not, she was woman; and because of that, not through So Wing, the son of So Wei, should she see human bloodshed and death-agony. He would spare Q'ūo Ssu because she shared the sex of his mother—and because they, he and Q'ūo Ssu, had played at love together when they were children.

But he had no thought to spare Ko Ching-lin. Had the thought come, the soul of So Wing could not have stomached it. But no hint of such thought came.

He was galled to the core of his being. He had taken the wage of Ko Ching-lin, eaten his salt. On days of processional and ceremony he had worn the livery of Ko Ching-in. It galled. And he was Ko Ching-lin's son! It was Ko Ching-lin—rich, honoured, respected, the husband of little peach-faced Q'ūo Ssu, who had despoiled and tortured his mother. Gall! Gall!

He had delayed—for the sake of two women, and in homage of Niang Niang Sen the Motherhood-god. He would never renounce.

Ko Ching-lin could not escape him. Ko Ching-lin always would be easy to find by any who sought.

But So Wing did not intend to delay his slaughter long. He had waited for it too long, planned it, dreamed it, pictured it too often, too devoutly to put it from him but briefly now that he had reached it.

So Wing walked more briskly. He was warm again. Vengeance lay sweet in his mouth. His face was smooth and placid, but under their heavy ivory lids So Wing's eyes glittered in anticipation. All his being was glad and rejoiced that he was about to kill his father, Ko Ching-lin.

In China, patricide is the foulest of all the crimes, the one that most surely, irrevocably, cruelly damns its perpetrator—except only matricide.

Presently So Wing hummed a smooth little tune as he walked on happily. Several times he stopped to smell a flower that grew on wayside hedge or slope; smelt it lingeringly, and caressed its delicate petals with a careful, loving finger. The wild-white roses are sweetest at night; and the Chinese peasants say sweetest of all when the Night Lantern is full of oil and swings high in the sky.

The moon was still high, lighting and showing the earth-scene, though more softly, as clear as day, when So Wing reached the wall of Mr. Kwan's red-roofed home.

Probably the gate was unbarred. Mr. Kwan rarely barred or locked or bolted. All his doors had heavy bars—they'd not have been number-one Chinese doors else. But the so-Chinesed missioner's bars were for ornament and manners; were there because it was "custom"; were scarcely ever used, because Kwan Yin-ko's American brother willed it that all who would should come to him freely and undelayed at every season and hour.

Even were the wall-door by chance fastened, one good thump, at the most three, on it would bring Tin Bong to unchain and unbar. But So Wing preferred to climb over the wall.

The wall was high, but So Wing was agile, and, too, he knew where a gnarled old walnut growing by the pathside would make him an excellent ladder.

So Wing swung himself up into the tree, and looked over into the missioner's *chia*.

The courtyard was bathed in beauty.

Little more than two of its sides were enclosed by dwelling-rooms. The American had added to his house a bit at a time as need or whim dictated, and as his leisure served. Probably he would add no more rooms to it now. It already was generously provided with guest-rooms. To keep open-house was his delight. A missioner friend who unexpectedly came on a visit could bring his wife, his children, and a few other friends with him without overcrowding Mr. Kwan's hospitable *chia*. His family would not increase; and there were no women-ones in it to guard and seclude. One side of the courtyard was bounded by the home's beautiful carved outer wall, over which low-branched trees leaned and nodded, through whose carving's loop-holes vines twisted in and out and wild flowers peeped. One of the courtyard's open sides led through a

moon-gate into the outer jade-courtyard where hundreds of tiny blossoms grew between the flagstones that covered it all except for the red-stone edged lily-pool.

Lanterns hung at all the doorways—each room had its own doorway, though none its door—and hung down from the inflected red-tiled roofs. Some of the lanterns were lit even now, late as the hour was, bright the moonlight, and although the missionary was alone—had no guests and expected none. For the American was as beauty-hungry and as greedy for picture and effect as the Chinese are.

This inner courtyard's sparse furniture all was beautiful and costly. Master hands had carved the long low bench, the stools, and the bench-like table, book and pipe strewn, close to the missioner's hand. There were joss-sticks burning in a great soap-stone incense-holder standing in front of his seat. He loved their pungent sandal-wood smell, and liked its heavy artificial perfume mingled with the heavy fragrance of roses and orange flowers, jasmine, and heliotrope.

The courtyard was paved with roughly smoothed green stone; but it boasted a great square porcelain arch of wistaria, several sumptuous flower-beds, and a score of tree-tubs, and many pots of deep-scented flowers in bloom; clumps of tall ferns, and several fan palms.

It sparkled and glowed in the moonlight, and with a thousand ever-darting fire-flies.

"Mr. Kwan," greatly at ease on the low stone bench, wore sensible, padded, very comfortable, somewhat gaudy Chinese shoes, and a long soft robe of dark blue silk. He nursed a violin on his lap.

So Wing gave a Chinese war-whoop—the "kill! kill!" of the rougher banditry, and to-day often the war-cry of the *Koumintang's* rabble "armies," and dropped.

"Your money or your life," he hissed, bearing down on Mr. Kwan.

The missionary looked up with a lazy smile.

"Look out for the poor old fiddle, you ruffian," was his welcome to the night-time marauder. "It's on its last legs, I'm afraid. Hurt but a hair of its head, scratch one scratch on the beautiful varnish of its elegant belly, and it's your life that will be taken, and it's I who shall deprive you of it." He made room beside him for So Wing, lifting the old violin into safety on the table. "Well, how goes it with you, my friend?"

This was not So Wing's first intimate visit to Mr. Kwan, though his first to Mr. Kwan's courtyard.

Dearly as the American loved this Yün-nan home he had made him, close as he kept to it for the most, he often journeyed from it when he heard of special want or need. Famine called him far afield to his Master's business again and again. He had met So Wing at bitter famine time in and about Talifu; had seen how freely the Chinese gave, how feverishly yet wisely he worked. They had worked side by side for three terrible months. The bond between them had knit and had held—grappled them close in the common brotherhood of man.

Again and again So Wing shared his latest harvest of gold with Mr. Kwan—always giving, never taking. About where the money So brought him, to use as he would for Chinese that were hungry, to use for mothers who were widows and poor, came from the American did not deceive himself, or pretend to himself that he did. He did not approve of banditry. But he had come to see it almost with Chinese eyes. He knew that So Wing took toll for those who were in want, even more than he did for himself. He believed that So Wing never had taken a *cash* or a grain of rice from any who could not well spare it—and never would. He knew that nothing he could urge would alter or modify So Wing's method of life, ways of industry. He had known So Wing to hurry across half China to reach and to aid where famine was sore. He could not condone banditry. But he respected So Wing the bandit, whose succour never was spared when mothers and children hungered, and who, the missionary believed, never had robbed or misused a woman, or had failed to help when he could a fatherless child. The American respected So Wing. And he did not judge him. He believed that to the House-of-Many-Mansions many roads led. And he dared, not only to hope, but to believe, that So Wing the Chinese bandit would be welcomed into Our Father's House. For the very soul of him he could not see how it could be otherwise.

They talked late that night out there in the missioner's courtyard, sitting together facing the jade-pool on the other side of the round moon-gate.

They played before they parted. The missionary's beloved violin was at his hand. So Wing's flute always was tucked somewhere in his garments. And both were "music mad."

The flowers in the courtyard nodded their sleepy heads in perfumed applause as the music sweetened the courtyard.

At the Hour of the Ox's mid-time they parted—to meet again neither knew when.

So Wing took away with him the old missionary’s blessing, and left behind him, lying beside the American’s violin, a brocade purse heavy with notes and gold.

IN A YÜN-NAN COURTYARD *CHAPTER XXXVI*

SO WING had had a whim to go again to the high-growing banyan on a hillside where he had told Q'ūo Ssu that he loved her, had plighted young, reckless troth with her before he had gathered her up in his strong arms, and carried her in tender triumph back over the rock-pierced stream she had perilously leapt on sturdy Fan Tan.

Why not?

He must hang about here until he again ran across Ko Ching-lin, Ko Ching-lin unattended, unaccompanied; and slew him: accused and cursed before he killed him.

He must fill the slow intervening hours as best he might. Looking back, smiling at old days and at a boy's foolish dream would serve as well as any other way. He did not think too well of himself that he had the raw inclination. But he had it, and was half-whimsically minded to indulge it.

The place had not changed. The jagged rock still pierced the perilled, gurgling streamlet. The old banyan-tree spread its shade as wide and deep over the same shrubs and wild flowers. On the south all the hillslope was yellow with the gold of the ripened rape. Nothing was changed but So Wing—and Q'ūo Ssu was not there.

So Wing bent down and gathered a spray of musk-scented columbine, held it gently in his fingers, smiling at it ruefully.

Someone was coming. The padded footfall almost was noiseless, but So Wing's quick ears heard it, and heard the clearer, though soft, sound of rich silk garments that the golden-rod and the wild tobacco leaves caught at as the wearer passed them.

So Wing instantly knew that it was Ko Ching-lin. Something told him. He put down the bit of columbine gently, careful of it even in his sudden, gruelling passion, relentless, joyous murder-lust, and rose to greet his father.

Ko Ching-lin came carelessly on. He did not even notice the stranger until they were face to face.

Then Ko saw the other, a handsome, stern-faced man. Ko Ching-lin thought that he looked distinguished, and beyond doubt refined and cultured.

But still Ko Ching-lin did not recognise So Wing; did not even recognise that this was the same man who had passed him a few days ago on Niang Niang Sen's temple steps; had no hinted recognition even, in this stranger, as elegantly garbed as he himself in the silk and brocade robes of old China, of naked So Wing his once-coolie boy. That had been years ago; and Ko Ching-lin long since had forgotten So Wing.

The *ta-jên* made a courteous salutation, and said affably that the day was gracious to them in its warmth and in its radiant beauty.

So Wing smiled slowly. Ko Ching-lin, though not regarding him attentively, far more interested in the scenery, thought he smiled peculiarly.

So Wing smiled, took a soft step or two softly, went near to Ko Ching-lin, and spat in his face.

Ko recoiled with a horrid cry of rage. He was defenceless, and he knew it. The sinewy younger man, with probably half his own years, had thrice his own strength, Ko could not doubt. And Ko, as he approached, had seen the beautifully carved hilt of a dagger worn jauntily in the other's sash, had noticed the "toy"—but probably deadly—revolver openly worn at the man's side. Ko Ching-lin was unarmed.

But Ko Ching-lin was game. Except to the Manchu on his Dragon throne, to the gods in their temples, to Ko Ssu in her loveliness and lure, he never had bent his knee, never had temporised or asked quarter. He did not now.

"Are you a madman?" he hissed, "or only a blackguard cut-throat?"

"I am a cut-throat. Yours," So Wing added with another colder, slower smile. "And I am your son."

A madman then! Ko Ching-lin's anger fled—though that spittle in his beard was not easy to forgive. His flamed face cleared and softened pityingly. Never a Chinese gentleman may withhold compassion and pardon from the sorely afflicted.

Then he saw the vivid shred in So Wing's black hair; an old memory stirred feebly.

So Wing the coolie's head had been shaven half back to his queue when he had been the servant of Ko Ching-lin. A fresher memory must have stirred, stirred more sharply, had the master ever seen the tell-tale lock on his servant's forehead. But the master never had.

"You have forgotten me. Once I was your slave, coarse-clad when clad, branded with your servant-livery, coarse-fed, hard-worked, cheap-paid."

Slowly Ko Ching-lin remembered him, but not his name. The name would have told him nothing. There are more than a million Chinese surnamed So. Nor had it been So Wing's mother's. The driven woman had filched it.

"Look!" So Wing commanded, wrenching coat and vest from his throat.

Ko Ching-lin saw, and blanched. This indeed was some kinsman. It gave the madman a closer, holier claim.

"We are indeed of the one distinguished clan," Ko said kindly. "I shall be extremely gratified if I can serve my kinsman. But in your amiable graciousness permit that I assure you that our kinship, which I rejoice and am proud to recognise from the indubitable birth-mark of our family, on your flesh as on my own, is not the kinship of father and son. I wish that it were!" Ko added with great politeness. He had no wish to die. He very much wished to live. And he was sorry for his mind-distorted kinsman. "Doubtless you have mis-seen me for a more distinguished one of our eminent clan, one whom I have the fragrant honour to resemble in features and in years. We all much resemble each the others, we of the noble House of Ko. I would that I had a son so distinguished and amiable. But that the gods in their better wisdom have denied me—as yet. I have no son."

"You lie! Foul despoiler of women! Unclean begetter of bastards. Son of a toad! You have a son—a son accursed from his birth, accursed by your selfish sinning, as by it his mother was given to misery, shame, homelessness, starvation." So Wing drew out his knife, and licked his lips tauntingly as he ran an appraising finger along its sharpness.

Ko Ching-lin regarded the dagger calmly.

"A son who now will slay you, holding you fast by your lie-crammed throat while he slices the foul flesh from your foul bones, doing it little by little—that your sufferings may be longer and more—until your heart lies raw on the lonely hill's weeds for carrion to eat. Your carcass, O my father, I will fling, spurning it down with my shoe, down into the angry water there, where none will find it, none give it burial, none pay it worship. Fester and suffer for ever in the Hell-god's cold kingdom! Now! in vengeance of my mother!"

So Wing was pallid and quivering with maddened rage, implacable hate, venomous loathing. He intended what he threatened. Ko Ching-lin knew that So Wing did, and knew that So Wing could perform it.

But Ko Ching-lin was calm.

"Who was your mother?" he asked quietly.

“So Wei,” So Wing told him—willing to prolong even a little longer his racking of the other.

“Wei——” Ko Ching-lin said slowly, then said it again, speaking it oddly—a change in his voice, a change on his face, though still both were calm.

“You remember her now?” So Wing cried.

“I remember her now,” the man said sadly—quite frankly.

“I am her son!”

Ko Ching-lin looked at So Wing lingeringly—and did not doubt it.

“And I am your son.”

Ko Ching-lin doubted it no longer. His eyes grew sadder, but still they were calm.

So Wing delayed no longer.

He sprang——

Ko Ching-lin looked death in the face; and Ko Ching-lin’s calm eyes were kind on the face of his son.

Then——

A red jungle-fowl flew, wildly crying in some sudden fear, from beyond the banyan, and was lost in the distance.

A feather fell at So Wing’s feet as it passed—a small crimson feather.

A memory clutched So Wing. An omen transfixed and chilled him.

So Wing recoiled. The fingers tensed and bent to grip and to throttle laxed. The other hand and the blade it held fell to his side.

Q’ūo Ssu!

What would her life-portion be, what her old age, she a childless widow?

And through him!

He who had prayed Kwan to grant her a son!

In striking Ko Ching-lin, he would strike her; a heavier, more lasting blow.

Here! Here where they had plighted their springtime troth!

He could not do it here. He could not do it yet.

His purpose held. It would hold. Kwan the ever-merciful would hear his cry, and Q’ūo Ssu’s, Kwan and Niang Niang Sen would grant. And then—

when she whom he had wooed sitting beside her here, whose arm he had caressed with his sleeve, and she had smiled at him across the crimson feather in her coat—when she was for ever rich, safe, and powerful, the mother of a son—then he would come again and slay.

He could not slay now; slaying, in slaying Ko Ching-lin, the babe he had prayed Kwan Yin-ko to grant her, the babe he had seen her praying for in the temple. He would go, and come again—that she might have her child, and be left a regnant mother instead of despised widow.

Without a word, without a glance at Ko Ching-lin waiting quietly to die, So Wing sheathed his knife again in his sash, bent and took a little crimson feather from the grass where it had fallen, turned and went slowly away, holding the little feather in his hand.

WHEN Adam put up his famous defence, “The woman tempted me, and I did eat,” he established himself the arch-cad, and wrote himself down for all time as mean. But we have it on high authority that he told the truth.

Ko Ching-lin’s metal differed from Adam’s, his Chinese standard was other—and his taste.

He remembered it all now: a wrong-doing he had been alluringly tempted to, almost offered to him, in a long-ago summer-time that already had tingled his ardent, virile blood. Far from home, over-idled he had loved for a moon; had turned away and had gone. Back in Sze-ch’uen he had wondered if she had deeply cared, if she missed him and mourned. And he had gone back to offer an honourable place in his harem—if she and hers would have it so—not a first-wife’s place, that already was filled; and, had it not been, a Chinese gentleman did not take as his number-one a woman who even once had been frail; but the honourable place of a guarded, respected concubine.

He had not found the girl. She had gone from her careless home, and had left no clue—none that Ko Ching-lin had been able to find. And he had gone back to Sze-ch’uen, and had forgotten her.

Such had been Ko Ching-lin’s only misdemeanour. The list was not long, the one item was not very black, as the world goes in China and in Christendom.

That a child had come into life, or might have come, never had occurred to Ko, or he would have searched longer and more persistently; both for the mother’s sake and for his own, as well as for the child’s. His blood, the blood of his family, was precious to Ko Ching-lin, no matter how channelled, perpetuated. And it was not in him to shirk consequences which he himself had in any part caused.

When So Wing, his once coolie, had spat in his face, Ko Ching-lin could have slaughtered So Wing ruthlessly.

But as he heard So Wing’s story, hearing it with understanding, his soul had quickened to the manhood that he himself had begotten. His pity had welled for the son of his loins cursed with the sorest brand a Chinese can wear—and the rarest. There is no need of illegitimacy in China; the Chinese have poor stomach for it, and little condonement. Ko knew what a load, what a

lifelong detriment it must be to So Wing. Even now he would have righted it by adoption; still would offer it, but that he *knew* that So Wing certainly would scorn it—spit on it.

He had no blame for So Wing's anger and unfilial abuse, not even for So Wing's patricidal threat—since all that had flamed up from So Wing's love of his mother. Even as So Wing raised his hand to slay, his father had known that he loved him.

He honoured So Wing for So's passionate championing of his mother. And he had divined more in So Wing's story than So Wing himself ever had known or suspected. The woman who had born him this manly, nameless son had lived and died abjectly poor: she had kept her motherhood chaste. She had earned her boy's burning, unalterable love: she had lived all her motherhood stanchly and finely. He loved her again, with a better, wiser love, for her love and care of So Wing, their son.

The little he thought of himself just then, Ko Ching-lin was glad that his life had been spared to him. With all the might of his being he thanked his gods that So Wing, his son, had been spared the crime of patricide. That was the most!

Ko Ching-lin stood motionless where So Wing had left him; watched So Wing longingly as long as he could see him.

And Ko Ching-lin was proud that he was the father of So Wing.

DICK WENTWORTH was having a rotten time. When So Wing left the bandit encampment all the amenities disappeared with him. Chicken and champagne were conspicuous only by their absence. He ate what the rank and file of the bandits ate; the little he could eat it. Wentworth had to be well-nigh famished before he could. Sun-dried corn seemed to be their unvaried *pièce-de-résistance*. Try as he might (and he tried persistently) he could not relish rice-wine (the bandits appeared to relish it extremely), and he thought it wiser not to solace hunger, fatigue, and the black boredom that was worse than both, with opium.

Conversation between him and the bandits did not flourish. Dick's Chinese was limited to "chin-chin," and the English of the most polyglot of all the bandits was scarcely more.

No one showed him any affection—or so he stated on Legation Street afterwards. "Those bandits had no manners—none that would have been admired in Mayfair, or considered elegant by William of Wykeham." And they jerked him half over China; or so he told his sister—later. For the time being, the weeks of his involuntary initiation into Chinese banditry, he told no one anything. In the intervals between his being jerked and jerked back again over a not inconsiderable and far from beautiful area of Chihli, his principal occupations were fighting mosquitoes and vermin, trying to sleep (not often successfully) and sitting dejectedly on mud and stone heaps and whittling absurd beasts and birds with the dull, loose-bladed penknife they had scorned to take from him after they had examined it.

Except that they looked to it well that he did not escape, they paid very little attention to him. Where they thought he'd attempt to escape to, baffled Wentworth's imagination. But, of course, being an Englishman he hadn't a great deal of imagination.

Whether anything was being done about his ransom or not, he could not learn. He supposed something would be some day, else why did they trouble to keep him, and to keep him alive? He suspected they were keeping Bob and Edith in suspense, to drive his price up, and Arnold's willingness to pay heavily for his release. Two things seemed certain: that they did not intend him to die at present—they pressed his share of their abominable rations upon him, and that, if that head bandit chap had told them to treat their prisoner with consideration and to pamper him with delicacies, ease, and other creature

comforts, they were not obeying the order.

Dick was not worrying. Constitutionally he was very nearly incapable of worrying. And—even more—he was too angry to worry. He saw red, now; and he'd have murdered the lot of them, if he'd been able to do it.

But he was jolly uncomfortable, and he was so wretchedly bored that several times he was nearly in tears—the maddened tears of red rage, and the hard, weak tears of dejected ennui.

Most of the bandits were dirty. Half of them smoked opium at night, and slept stertorously after they had. And he believed that all were frightened. At least half the time they seemed running away. Some messenger came, or some signal reached them, and they "made tracks" without waiting to finish a meal. It seemed to Wentworth that they rushed off aimlessly every few days. They seemed leaderless and both desperate and planless. For one unforgettable week they lived and slept in well-hidden underground huts roofed with sod and grass. There was room in Wentworth's hut for six or seven men at a crowded pinch. He and fifteen Chinese shared it. They literally slept on each other (turn and turn about for bottom or top), sat on each other, ate on each other. Two of those memorable days no one was allowed to speak above a whisper, to whisper often, to smoke at all. Apparently their scouts were everywhere, and continued to keep them informed—at the last moment, Dick thought.

Again and again they fled; but no one ever caught them. Twice Wentworth caught sight of soldiers in the distance. Each time the fleeing bandits evaded them, and hid securely again—each hiding-place worse than the one before it.

The weather turned nasty.

Every mosquito in Asia joined up with those bandits—it seemed to Wentworth.

His clothes were filthy. His boots were wearing out; his feet were sore.

The Englishman began to wonder if his nerve would not crack.

Another fortnight, and he wondered when his nerve would crack.

At last the leader came back.

The bandits seemed glad and relieved to see him; Dick Wentworth was.

So Wing greeted the English captive politely but coldly, said: "How is your warmth and cold?" regretted that business more pressing had delayed his informing his guest's relatives of his need of ransom, added that negotiations for that should be put in train soon, and then ignored him.

The bandit leader seemed depressed and out of humour, Wentworth thought.

But again Dick Wentworth had better food, and a softer bed.

A few days later luck turned at last. Standing near So Wing, Wentworth glanced at his wrist-watch; a very ordinary one that had not been taken from him. As he did, So Wing leaned forward suddenly, and looked sharply at a little Maltese-cross shaped medal fastened on the narrow leather strap.

“May I ask—have you had it long?” the Chinese asked with more animation than he had shown in speaking to Wentworth since his return.

“Since I won my first set at school rackets, when I was a shaver,” Dick told him.

“Was that in Hurstcroft?”

“Why, yes, it was. What the devil made you think so?”

“You knew Gayford, the great violinist, when you and he were boys? Were school comrades?”

“That’s right. When we were not much more than infants. But however did you hear of Gayford?”

“I have heard him play.”

“Thought you’d never been out of China. Fancied you’d said so.”

“You were his friend, loved him?”

“We were chums—always have been—are yet.” Whatever he felt, and was proud to feel, Dick Wentworth was not going to talk about “loving” another man. And he was not going to talk about love of any degree or sort to any Chinaman living. Nor was he going to tell a Chinese bandit the tender, boyish story of two little chaps that had sworn to each other always to wear their first sports trophies that they had won together at their first school.

So Wing turned away, called a passing bandit, and gave an order. He spoke to the man in Chinese, of course. But the crisp command in his voice was unmistakable.

That night as they ate together, Dick spoke of Brent again, curious to learn when and where the Chinese had heard Brent play—if he had.

But So Wing did not exactly remember, had lost all interest in the subject, could not, or would not, be drawn—although he and Wentworth again were sharing a bottle of excellent bubbly.

To Dick’s delight they moved on the next day. Only he and So Wing and half a dozen attendant bandits went.

All So Wing’s bright good-humour had returned. More than that, to Wentworth’s amazement, he was treated now as a specially honoured guest. There were sunny deference and cordial tendance in So Wing’s attitude to him. Dick had the better horse, the pleasanter side of the path—when there was any.

What the devil?

Then he understood in a flash, knew the only possible explanation. For Wentworth, if not abnormally “quick,” was not abnormally dull.

Of course! So Wing had arranged the ransom—an enormous one. Bob had paid it, or had promised to; and his yellow nibs was taking him to some agreed-on place where the money was to be handed over, and he set free. And the hold-up robber was in high good-humour because of the English pounds he had extorted and was going to get. Damn him! And probably scheming to get a bit extra for “kind treatment, etc.” Dick Wentworth would watch it!

“Look here,” he told So, “my ransom has been paid.”

“It has been paid,” the Chinese answered promptly.

“How much?” Wentworth inquired politely, much more politely than he felt.

So Wing laughed, and laid a finger on his lips.

“I hope you haven’t stuck my brother-in-law for a small fortune. I’ll have to pay him back, you know. And I haven’t married into the Rothschild family, and don’t seem apt to, or a lady from Chicago either.”

“I have had no negotiations whatever with Sir Robert Arnold.”

Dick did not believe him. But he did not mention it. The Chink might slit his throat yet.

“Who then?” He asked it with great politeness.

“Three men have paid it.”

“Names, please?”—lightly and with added politeness.

“One is named Grieg, one’s name is Caressa.”

Dick disbelieved So Wing even more firmly than he had before.

“Who’s the other chap. You said three. Those two you mentioned don’t sound exactly English to me. Surely it was an Englishman’s job?”

“They are not English—those two,” So Wing admitted with a smile. “Your other friend is, I am taking you to him now.”

“Splendid! What did you say his name was?”

“I did not say.” So Wing laughed.

“What *is* his name?” Wentworth persisted.

“Wait and see!” The Chinese laughed again.

Dick Wentworth frowned—as much as he dared. It was damned cheek of a Chink bandit to quote the English classics.

WHEN Dick saw who stood at the top of the water-steps he stood stock-still and whistled.

When Brent looked and saw Dick he dashed down the high, slippery steps two at a time, and gripped the other's hands hard.

It is impossible to say which of the two was the more surprised—impossible even to surmise.

So Wing, close at Wentworth's heels, looked on with a glowing face, and turned back to give an unneeded order to the boatmen—and took a long time about it.

He envied them both. So Wing never had had a close friend—since So Wei had died: unless a French nun had been, unless an American missionary was.

Too amazed to ask or to give explanations intelligently just yet, the two Englishmen, for all the time he had given them, were still staring at one another blankly, gripping each other's hands without a word when So Wing came back to them; and the three went on up and into the temple.

They dined well.

The Chinese made a notable and an easy, gracious host.

"This is a rum go," Wentworth remarked when So Wing left them alone on the terrace after dinner.

"The rummest yet," Gayford agreed.

"What are you doing here?" they demanded simultaneously.

"D'you mean in China, or here?" Wentworth added.

"Both."

"I am in China," Dick announced importantly, "to acquire a *crèche* of infants, and to transplant it, swaddling clothes, feeding bottles and all, to Norfolk."

"You are a liar."

"I am the one entirely truthful man living. It's my speciality: truthfulness, and the tender care of travelling infants."

“Details?”

“Ed’s got the wind up over her kids. Sent for me to take them home to the mater to mind for a few years. That’s all the detail about it, unless you’d like to know the make of bottles that Ed affects—the number of——”

“Lot you’ll have to do with the precious bottles, you idiot! The nurse will look after the bottles. Edith is taking a nurse along, of course,” Brent interrupted severely.

“She is not. She hasn’t got any sort of white nurse out here. Just Chink ladies—and they are remaining in Peking.”

“Edith will have to do all that herself then. And I don’t see Edith doing it.”

“Nor do I. Lady Arnold is not accompanying her offspring to England. Dear little Uncle Richard Molyneux is doing it all alone. Lady Arnold is clinging to Sir Robert, and to old Peking. Behold in me head-nurse, under-nurse, and all the rest of it of the four young Arnolds.”

“You lunatic. Edith only has three.”

“Four is on the way,” Wentworth chuckled proudly, “almost due by now. I am waiting for Four.”

Brent shouted with joy. It wasn’t true, not a single word of it, but it made a lovely picture as Dick told it.

“And what are you doing here, Dick?—here with So Wing, I mean.”

“Cooling my heels until he lets me go.”

“Oh—you are his prisoner, too, are you?”

“You don’t mean to say you are his prisoner, too, Brent?”

“No, not now. But I was, or I very nearly was. I am his guest. He is a fine fellow.”

“Good Lord! He’s a dirty bandit, man.”

“I know he’s a bandit. What’s the odds? This is China, you must remember! Bandit or not, my friend So Wing is one of the finest that ever lived—whiter than almost all the white men I’ve ever met.”

“I’m damned.”

“Sure to be by-and-by, if you get half your deserts,” Gayford said cheerfully.

“Your turn,” Dick reminded him. “What are you doing in China? Thought

you'd joined a band in Vienna. First violin, that's what you call yourself now, isn't it? I know you're cracked, but I don't suppose you are giving fiddle concerts in China, are you? Playing to the Chinks for your dinner sort of thing?"

"You are right and wrong, mostly wrong, and characteristically inaccurate. I never have been promoted to play in a band. I am strictly a solo performer, and the hand-organ is my instrument; I am taking a professional holiday, in one sense. In another sense, I am studying music here. I am finding out all I can about Chinese music——"

"Isn't any," Wentworth interrupted.

"You are not the first Western fool who has said that. China is full of music—*Chinese* music, but intrinsically music. It came across me one day in Vienna that I was learning nothing of any music except Europe's. There were other arts, other architecture, other literatures before Europe was born—artistically or spiritually. It stood to reason that there were other musics. I was seeing only one facet of life's greatest jewel; that wasn't good enough; it was narrow and narrowing. Music is universal. It is in everything. It is everywhere. I wanted to hear it as a whole—as far as I can. So I packed up, and was off—to find, if I could, the music of twenty races at its sources. And who knows that I may not find my ultimate inspiration in the folk-songs of the Chinese, the Hindoos, or the Hottentots, as Beethoven found much of his in the folk-songs of Central Europe? I doubt if even one of the great composers has not learned and gleaned from the simple singings of the peasants. But, there, I am not going to talk about music any more with you, you old ass."

"Thank the Lord," was the musicless Briton's crisp reply. "But," he added, as So Wing came back and sat down on the terrace steps, "look here, Brent, old fellow, it was good of you to pay my ransom. You would, of course. But, ta, all the same. And what do I owe you?"

"Don't know what you are talking about. I have not paid your ransom—or anything else for you. Thought you were in England——"

"I jolly well will be as soon as ever I can; and be there for keeps. You watch it! When Ed wants numbers six, seven, and eight escorted over the wide brine, she'll have to buy them another uncle. China's no place for me—nor for you. Come home with me, Brent!"

"And carry the two youngest? Not I! Seriously, old man, I am going to search out the music and the musical instruments of a number of places before I go back home."

Dick Wentworth groaned. Then—“But you must have paid my ransom. Who else, then? Mr. Wing”—So Wing grinned—“swears it wasn’t Bob; said three chaps did, two of ’em with outlandish foreign names, the other an English chap. Sure it wasn’t you? Of course it was. He dreamed the other two; must have.”

“It was not I,” Gayford repeated.

Wentworth looked at So Wing searchingly.

“Pardon me that I contradict you, Mr. Gayford,” the bandit said. “You did not know it—nor did I at the time. Nevertheless, you and two others paid me the heavy ransom I asked for your friend. It is paid in full. When you wish to leave me, Mr. Wentworth, greatly as I shall regret your going, I shall be honoured, if you will trust me to have you safely—and in comfort this time—escorted to Peking; to Peking or to where you will in China.”

“But hold on, So; when and where did I pay you any money for my friend Wentworth?”

The bandit made a gesture of repudiating scorn. “I did not say money. You paid it more beautifully, more richly than any coin payment could be. You paid it more than a moon ago, paid it on the river.”

The violinist’s eyes sparkled, then softened. He understood.

Dick Wentworth was more befogged than ever. “How did he pay it?” he asked; “and who were those two other chaps?”

“Their honourable names,” the bandit answered as he rose and strolled back into the temple, “are Grieg and Caressa.”

“Pulling my leg! Damn his Chink impudence.”

It is a terrible thing to own of an educated Englishman—Eton, Cambridge—but Dick Wentworth never *had* heard of Grieg. As for Caressa, the violin-maker of Paris, have you?

“I think I can explain, Dick. So Wing and a few of his bandit gentry boarded a houseboat I had hired for a float up the river. They asked me how much money I had with me. I told them; thought it would be foolish to refuse. They took most of it. It was no great haul. I did not have much ready cash with me. They said how much they’d have, by or without my leave, and took it. They didn’t clean me out. They said good-bye politely, and off they went. I considered the incident closed. But I was wrong. The leading bandit, So Wing himself, came back the next day, came chasing me in one of those quaint little slipper-boats of theirs. I thought that he had come back for more. I was wrong

again. He had come back to return half of what he had assessed me the day before. He said that on thinking it over he had concluded that he had taken too much, especially as I had not opened fire on him or called him names. He did not add that he had liked my face, etcetera—not then, but he has since. As for opening fire on him, I hadn't had much to open fire with, and they were four to every one of us—if I could have depended on the loyalty of my Chinese crew; I was not sure that I could. And I didn't see much in calling them names. Well—he chucked down half he'd removed the day before, and bowed himself off again most politely. I stood and watched him go, and bowed as politely. Then I sat down on the deck and picked up my fiddle to help me think it out. I had met a full-fledged Chinese bandit, and he was the dead opposite of what I supposed they were.

"The bandit came back. I didn't hear him come. But when I put the fiddle down and looked down at the river, there he was. He stood up in his boat, and begged me to go on playing. And he *wanted* the music. You wouldn't understand, but I saw it, and I understand. I told him to come on up again. He came. And we had a concert. He had a flute in his jacket. Something he said, something that surprised me, made me ask him if he played, and he took out his flute. I saw by the way he handled it that he loved it; but I wasn't prepared for the way he played it. He'd learn to play the violin beautifully, if he had a good chance—a teacher like Vogelweid—he'd learn to play anything. He is full of music. We had a tip-top concert—our concert on the Yang-tsze! So Wing stayed all night and all the next day. I never have played better than I played for him that first time. We talked a lot, too; he did—made me tell him all I could. Who wrote the bit he liked most? Edvard Grieg did. Where did I get my violin? Had it cost much? What was it made of? Why was one string wire? A chap in Paris named Caressa—the best living violin-maker, I think—made the violin I've got with me here. So Wing didn't believe me when I said it wasn't my best fiddle. Of course it isn't, but it is excellent."

"Left your best at home—or rather in Vienna, I suppose. Cost a lot, some of 'em, don't they?"

"They do. Yes, I have left my favourite Guarnerius and several others in bank at home in Vienna. Rest does them good—enough rest, not too much. And no decent violinist, if he could help it, would risk the seams of an Amati or a "Strad" being opened by exposure to damp atmospheres. Fiddles need a lot of care—and they deserve it. See now, don't you? Why he said that three had paid your ransom, Grieg, Caressa, and I?"

"That's tosh."

"It's love of music, Dick, old thing; and I suspect that a lot of the Chinese

are like that.”

“Sure you aren’t his prisoner here?”

“Quite sure. I have been here two or three months. So asked me to come. I came for a day or two—and have stayed because I liked it. He’s been away a good deal of the time. But this has suited me down to the ground. I shall not forget this or So Wing.”

Dick Wentworth whistled. This new lay of Brent’s was badly queer, almost as perverted as his turning professional fiddler had been. Wentworth was downright anxious.

“How do you explain his spotting me for a friend of yours? Turning polite to me, and bringing me here?”

“Yes, I’ve figured that out, too; it was easy. I saw one day that he had noticed this old rackets medal of mine, and wondered what it was. So I told him; got to chinning, don’t you know, told him a lot about Hurstcroft and those things. Keen to hear about Vienna and Paris—and I’ve told him as well as I could. He has got Chinese eyes and a Chinese memory. He spotted your medal, of course; saw it was the dead spit of mine, jumped to the conclusion that you and I were pals; being a Chinese, guessed right, that’s a mental speciality of theirs, I have noticed.”

Wentworth began to feel that it was far more important to get Brent out of China, and far more up to him than it was to escort his nephews out of the Celestial Republic. You heard ghoulish tales of splendid fellows that went Chinese. Lord!

“Do you believe that he means to let me clear off as soon as I like, and without paying him a shilling?”

“I know it. Don’t be a fool, Dick. So Wing is a prince of a gentleman. He has said it, and you couldn’t pay him a copper.”

“Let’s go to-morrow, then!”

“Better stay with me a week or two, Dick. We haven’t seen each other before, not for donkey’s years.”

“That’s right; let us stick together now for a decent time. I’ll chuck seeing the kids home. I don’t think Ed would come up to the scratch of parting with ’em when the time came, anyway. Whether she would or not, I’ll chuck the job; she has fooled me about here waiting for it long enough. Let’s go home now, just you and me.”

“I am going much farther afield than this,” Gayford answered. “I’m in Asia for another year, perhaps longer. Then I’m back to Vienna, and to work in the old way. But I am going to have a look in at India and one or two other places. I’m going to Yün-nan before I leave China. May go to India that way—through Burmah. There’s a man in Yün-nan, So tells me, who knows more about Chinese music than any Western living; and has a splendid collection of Chinese instruments. I am going to call on him. He is a great friend of So Wing’s, and So Wing has promised to introduce me to him. And we are off to Yün-nan as soon as So Wing can spare the time. Wish you’d come along.”

Wentworth had the haziest idea of where or what Yün-nan was. Was it an island somewhere that belonged to France, with a mountain in it they’d built a railway up—something like the Rigi one? But it might be in the moon for all he *knew*.

So he only groaned.

DICK held on there three or four days longer, still hoping to persuade Brent to go away with him, and because he so hated to leave Gayford.

There was a good deal of talk of war in China just then. Brent took it lightly. “There always is, isn’t there?” he appealed to So Wing.

“Very often,” their host agreed. “More words than bullets. But there have been serious wars in our country. There are indications that very real warfare is brewing now. It may not come. It may come at almost any day now, I believe.”

“Which side will you be on?” Wentworth asked.

“My own,” So Wing laughed. Then with a sudden Oriental change of voice and manner, he said, “I shall be on China’s side, Mr. Wentworth.”

“Which is China’s side?” Wentworth persisted.

“If I knew that, I should be greatly happier than I am,” So Wing told them sadly. “It is a question that is torturing every honest man in China to-day—every educated Chinese who realises what is happening to his country, and who is unselfishly anxious to serve her—to serve China—at no matter what cost to himself.”

Wentworth had controlled a smile heroically. But So’s sharp Chinese eyes had caught it. He turned to Wentworth with a good-natured laugh.

“There are honest bandits in China, Mr. Wentworth; we are a sorry lot, most of us, I grant you. Almost all of my own bandits have been recruited by hunger. Hunger is a wonderfully successful recruiting sergeant everywhere. Little by little I have turned my bandit rabble into a disciplined army. Many bandit leaders have done the same. Banditry feeds China’s army as the Yang-tsze and the Hwang-ho feed the gulfs and seas that bound her eastern coast. ‘Honest bandit’ seems absurd to you. It does not to me—and I, being a bandit, have had wide opportunity of arriving at a sound conclusion. I should like to write a history and an exposition—a defence, if you like, and, of course *ex parte*—of Chinese banditry from long before the days of Koxinga to now, if I had the skill.”

“It would be exciting reading, wouldn’t it?” Wentworth said politely.

So Wing smiled gravely.

After a moment he said, “We shall learn to fight, we Chinese. I have no fear on that score. China has a great military history—in her far past. We shall recover the science of warfare; already we begin to do so, more than is credited by Westerns. We are pacific, even we bandits, but we are not pacifists. There are cowards among us, us Chinese, but not many; and I do not believe that there is one Chinese conscientious objector. Gradually we shall get into line with the best of your armies, the armies of the West. And I believe that we shall stay in line, at perfect parity, because I believe that we shall find it necessary. Our difficulty is not going to be to learn how to fight you, but which of you to fight, and *why*: what to make the issues for which we fight. Theoretically it is perfectly clear—to my mind: you Westerns all are intruders in China, and you deserve to be expelled. China did not ask you to come, did not let you in willingly, or understand what the consequences might be, almost inevitably would be, and what most, if not all, of the Western nations intended that they should be. China has been forced or tricked into signing the most iniquitous treaties that ever have stained the history of mankind. Europeans have been the outstanding and ruthless bandits. But—forgive me if you can, you are my guests. I am miserable that I so have outraged the sacredness of hospitality. I crawl at your shoes.”

“Don’t you dream of doing it,” Wentworth said, with more kindly warmth in his voice than he ever had given So Wing before. “I don’t understand a word you have been saying—’pon my soul I don’t. History never was my strong suit. But I’ve heard it before, heard my brother-in-law say much the same thing.”

The Chinese flushed. “We have our friends among the Westerns,” he said softly. “Gods forbid me that I should ever forget it! China has her Western friends, sincere well-wishers who also understand us. That is the supreme kindness they do us. And we Chinese are so easy to understand! We are very simple people—so simple that we have been simpletons in our dealings with the Western peoples. Your writers call us and our ways impossible to understand, baffling. They make a great mistake. England blunders often in China. Her greatest blunder is her lack of tact. She offends and hurts us—hurts our face. That is where the missionaries score. They treat us better—or try to. But again I transgress. We will speak of other things.”

“No,” Brent Gayford insisted. “Go on where you were, So Wing. I like it. And I want to understand. You think China would be better without us?”

“That I did not say. For that I do not know. It is too difficult for me—that question! We need your money, your trade. I do not know what would best serve my country now: it is all so complicated. Take extra-territoriality for one

example. The concessions at the treaty-ports were offered to the alien Powers—not seized by them, though Western writers often boast or deplore that they were. The foreign concessions were granted (most of them were offered) to keep the foreigners from spreading over China, permeating into Chinese life, meddling with our customs. Very many of them are absurd customs, I do not deny. But they have been ours for a long time. They are dear to us. Now the concessions have become a reproach to our national pride. Many of us believe them a menace. But can we spare them, and what they give? I doubt it. Your special courts! They insult China's sovereignty and China's flag. And yet ——" So Wing broke off with a wearied sigh. "By-the-way," he added, "I am giving it up—going to turn soldier, and use banditry merely as one of my auxiliaries."

"Is there much difference?" Gayford asked it affectionately, without a trace of offensiveness.

"There is very little," So Wing replied regretfully. "But we are boring Mr. Wentworth. Let us have music." Without waiting to hear what either of them thought of the suggestion, he got up resolutely and moved off toward the temple. And Brent and Dick were alone.

"Brent!"

"Hello!"

"Are you going to stay on here?"

"I am, old fellow."

"And going to stick to your fiddle playing, when you get back home?"

"As long as I live. As long as I can stand, and can hold my violin, hear its heart beat against mine, draw my bow across its strings, and coax the violin to tell me part of the beauty it knows, tell me even a little of the heaven's secret it holds in its golden bosom. Yes, I'm going to stick to it, Dick."

"I hope to God she won't let you!"

"She?"

"The woman. I hope she won't cotton to a fiddle-playing husband. I hope you'll meet her soon, and that she'll smash your fiddle-craze once and for all! I pray God she will!"

"A woman! I wouldn't give one broken E string for any woman living—not for all the women in the world. My violin has all my desire, Dick; music has all the love I have to give, or ever shall have. I don't think I'll ever marry.

If I do, my wife will be filled with music, love it as I do; be glad to play very second-fiddle indeed in my life, as I shall be to in hers; living for our music, loving it beyond everything else on earth or up in heaven.”

“Rubbish!”

“Women don’t even interest me, Dick.”

“You wait. *She’ll* come.”

“Rubbish!” Gayford retorted.

It was the last appeal Dick made to Brent.

So Wing came back, carrying Gayford’s violin and bow and his own flute.

And presently Wentworth whistled softly as they played. And the bandit’s temple-garden and the star-lit Yang-tsze River were sweet with the singing of Brent Gayford’s violin, sweet with the soul of Brahms.

IN A YÜN-NAN COURTYARD *CHAPTER XLI*

DOCTOR RATHBORN began to think that he had come to China on a wild-goose chase. Not to be able to find Charles Tolover was a deep disappointment. But, even so, it had been a delightful wild-goose chase; they both had enjoyed it all greatly. Only one thing had marred it: the apparent hopelessness of Rathborn's quest.

But he was not going to give that up yet. They had plenty of time, plenty of money, and only themselves to please. When Helen had had her fill of Yün-nan Fu they'd jog on again, and search in half a dozen more places.

A long lifetime would not be long enough in which to beat half the Chinese missionary coverts; but he was not going to give up the hunt or the vicarious reparation for which he had come so far without a good look round in several of the provinces they had not been in yet. There was no end to China; the physician from Poughkeepsie realised that now. The illimitable empire—the old name sticks—was baffling. Probably no Chinese in it knew even superficially a quarter of it. No foreigner could hope to know a tenth of it. But he'd see more of the likeliest places before he gave it up defeated and went back home.

The odd thing was that none of the missionary societies he had questioned had any record of Tolover, or had ever heard of him. Where had he got to, anyway? Had he died, after all, and left not even a name behind him? Or had he drifted away—to India or to Siam, or some such place?

There were a good many missionaries in Sze-ch'uen. He would go up through this province into Sze-ch'uen, and see if he could unearth a clue there, any small thing to work upon, when Helen was ready to be torn away from Yün-nan Fu.

She gave no sign of being ready yet.

That was all right. The place interested him very much, even if he could not share the child's infatuation for the amazing spot where many more than "three empires met."

Of course she was having a good time. She always did. That was her special talent, her father thought. Everyone was particularly nice to her. Everyone always was. If that good-looking Frenchman who did his best to serve himself up to them for breakfast, dinner, and supper got his fingers burnt,

it would be no one's fault. It always was happening. "Women as fair as thou art must do such things now and then." Even if Nell responded at last, it would not be a tragedy. If the choice had rested with him, only an American would become his son-in-law. But the choice did not rest with him—nor did he wish that it did. Nell herself was the best judge of all that, and he did not grudge her her right. She always had known what she wanted; and he always ultimately had found her taste sound. He had travelled too much and too wisely to think that all races but his own were objectionable or flimsy. And he had too much Southern blood in his veins to dislike or to misestimate the French.

There is a type—would it were more—of cultured American that does not consider vanity patriotism. Thomas Rathborn would not have exchanged his nationality for the next best one under the sun. But he did not consider his the only birthland not to be despised; and he did not travel about the world with a chip on his shoulder, indignation in his eye, or a sharp challenge in his voice. He had common sense and good manners. The daughter had inherited both. The result was that they both were liked and respected abroad, and had excellent times everywhere.

With one thing in Yün-nan Fu's social usage Doctor Rathborn could not fall in with anything approaching ease. A few picked Chinese were received on an apparent parity by the European residents. Rathborn could but realise that it was just, and international policy, too, that unobjectionable Chinese should be allowed in their own country to live and to mix as the gentlemen that he had to own they were. But he could not get quite pleasantly accustomed to it; and it distressed him to see the best of them associating at dinner or dance with white women, even with the least and least exclusive of them. It amused him to see Sir This and Mr. That in friendly and close *tête-à-tête* with Mr. Han Li Chou; it shocked and hurt him to see Lady This and Madame That do exactly the same; and as for Miss This and Mlle. That! Several Chinese introductions, not only to himself, but even to Helen, had been unavoidable; he had disliked it for himself, resented it for her, each time. Fortunately those few Chinese whom they had met socially had held as coldly and indifferently aloof from them both as formal courtesy had permitted. That alone had made those introductions to Helen even remotely endurable. The essential, typical American's attitude to the "colour question," even to the Asian-European and official diplomatic phase of it, is instinct far more than judgment. He himself may condemn it; he cannot overcome it. The better his birth, his education, the finer his culture, just so much more unalterable is this prejudice of his—if it is prejudice: one of the most striking and most unalterable differentiations between English and Americans.

“What an interesting face! Who is he, M. de Mesurier?” Helen Rathborn asked. “Is he one of the dethroned Manchu princes? None of them have been educated in Europe or in America though, have they?”

Her father and their French companion followed her eyes.

“How do you know he has been educated in Europe or America?” her father demanded before the man she had questioned could answer.

“Daddy! Those evening clothes were made by the best tailor in London! And he has learned how to wear them—and forget them—at Oxford or at Harvard or Princeton (Oxford, I’d think), and it must have taken him years. I wish I could look half as unconscious of having on the third prettiest dress in the room!”

“But your robe is adorable, mademoiselle, if you permit me that I say it. There is no toilet here one small fraction so successful.”

The American girl dropped de Mesurier a little mock curtsey.

“You are charmingly polite, but sadly untruthful,” she said. “We might dress worse, most of us, but we can’t manage a patch on your countrywomen.”

“A patch?” The Frenchman, for all his easy English, was at sea, and distressed that he was.

The girl only laughed at him teasingly.

Still baffled, he broke out again in hot and picturesque defence of her glistening costume’s far greater perfection than any his own few countrywomen here to-night wore.

“Pouf!” Helen checked him. “Who is he? Must I ask a third time?”

M. de Mesurier smiled down at her tenderly. That she condescended to tease and upbraid him, surely was not that an encouragement?

“He is one of the outstanding figures in China, mademoiselle. I do not know the address of his tailor,”—she had certainly flicked him. There *are* excellent tailors in Paris. “But he is not a Manchu, nor is he of a princely family. He never has been out of China. He speaks your language better than I have the happiness to do it. My language he speaks not badly. *Moi*, I do not admire often the Chinese. I admit, truth compels me that I do, that here and there one of them is *simplement* a giant, giant in personality, the resource, what he has achieved out of the seemingly nothing. General So Wing is of the North. Most usually they are stupid—*bête*, *gauche*. He is the otherwise. He is a coolie! By the birth, of the poor common people, the dregs. He has genius, *de*

l'esprit; no other explanation is possible. Ten years ago he had nothings. Two years ago he was the most dangerous bandit on the Yang-tsze. To-day he is a Great Man. To-morrow he may be President, or in the gaol, or bandit again. So it is in China now. I have speak with him. He has the charm, I cannot deny that he has. He has the *grande manière*. He is a great man. He has the possibility of the anything—the all!"

"He is not a peasant!" Helen Rathborn said slowly, still studying the Chinese face her eyes had not left since her first demanding, "Who is he?"

De Mesurier bowed—deferentially. It was the only reply he made.

"Well—well," her father expostulated good-humouredly, "if he isn't, it's no reason to stare him out of the face."

"You can't often stare a Chinaman out of countenance," a fourth voice said. "You most certainly can't So Wing." The Englishman who had strolled up to them added.

Helen laughed, and nodded to Monsieur de Mesurier that yes, she would dance with him now. De Mesurier was very happy as they glided away together. Helen Rathborn was wondering why on earth that distinguished-looking Chinese man—yes, he was very distinguished in face and in bearing—had had that one lock of his black hair dyed red. *That* was not attractive. It looked cheap, and it had more than a touch of the theatrical.

"By-the-way," Harrington added, "your girl is right, and Monsieur de Mesurier is wrong. No one seems to know just when or where General So was born. He has no intimates; I never have heard that he made any claim to kinsmen. That is about as un-Chinese as anything can be. To my thinking, it tells a sinister tale. So is a solitary; for all that he is in the very thick of half the important happenings in China to-day. Wherever he came from, or *how*, So Wing is no coolie, not on both sides. That scrap of red-hair on his forehead is a birth-mark, a certificate of ancestry. Only one of the Hundred Names ever has or bequeaths it. Do you notice that it is a little inclined to curl? On a Chinese scalp that is even more remarkable than the colour. The Sinologues are not in agreement about it. One of them maintains that it hints at a strain of Hebrew blood back somewhere. Like the red-haired Jews of Zanzibar, don't you know. But I never heard that any of them had got to China, and it isn't likely; though give a Jew a good financial reason for doing it, and he'll get anywhere. There are lots of fat pickings in China; a thousand or two years ago there were many more and much fatter ones. You have heard of the Jews in Ho-nan, haven't you?"

Doctor Rathborn could not say that he had.

“But I never heard that any of them had red hair. Would have been sure to, if they had.”

“Are they half-castes, Jew and Chinese mixed?” The physician was interested.

“No, they are purely Jews. A colony settled in Ho-nan, chiefly at Karfeng Fu before the Christian Era. A few families of them are there yet. For centuries they prospered and were wealthy. They lived in peace with their Chinese neighbours, but never married with them. They fell on evil days nearly a century ago, and now are just an uneducated remnant and miserably poor. But they still are Jews, and keep the Hebraic laws and customs. They never have been persecuted because of their religion—no one is in China. Nor were full rights of citizenship ever denied them. Oh no, our General over there has no Jewish blood, I feel sure. He is out and out Chinese. So himself may or may not know who he is. But I have seen several of his kinsmen near or remote. And you can take it from me that, legitimately or the other thing, So Wing is descended from some woman of the Chihli aristocracy. One of the proudest and ablest clans in all the Empire—I mean Republic,” he corrected himself with a contemptuous shrug of international disapproval.

“Why necessarily from a woman?” The physician was increasingly interested.

“Only the women of the family ever have the red-hair badge. Some of them have but a few red hairs. But all of them—the women—have some. They are particularly proud of it. None of their men ever has had it; and the men do not transmit it. But the women do, and their sons, in just the first generation, invariably have the mother’s touch of red, almost curly hair. Often it is not more than a few hairs; but always it is there.”

“That is odd, but not quite so odd as it sounds,” Rathborn remarked. “A family characteristic, especially one so strongly marked and so unusual, often runs underground and skips the women—like great intellectuality or artistic ability. But in some unique cases it skips not the women but the men. And nine times out of ten it is the mothers who transmit it. Women are the carriers, I have repeatedly observed. I have no doubt that that is the universal rule.”

“It certainly is in this old distinguished Chinese clan then. The General over there talking to Wilson is descended from some woman of it. And the family name is not So,” Harrington added significantly.

It was after supper that the American physician frowned, more openly than he knew, at seeing one of the older diplomats introduce General So Wing to Helen.

“*N’importe, monsieur*,” the quick-eyed French-woman, with whom he himself was chatting, said gaily. “*Monsieur le General* find no interest in us. We bore him, all of us, *nous pauvres femmes*. He make Mademoiselle Rathborn a most beautiful bow, but he speak few words wiz her, soon he make excuse to leave her, he vill not seek her society again.”

Rathborn was glad to hear it.

“And how did you find the General So Wing?” de Mesurier asked Miss Rathborn a little later, when he came to claim a second dance she had promised him.

“Not talkative.” The girl laughed. “I wish he had been. I tried to make him talk, but I didn’t pull it off. But I will yet. You see!”

“Then speak to him of music, mademoiselle. If So Wing cannot be drawn out of his silence by that, give up the enterprise.”

“But that is more and more interesting! Is he a musician, too?”

“No Chinaman is musician,” de Mesurier asserted. He offered Helen his arm. But when she had taken it she dropped it at once at the sound of the small band’s first bars.

“I am sorry,” she told her partner contritely, “but I cannot dance to that—not to-night, not here. And I wanted another waltz; one gets so few now. And I told Lady Betty that I loved an old-fashioned waltz.”

“Neither is it my favourite music, the ‘Blue Danube,’ ” the Frenchman said quickly. “But,” he begged, “it is a good dance music. Will you not dance it with me?”

“I adore the ‘Blue Danube,’ ” the American girl said almost petulantly. “But”—more gently—“no, thanks, I will not dance it with you. Another dance, another night, Monsieur de Mesurier. I am going to sit with my father now, and pretend that I am in Vienna.” She gave her father a queer little uplifted, roguish smile, and gave de Mesurier a courteous gesture that he had to accept for the dismissal it was.

Doctor Rathborn smiled too—and sighed. What a girl! Had poor de Mesurier contrived to offend her in any way? Or had she grown suddenly bored by him as the naughty spoilt child had with so many others before him? That little joke of hers about the “Blue Danube” was just fun and bunkum. The beautiful “Blue Danube” did not trouble Doctor Thomas Rathborn.

Helen was as good as her word. She did not speak again until the tune was ended. She sat smiling almost wistfully; her downcast eyes were far away.

General So Wing chanced to look at her as she sat there with her hands idle on her knee, her head bent above them, the toe of one little blue slipper throbbing softly in beat with the music. A glint of interest came in So Wing's guarded face. And he wondered of whom the foreign girl was thinking?

Western women did not interest So Wing in the least; but he saw that this white girl was beautiful, saw that she was not dull, thought that it might be a pleasant adventure to know her—if she had been of his own race.

IN A YÜN-NAN COURTYARD *CHAPTER XLII*

"THERE is a missionary chap up near Lololand, just about where the Niul An joins up with the Yang-tsze, who might help you to find your friend," Harrington remarked to Doctor Rathborn a few days later. And as soon as it could be arranged—a reliable guide, stout, sure-footed ponies, chairs, provisions, coolie retinue, a cook, and all the other necessaries of comfortable European trekking across Yün-nan—Helen and her father left Yün-nan Fu behind them, and started off to find, if they could, the missionary with the odd name of Kwan, who just might, Harrington thought, be able to tell Doctor Rathborn where and how to look for Charles Tolover.

Helen was just a little sorry to go; but she was careful not to let her father suspect it.

She had enjoyed the cordial French society of Yün-nan Fu; had liked the social oasis they had found there. The American girl had enjoyed keenly all this long Chinese jaunt of theirs; but most of it had been "in country," comparatively little of it—for more than a few days at a time—had been in treaty-ports, or had given her any of the Western gaieties she dearly liked, and always had had. She had had ever such a good time in Yün-nan Fu; she could not help regretting that they were going on quite so soon.

She had not been indifferent to the *fu* city that had been old when Marco Polo had known it, and called it Yachi. The picture of it and its quaint surprises grew upon her every time she saw them: the long grey walls and their four deep, tall terraced, wide arched, many roofed gates, curious Chinese shops, sign-hung, crowded cobbled streets, thick with bullock-carts and pack-horses, story-tellers, puppet-shows, water-carriers, brilliant heaps of vegetables and fruit, the Temple of Confucius, many gigantic gilded Buddhas, gardens floating flower-beds, the matchless Fish Pagoda. But there was much of all that sort of picture and Chinese interest all over the wonderful country, and she knew, and frankly owned it to herself, that it was not picture-packed Chinese Yün-nan Fu, with the cool loveliness of its verdured hills beyond it that she disliked leaving, but pleasant functions at the French Consulate, afternoon tea at Lady Dolly Porter's, jolly little dances, European voices, talk of Western things, canal-side rambles, moonlit picnics at the Copper Temple on the Lake: Europe in China.

Kwan Yin-ko's American brother half suspected himself of having dozed a while as he sat there. The *Practitioner*, newly come from London, and only three months old, had fallen face-down on the courtyard pavement; his eyes felt heavy, their sight not too clear yet, and he believed that he was going to yawn. There was a cushion under his head; Go See must have slipped it there while he slept; it had not been out here on the bench when he had settled down to read, but in the *shu-chia* where it belonged. Go See was a good boy!

It was a sin to have gone to sleep on a day like this—to have missed perhaps an hour, such a golden hour as this, of the courtyard's perfumed and throbbing beauty. He could not expect to have a long stretch of years still before him here in his beloved courtyard. And he had slept one of its perfect hours away—he who treasured every moment he spent here, every lily-bell and tiny vine-leaf that grew here for him, and that the soft breezes loved to kiss and to jostle gently when they came to the courtyard.

He bent over and picked up the magazine repentantly, but when he had he sat looking about the lovely, treasured place a long time before he reopened the *Practitioner*. His eyes were wide awake now; they wandered about the courtyard lingeringly, finding new beauties in it—as they always did—gloating over its old ones that they knew so well.

The man's soul glowed and was glad: glowed to the exquisite radiance of this Chinese courtyard of his. And he thanked China for it, thanked his own God that it was his.

Artist, poet-minded, somewhat sybarite, too he was physician. The doctor in him never slept long; and he had patients here who needed all his doctoring; Chinese sick who needed it sorely.

He opened the *Practitioner*—"Let's see—what was I reading? Ah—yes! This is it"—and he began to read resolutely.

Interesting—very interesting! . . . Ingenious! How ingenious! . . . H'm—possibly it was—but he'd think a long time before he would risk it, in this climate, without a proper theatre, a highly trained anæsthetist, adequate staff, adequate equipment. . . . Of course! He was with the English doctor there.

Donkey-bells tinkled—a lot of them. The pad-pad of coolie feet came nearer—a lot of coolies. Some of them were carrying chairs; he knew that from the sound their feet made, and the rhythm they kept—you could always tell. Carry-coolies, too: a score or more of them. Some rich man journeyed. But the man in his courtyard did not look up; much less left the bench to go to the wall and look through it. He turned a page and forgot all about the rich man travelling past his *chia*.

He did not look up until blue-clad, and very starched, Go See brought two strangers through the moon-gate, and announced that distinguished foreigners had come to make visit to eminent, venerable Master. Then he put his magazine down reluctantly, and rose hospitably. Perhaps they'd go soon.

The sun was in his eyes, but they made out that his callers were a man and a woman; Europeans in European clothes.

"I hope you will pardon me, Mr. Kwan," Rathborn began, "I offered your servant here my card, gave it to him, in fact, but he put it up his sleeve—it's up there now—and brought us right in to you. I have taken the liberty of disturbing you, because——"

The other held out his hands, and said: "Why, don't you know me, Tom?"

Helen slipped away through the rose-frothed moon-gate into the other courtyard—the pooled jade-courtyard—and left the old friends alone.

She had seen the look the white-haired man had given her father; she had seen his face suddenly tremble when he had looked at her—looked at her with quivering, instant recognition.

Almost an hour went before her father and Charles Tolover came to her in the jade-courtyard.

IN A YÜN-NAN COURTYARD *CHAPTER XLIII*

HELEN caught her breath suddenly, faltered, stood very still, and listened incredulously to the sound that came down to her from the winding path hidden behind a thicket of cork-trees.

Was it true then? Did the miracles she had laughed at gaily when men in Yün-nan Fu—de Mesurier and several others—had vouched for them actually happen in China? Cousin Charles had said gravely that sometimes some of them seemed to; that he for one could not altogether deny them.

Had old China vouchsafed her one such miracle—in bounty, or in rebuke of her raw young scoffing?

The wild flowers she had gathered as she went—golden-rod, deep-scented roses (white, pink, yellow), snowy orchids and tawny lilies, forget-me-nots, tissue poppies, and branches of orange mimosa and blue-berried eucalyptus—slipped from the American girl's arms, and heaped their green-leafed satin blossoms and their fragrance down at her feet.

Could a Chinese play like that?

She was sure not.

But there was no European for miles here—except they three at Cousin Charles'. None lived nearer than Yün-nan Fu, he had said only yesterday, and that white travellers did not come to this out-of-the-way spot, and even a stray missionary but once in a very blue moon; no other Western at all, ever.

Was she dreaming?

She never had been wider awake. She was tingling with wide-awake, sentient life.

Was it possible, after all, that Chinese hands could play the violin like that? Mr. Harrington said that General So Wing was no mean musician. And she knew that Paul Harrington was not a mean judge. Had So Wing been educated in Austria? The Chinese of to-day went far afield in pursuit of Western "culture." Princeton and Yale teamed with them—England and Paris. Probably Berlin did. But Vienna?

Had it been some Chinese student she had heard idling an hour away up in the painted apartment? That was impossible. Only a master musician had played to her that not-to-be-forgotten day. And no Chinese!

She had found again at last the haunting melody that had ravished her senses then, only to elude her memory even as it chained it, ever since.

She heard it again. Should she forget it again?

It was the same music. It was the same musician. Helen Rathborn was sure.

She must see the player.

How?

He might be gone, lost in the deep depths of the cork-tree wood, before she could climb so far; lost for ever this time.

Let him go! A man was only a man. Let him go—and welcome, if he would. But not to take from her again and for ever that lovely melody. It was hers, hers by the right of how much she loved it, and how much it had meant to her all these years. It must not be filched from her again.

But the girl did not move.

For the man played on—if it were a man; and she would not dull her hearing by the slightest sound of her own.

It was great music greatly played. What an artist! Up there on a nameless Yün-nan hill! How sweet, how difficult, what perfect simplicity: the absolute simplicity that is the one hall-mark of all great and impeccable art.

What mattered who was playing—man or woman, yellow or white! It mattered nothing. The music was all.

It was enough.

All her life she had had music—good music.

But only once, she believed, had she heard music at once so delicate and so masterly as this—once before, in Vienna.

Was she back there now? Had she dreamed China?

That was nonsense, of course. Up there on the hillside the roof of the blue pagoda just pricked through the cork-trees; higher above the God of Literature's Temple glittered white through an opening in the dark pines. Down below her her cousin's courtyard nestled snug in its brick-and-stone wall girdle. The fat little Kitchen-gods were veiled thickly by the incense-sticks' delicate, upcurling smoke. Go See was feeding the pet turtles out in the jade-courtyard. She had heard tom-toms and brazen cymbals down on the path a few moments ago. This was China indeed. She had not dreamed it.

She had not dreamed the music that rippled down to her, as it had in

Vienna, a liquid cascade of jewelled notes, looped, interwoven, an exquisite, glowing tapestry of violin song; the human gift of sound made perfect by the art of man; genius enriched and purified through the artist's long, willing discipline.

The girl did not move until the last lovely strains had whispered themselves and their singing away into silence that throbbed with them still when they had hushed; only her breath trembled through her half-parted lips, and her thin blouse pulsed with the beating of her heart, and her hands were trembling a little. The look in her eyes would have been worth seeing—but there was none to see.

The violin was done.

Helen waited—hoping the violinist would play again. How could he stop? How could one so gifted to pour out such nectar of sound, music that was poetry, perfume, and lace, ever cease playing—for more than the pause that must whet his own artist-appetite for more and still more? Had the hand tired, or the arms wearied? It sounded so easy, natural, instinctive as breath; impassioned but effortless; the simplicity of birthright; art that has suffered long and has triumphed—triumphed humbly, as great art and great artists must!

But the violin did not sing again.

She must find it.

No matter who or what the player—Western artist, blind Chinese beggar, brutal yellow bandit—she must find and look, give the homage of her eyes to the player up there in the cork-trees, and to the violin. That violin!

To feel as Helen Rathborn had felt that feast of melted music is to be very young. (To keep such power of ecstasy is to keep youth itself.) She had heard gruesome tales of what the Chinese bandits were, of what they had done, and would do again. She knew that much of China—all of the Yang-tsze basin, it was said, seethed with red-handed banditry now. It was nothing. A violin had called her. She was going to it, since it would not come to her. What it might cost her, no matter what, was nothing.

Laughing softly at herself—the excited girl had not lost her head—she turned to follow the steep, narrow half-path that glistened yellow up to the thicket of cork-trees. She trod on a bird-wing orchid, a brambled, red-berried vine tangled her ankle. And Helen shook her head at her own unkind carelessness, sighed ruefully down at the spoiled and scattered flowers she had filched and discarded.

The little wild flowers were crushed and spoiled. She had trod on the poor white roses. The poppies were draggled and broken. It would take too long to gather up the forget-me-nots and the little wind flowers. But the great red lilies, the spotted tiger-lilies, a lovely spray of dragon flowers, a branch of azalea, a glorious sheaf of gold and rose leaves, a spike of wild tuberoses took but a moment to gather up again repentantly into one arm. Their fall had not harmed them at all. She was glad!

She went up the moss-grown path that was scarcely a path slowly and cautiously, careful not to slip on the smooth, polished stones, careful not to step on the anemones and the ferns that feathered the moss, and trailed across the yellow earth and the smooth, grey stones, careful not to misstep on a treacherous pebble—a sprained ankle was the last thing she wished, all alone here, not too near her cousin's gate. Helen went slowly, holding her flowers carefully; smiling at herself banteringly that she troubled to go.

Again!

The violin was singing again; almost whispering now. She knew what it was saying this time. Dvořák's "Humoreske" played a love-song, made a memory and a prayer, tears woven in its laughing. It was not going away from her—to be lost in the thicket of trees. It was coming down to her, the whispering violin.

She need not go on, over the troublesome stones, over the slippery-smooth moss. But she would not seem waiting, so she had to go on after all.

She picked her way with business-like care now, and her face was as indifferent and self-absorbed as her feet were cautious.

They were face to face before either could see the other. They met at a sharp curve of their way, thickly fenced with bamboos just there.

If Gayford felt any surprise at meeting a Western woman in the wilds of Yün-nan, he showed none. His caste of his race is rarely surprised, and never betrays that it is. But Gayford was not surprised. He was not interested at all. He had believed himself the only Western in this part of the province, but it was nothing to him one way or another.

He left off fiddling at once, and drew aside, as flat against the bamboos as he could, to let her pass, bowed courteously though slightly as he did. He had seen that it was a woman, a white woman in Western dress, but he did not glance at her face.

Helen Rathborn looked at him squarely. She had climbed over a good many slippery stones, plodded over a good deal of moss to see this man and

his fiddle. She looked at him frankly.

And she paled a little before she laughed.

“You!” she exclaimed.

Gayford looked at her then, of course, and his artist’s eyes saw the picture she made: one exquisite white arm full of flowers only less lovely than the riant face above them, a delicate, graceful figure framed in the sun-flecked bamboos.

Miss Rathborn flushed a trifle with vexation.

He did not remember her in the least.

But he instantly tried to appear that he did, smiled instant pleased recognition. A devilish pretty girl; a lovely creature! Where had they met before? He did not know her at all. What a sieve of a head he had, not to have even an inkling of remembrance of a face like that! She knew him. Her greeting had been too sure and too assured for him to doubt that she did recognise him.

The girl was vexed—vexed with herself that she had claimed acquaintance with a man who had forgotten her and her existence so completely. Then she and her own sterling common sense and her sound good nature rebuked her, and laughed at her. Why shouldn’t a man forget her? All men were not geese. She liked a man to be independent. And so few of them were! If it hurt just ever so little that this special man, who had chummed with her conventionally for an hour at a dinner table once, had no recollection of her now, no clue as to who she was or where they had met, so much the more foolish of her! No fault of his! And why should a man who could play the violin like that bother himself to remember a stray girl he had met for an hour years ago on the other side of the world? No reason at all. To resent it would be cheap. Helen Rathborn was not cheap.

“Then you are not the military attaché! I made sure you were.” She smiled up at him cheerfully.

“Why am I not—the military attaché you believed I was?” Brent Gayford fenced.

“Such music as yours is a whole time job,” Helen answered gravely.

The man paid her for that with a cordial, friendly smile.

“You are just a musician,” she insisted.

“I try to be one,” Gayford told her as gravely.

“Nonsense. You know that you are a great one. You were five years ago.”

Gayford was puzzled. He had not played “in public” five years ago. He had not “arrived” then.

“I have heard you play before,” she added.

“When I was a military attaché?”

“When I thought you were. And you do look a soldier. But you never have been anything but a musician.”

“Where did you hear me play, please?”

Helen laughed and hummed half under her breath the first bars of “The Blue Danube.”

Gayford’s eyes lit. “There? Where there?”

“I do not know—not in what part of Vienna it was. But it was you and *your fiddle*.”

“Wrong,” the man laughed; “I did not own this fiddle five years ago, or three.”

“You owned its twin, then.”

Gayford shook his head. “There are no twin violins,” he said. “In Vienna—I don’t think you could have heard me play in Vienna five years ago.”

“But I did. You *were* in Vienna five years ago!”

“I was. But I did not play in public then.”

“You played though—up in a room across the canal in one of those fascinating funny flat-buildings all painted with roses and yodlers and cupids and queens and things. They call them *zinspaläste*, don’t they?”

“Yes, and I lived in one of them. But where were you when you think you heard me play? And where does the military attaché come in?”

“He came in at the British Legation.”

Still he did not remember her. Her voice struck a chord—something he had heard before and had liked. But he did not remember, and her face was the face of a stranger.

“You took me in to dinner there one night,” Helen told him nicely.

It was the Englishman’s turn to flush slightly.

“Never mind,” she told him with the friendliest laugh. She saw that he was

not going to lie about it. She liked him for that. Most men would have lied—now that she had given him a safe cue. “It was a long time ago, and I wasn’t wearing a hat. Speaking of headgear, wherever on earth is *your* hat?”

“Blew off, somewhere over there back of that intensely blue pagoda.”

“Why didn’t you pick it up?”

“Because I objected to breaking my neck. It blew down a few hundred feet when it blew off. There’s a fairly steep gorge back of the pagoda. And it’s windy up there off and on.”

“I wish I had an umbrella or something to lend you. You’ll get sunstroke if you run about China bareheaded.”

“I do not run about China. I am strolling the Asian continent in the most leisurely way. And I like all sorts of weather—even the hottest. I’m not afraid of sunstroke, my poll is well thatched.” It was beautifully thatched, thickly and softly. “But I wish you did have an umbrella with you to lend me—so that I could call to return it. I must not presume to ask what you are doing in China, but an old dinner acquaintance may venture to ask if you live near here, may he not? And if you expect to live there long?”

“Half a mile, perhaps a mile, as the celebrated crow flies, I fancy. We are staying with a cousin who makes his home here; has adopted China.”

“Do you think he would like me to call on him?” He was making the best amends he could. “When I’ve bought a new hat, of course.”

“Cousin Charles would be charmed. He is all friendliness and welcome. And his Chinese home is worth seeing.”

“And you? Are you friendly and welcoming?”

“Occasionally.”

“May I call when I have procured a new hat? I was properly presented—in Vienna, you know.”

“I wouldn’t dwell too much on that if I were you, Mr. Gayford,” she laughed at him frankly.

Then both the man and the girl reddened a little. She had not meant him to know that she remembered his name—all these years! He was vexed with himself that still he could not recall that they had met, and chatted together through one of his kinswoman’s long, elaborate meals.

“Cousin Charles won’t mind your hat, or your coat.” Gayford was as coatless as he was hatless. “And perhaps he’d find a hat to lend you.”

Suddenly she saw recognition leap into the man’s brown eyes. But Helen was wrong in thinking that it was she herself or her face that had slipped back to his memory. It was her voice.

“May I really call one afternoon soon?” He wished he could have addressed her by her name.

“Why not? We do not have too many visitors at my cousin’s. Not Europeans. Chinese pad in and out of the courtyard all day long.”

“Has your cousin’s house a name?”

“A queer Chinese one. I can’t pronounce it, and I forget what it means. My cousin’s name is Tolover. But none of the Chinese manage that. They call him ‘Mr. Kwan.’ If you ask for Mr. Kwan’s, anyone will direct you—all the Chinese know my cousin. I think every blade of grass here—for miles—knows him. By the way, my name is Rathborn.”

“Thank you,” Brent Gayford said bravely. “Frankly, I did not catch it that night in Vienna. My cousin usually gabbles names. I’ve often told her so. She ought to use dinner-cards, but she won’t. Did you like Vienna, Miss Rathborn?”

“We both did, my father and I, very, very much. Don’t you?”

“Like Vienna!” Gayford answered, in a tone that told the sharp-witted American girl a great deal about him.

It was a week after that before she asked him what it was she had heard him playing up in his apartment in the painted *zinspaläste*—the music she had never forgotten, the music she had heard him playing again up in the cork-trees.

But it was not a week before Gayford called at Mr. Tolover's. He did call, correctly garbed, and just the right hat in hand, as your Englishman will on the very equator.

That, however, was not his first introduction to the missioner's courtyard. And he went there the first time hatless and coatless, and was cordially welcomed.

Helen wondered, up there near the blue pagoda, how she was going to turn back, for it was time for her to go home, without too unmistakably betraying that she had come out of her way in search of a violin and a violinist.

She need not have troubled. Gayford realised that she whom he had so crassly forgotten had remembered him, but, except for his slight embarrassment at his own forgetfulness, which some girls would count as rudeness, he did not give it a thought. Brent Gayford had no vanity, and, in spite of Vogelweid's more than once repeated warnings, he still always took it for granted that he interested girls and women as little as they interested him. It chanced that this girl had remembered him, and that he had forgotten her. It might as easily have been the other way about. And it mattered nothing, had no significance, either way.

"I'm just rambling about"—that was the best she could think of—"and I ought to be getting back home now, or Father will get anxious. Is there a path down the other side of the hill?"

"Not for you," Gayford assured her with a glance at her feet. "Better go the way you came, Miss Rathborn." He thanked his stars that he had caught her name this time. And he did not intend to forget it again—not until he had strolled off to another part of China.

"All right, I will then—when I've taken a good look at the pagoda. I have not seen one at all like it before, and we have been in China almost a year now."

"Neither have I, and so have I."

They both laughed.

It was a day for laughter. They were young. And China was smiling and basking in the yellow sunlight.

The Pagoda of the God-of-the-Grasshoppers was not large—only five low stories—but it was oddly beautiful even in the land of beautiful architecture. It was strangely unlike all China's other pagodas. Its stories all were very nearly square. Every inch of it was blue, burnished, and radiant. Even the peaked and curling roofs were blue—the same lovely blue: the colour of a deep June sky. About the lower story a long, lithe tiger twined snake-like, its tail caught in its half-open sharp-toothed jaws; its blue eyes blazing fiercely in its upheld blue head, its blue claws clutched fiercely on the smooth blue tiles beneath it. The second story was a dragon; each sharp-cut scale a sapphire in the sunlight, the blue eyes in its down-held head dark and tender. The next higher story was a procession of birds, each beaking another—some unmistakably in quarrel, others, it seemed, in courtship. The fourth story looked blue sea waves on which blue-sailed blue junks rode, some at quiet ease, some in imminent peril. The last story was a maze of great grasshoppers and bamboo sprays. Grasshoppers crowded the edge of all the roofs; bells and lanterns hung from every roof; all unlike all the others, all the same deep, pulsing blue.

The blue pagoda looked the bluer for the greens and greys of the trees about it: spruce and fragrant-berried eucalyptus growing beside the splendid cork-trees.

Ferns, golden-rod, and wild white roses frothed and feathered about its base.

When they reached it the man and the girl stood a long time looking at the old pagoda that had kept its radiant blue there for more than a thousand years. They paid it the tribute of silence. Nor did they speak of it to each other when at last they turned away. Any word would have been foolish. They were grateful to each other that neither spoiled with words this thing they shared.

"I ought to offer to carry your flowers," the man said as they turned away. "Shall I? They belong where they are, though. And I don't think they'd like the transfer."

"I must get them home soon, or they'll not be worth taking. No, thanks, I'll carry them. If you did, I'd have to carry your violin, and neither you nor it would like that."

"Wrong again!" the violinist said stoutly, but he made no motion to make the exchange as they turned and picked their way together over the moss and

the stones, down slippery steps, through thickets of pebbles.

Gayford saw to his companion's safety unobtrusively, which is how such Englishmen pay all their social duties; but his tenderer care was for his violin and for its varnish. The girl would not twist her ankle or tear her skirt on briar or twig while he was with her; not even the winds of heaven, or a dew-silvered spider's web, not a wild white rose's soft virgin petal, should visit his violin too roughly.

He intended to call at Miss Rathborn's cousin's; he felt that he should, in courteous atonement for his forgetfulness of the very brief slight acquaintance a girl had remembered. But he almost wished that the small necessity had not arisen. He had been having a very good time with things as they were. But certainly he would call. He liked Miss Rathborn, and her beautiful voice was a positive delight. No musician could have failed to hear it that. Since he had to call, he was glad that the American girl was so pleasantly and easily companionable, and he was grateful to her for the music of her voice.

"Yes?" Gayford asked in challenge of the question his acute ear had heard in a soft laugh that broke delicately between the orange mimosa and the blue-berried eucalyptus in Helen's arms.

"I was wondering wherever you were staying—eating and sleeping—here. There are no hotels, not even a Chinese inn, and not the sign of a European family."

"I am a tramp," Gayford assured her. "Fiddle and I are quite on our own here in China. I have a chair and a nag and a coolie-retinue waiting for me at a tumble-down inn in a picturesque but odoriferous village appropriately called Three-Mud-Huts, a few miles over there." He motioned south-east with his violin-bow. "But just now I am staying with friends not far from here."

"Friends? Here!"

"Very good Chinese friends of mine. I like them immensely. They are bandits."

"Well, I'm blessed!" Miss Rathborn stood stock-still and regarded him severely. "You English *are* queer! Honest Injun bandits?"

"I have heard several countrymen of yours state that there are no honest Indians."

"There are not many Indians of any sort left," Helen said, almost as if she were ashamed to say it. "Truly—truly bandits?" she persisted.

"Absolutely."

“I don’t think you’d better call, Mr. Gayford.”

“But I insist upon calling, Miss Rathborn. Wouldn’t you like to have a peep at a camp of Chinese bandits? Inspect it?”

“Wouldn’t I!” the girl laughed. “But you are making fun of me—punishing my curiosity! It isn’t true—it can’t be.”

“It is perfectly true. See—here comes one of them; their leader and my especial friend. Shall I present him to you?”

A uniformed Chinese was coming towards them.

“Yes, please.” But in a moment, seeing the approaching Chinese more clearly: “Him! You *are* making game of me, Mr. Gayford. You certainly shall not call! That isn’t a bandit. And you need not trouble to introduce us, thank you. I know him already. We met in Yün-nan Fu. Bandit! That is General So Wing.”

“It is. My host and friend—General or bandit, as you like. They are one and the same over here, you know.”

“Would you say it to him?”

“Naturally; or, being his friend, I should not have said so to you, or to anyone else, behind his back. So Wing says it himself.”

Helen Rathborn rather expected the Chinese to avoid joining them—there was time. He had shown no desire to press his acquaintance upon her in Yün-nan Fu.

But So Wing came on up to them, and before he smiled at Brent Gayford he saluted Miss Rathborn as punctiliously and as easily as any officer in the British Army could have done. And it was to her, not to Gayford, that he spoke as he reached them.

“I am fortunate to find you, Miss Rathborn. I have been searching for you most industriously for more than an hour—a long Chinese hour. And the Melon Moon is torrid in Yün-nan when the Great Heat draws near.”

“You? For me?”

“I for you.” General So Wing saluted again before he bowed. “Mr. Kwan is dragging the Yang-tsze, I think. Your father is searching Nosuland.”

“How do you know?” Helen demanded.

“I have just come from Mr. Kwan’s. I had a letter for him entrusted to me at Hankow the last time I was there. I have delayed its delivery too long.

Opportunity has not served me until now. I was pledged to put it in Mr. Kwan's hand myself. I did so this afternoon. I met Dr. Rathborn again when I did. But I found your relative's lovely courtyard in considerable turmoil because of your over-prolonged absence. I will hasten back, if I may, and assure them that you are safe and are returning."

"Oh—don't trouble. Father knows I'll not get into more trouble ever than I can get out of—and Cousin Charles must learn it. I'm sorry if I have fidgeted him, but they can't be dragging the Yang-tsze, or scouring Nosuland very vigorously, if you found them both in the courtyard, and left them both there!"

So Wing laughed. But he told her gravely: "I should not presume to hint or to think that you could not take care of yourself wherever you chose to go, whatever you chose to do, in your own country. But this is China, my country. It is not safe for you to wander about it unattended, Miss Rathborn, believe me!"

"But I don't believe it," Helen tossed back at him. "I am an American, wherever I am. I'm not afraid of anyone—even in China."

"Will you pardon me for saying that you are more brave than wise?" The Chinese spoke a trifle mockingly.

Helen Rathborn paid his rebuke a pretty shrug. "Nonsense, General So Wing. Who would bother or harm me, here in broad daylight?"

"No one, I hope, who knew you were of Mr. Kwan's family. But not all the *yü min* know it. And there are bandits about now, as far from the lower gorges as this is—even farther in some provinces. Yün-nan is a bandit province, Miss Rathborn."

"There always are, are there not, in China?"

"Very often," So said gravely. "There always is hunger in China."

"So is right," Gayford joined in. "Don't ramble about by yourself again, will you?"

"Dear me," the girl mocked them both, "what an international entanglement. But I'll make for home now, and help to drag the Yang-tsze and search Nosuland. Good-bye, both of you."

But they still walked beside her. Gayford was surprised that So Wing did. He himself, of course, would not leave her, not even if she dismissed him again and more curtly, until they were in sight of her kinsman's; he hoped it was not far. But he felt it would have been rather better taste on So Wing's part to have saluted and gone.

Miss Rathborn made no comment upon their keeping pace with her. And she chatted to them impartially. She asked So Wing the name of the temple beyond the blue pagoda, and asked Brent Gayford how long ago he had last been in Vienna.

Halfway to his gate they came upon Tolover and Doctor Rathborn walking hurriedly, looking about them anxiously.

Helen laughed at them both, but slipped her hand remorsefully into her father's.

"Hold on to me tight," she bade him. "But I won't run away again. Were you really anxious?"

"I began to be anxious," Rathborn told her.

"I was very anxious the moment we missed you," Tolover told her gravely. "Don't do it again, Helen—*please*."

The girl made a mutinous face, promised lightly, and introduced the hatless, coatless violinist.

Tolover held out a cordial hand, but his eyes, and the greed in them, were for the violin. He would have urged the Englishman to "come in" as cordially in any case, but he did it hungrily now because of what Brent Gayford carried.

So Wing went with them as a matter of course, Helen noticed—and wondered.

It was late when the Englishman and the Chinese left Tolover's—very late.

There had been chat in the courtyard, chat of "oversea," chat of China, chiefly chat of music. There had been music in the house.

Helen Rathborn had said but little. She could not be persuaded to join in the others' music; she did not feel like it to-night, she had told them.

Late as it was when the two guests had gone, Helen lingered a little in the courtyard, sat a long time by her open window when she had "gone to bed."

She knew what had happened to her. Her father more than half suspected it.

RATHBORN looked at Tolover in blank dismay.

"But, Charlie, you must! Not coming home with us! Of course you are. You have got to come. I've come right across the world to find you, spent more than a year doing it, and you have the confounded impudence to tell me that you don't give a damn."

"I have said nothing of the sort, Tom."

"Yes, you have. You say you won't budge from here—that's saying it; the same thing. Don't you care? Is it nothing to you that your name is cleared?"

"It is more than I can say, that you have come all this way to find me and to tell me, Tom. It is more to me to have you with me here—you and Helen—than I could make you understand, you who have never been alone, Tom. But it is nothing to me that my name is cleared, as you call it."

"What do you call it?" Rathborn demanded wrathfully.

Tolover's only answer was a deprecating smile. Then, "Why should I care, Tom? You never believed that I was guilty. I am the last Tolover. The old story is forgotten; was forgotten years ago, of course. Walter escaped the punishment that must have caught him, if I had not checked investigation by running away, and in that way confessed and proclaimed my guilt. And Alice never knew. That was all I wanted. I have nothing to go back for; I have a very great deal to stay here for."

"Have you never regretted it; wished you hadn't done it?"

"Never. I have thanked God that I did, and that I pulled it off, every day of my life since. Regretted that I had saved Walter, and spared Alice heartache and shame! What do you take me for!"

"A Tolover of Virginia!" his old friend told him. "But I half believe that Alice suspected the truth."

"I hope to God she did not. And I pray God that she never found Walter out."

"She never quit loving him," Alice Rathborn's husband said. "And I don't believe you did either."

"God is my witness that I never did."

“Well—well—you ‘bore your friend’s infirmities,’ if it never was done before in all earth’s history, and never is done again.”

“That is how I read friendship, Tom. I was Walter’s friend. And he was Alice’s brother. I hope that I should have done it for him, if he had not been; I hope I should, but I can’t be sure. We never know until we are tested. He sent me his love, you say. That means a lot to me. Poor, poor Walter!”

“It was the last word he spoke before he died. ‘Find Charlie, won’t you?’ And I promised. ‘Give him my love.’ ”

“He always had mine,” Charles Tolover said softly.

“You are some man!” Thomas Rathborn murmured huskily. “But you have got to come home with us, Charlie. The old place needs you—and it’s worth a fortune now; many times as much as it was when you came here. And Walter’s confession, witnessed by me—who can swear to his identity as well as to his signature—makes you safe to come, clears you beyond question.”

“I’ll take care of the old place in my will. As for Walter’s confession, I burned it the night you gave it to me.”

Rathborn groaned. “I was a fool to trust you with it!”

“Leave it all alone, Tom,” Tolover insisted gravely. “I shall take my own way about it—as I have up to now. It is my happiness to have it all left as it is, as it has been all these years. I sacrificed a good deal to save Walter’s name while he lived—did it gladly, for his sake and for hers. Why should I stain it now? He is still her brother, Helen’s uncle. The child has a look of him sometimes. We will leave him in peace, sleeping at Alice’s feet. I like to think of him there in your Poughkeepsie graveyard—near her. She blesses you for it, I am sure. And I do. I am glad that you never have told Helen—it would sadden her, and she would not understand how much excuse there was for Walter, poor lad. I am glad she never knew that it was to her own uncle, her mother’s flesh and blood, you rode so hurriedly the day you borrowed her nag when your own was ill. I am glad, for the child’s sake, that you did not mark the grave you laid him in. I am very, very glad that when Gabriel blows his trump Walter will obey it in the shelter of his sister’s nearness. I shall obey it from here, Tom; from my grave in this courtyard that I have lived in so long. This is where I shall rest best until Gabriel calls me—over there under the pepper-tree. No, no, Tom, you can’t budge me; you certainly can’t ship me West. Stay with me as long as you will. I needn’t tell you that I like having you here—and Helen. But don’t think again that you can take me away from this. You can’t. I’d find the West mighty dull after China. I have taken root, Tom.”

“I am damned!”

Tolover laughed.

“She is very like Alice,” he said again, as Helen and Brent Gayford came from the house. The girl was carrying the man’s violin. Brent had the handle of a luncheon basket in one hand, a rug over his other arm, a coat of Helen’s across his shoulder.

“Coming to our picnic?” Helen asked.

“Where?” her cousin queried cautiously.

“Up by the Blue Pagoda.”

“I think I’ll lunch at home, dear,” Tolover told her.

“Same here,” Doctor Rathborn added.

“Lazy—lazy,” Helen called them. But she did not urge them, nor did Brent Gayford.

The old friends sat and watched them as they went together through the moon-gate, across the jade-courtyard, and out of sight.

“She is very like Alice,” Tolover repeated.

Rathborn put his hand on his friend’s, and Tolover gripped it; and they sat together so until the younger voices died away beyond the wall.

It was not the first time that Gayford and Helen had gone back together to the Blue Pagoda, not the first time they had made picnic all alone. It seemed unkind not to leave the two old friends alone together now and then. The excuse was only partially dishonest, and it served.

Summer was almost gone. The air nipped refreshingly and the woods were crimsoned by the sharp clutch of autumn’s warning fingers. The birds were flying south.

Helen wondered how much longer Gayford was going to study Chinese music and its instruments—in her cousin’s house and courtyards. But she was careful not to ask him. She knew that each day now music and the things of music got dwindling hours of his. But she had known that this friendship of theirs was but an interlude—to him. Helen had known that he was not her lover; she knew how often his thought homed back to Vienna. But—of late ——

Brent was careful to spread the rug in the sunniest spot for her when they

had reached the cork-trees at the edge of the pagoda. “I must not let you sit here as long as we did last time,” he said regretfully as he unstrapped the wicker basket, and began to spread out Go See’s generous and boastful interpretation of “a few sandwiches,” “the days are drawing in already. There’ll be ground frost in another week, I think.”

And when they had lunched, and he took his fiddle from where it lay beside her on the rug, “Ought you?” she asked him. “Isn’t this almost cold air bad for it?”

Gayford laughed. “Don’t you want your music?”

“Very much. But we must not be unkind to Fiddle.”

“I’d risk the health of a better fiddle than this one to give you a little pleasure. You are an ideal audience, Miss Rathborn. I love to play for you. Do you know why?”

“No?”

“Because I love to watch your face when the music has you.”

“But you never look—or see—when you are playing. Your eyes are miles away—years away, too—except when they are brooding down on Fiddle.”

“I can see your face without looking at it, then—when I am playing for you.”

And to-day his eyes did not leave it while he played his own Caprice that she had heard once in Vienna, and heard so often now in Yün-nan.

A smaller talent than his might have found inspiration in it, and have quickened at the quickened beauty of Helen’s face as he and the risked violin did their music-best for her. The delicate colour came and went in the lovely, vivid face. How like a flower she was! And the red bow of her mouth! He could not catch the girl’s eyes—they were on the distance. But he knew their colour, neither blue nor jade, and he knew their sudden trick of sparkling through a mist. And the violinist knew that he was playing well.

“Thank you for liking it,” he said as he laid the violin down—almost carelessly. “Shall I dedicate it to you? May I? I have not published it yet.”

“No,” Helen told him. She drew the violin closer, and kept her bare hand resting on it gently.

“Why not?”

“Because,” the girl answered lightly, “you didn’t write it for me. You didn’t even know me when you wrote it.”

“Then I will write you another, now that I do know you—if you will let me dedicate it to you. But we won’t be too sure that I didn’t write ‘Caprice’ for you. And I think it is like you—a sort of music picture of you.”

Helen Rathborn crimsoned—and hoped that she did not show half the rush of joy that she knew she felt.

“And,” the man went on, “perhaps I did write it for you, without knowing that I did. You heard me play it two days after your birthday, five years ago. And I finished writing it on your birthday, began it the day before, just five years ago. I remember the date, because it was my best friend’s birthday—he was in China, too, less than a year ago. Perhaps it came singing into my mind the night we dined together at my cousin’s. I did forget your face—but I never forgot your voice; no musician could.”

Helen laughed—taking shy cover so.

“The first time I heard you sing—do you remember?”

Helen shook her head—untruthfully. But perhaps he did not remember the first time.

“It was here; just down there. You only hummed, and only a snatch of the ‘Blue Danube,’ but, my word, it was music! It’s a thundering pity that your father is not a poor man. You belong among the singers. Your voice always reminds me of Maria Olczewska’s. Yours is as lovely, and as true. You always hit the note dead in the middle. Scores of famous professionals don’t. Olczewska always does. I’d rather hear her sing than any other of the Opera House artists—in Vienna, I mean. Would you like to be an opera singer?”

“I’d hate it. But I wish I could play the violin—even a little, just to myself at home.”

Gayford was stretched at the girl’s feet, his chin in his hand, the elbow that supported it dug in comfortably in the moss.

“With those?” he mocked, letting his eyes drop from her face to the hand on her lap and the hand on his violin. The man did not hear the tenderness in his mocking voice. But the girl did. Her breath quickened softly as her eyes fell.

“I suppose they are ridiculous,” she owned with a sigh.

“Very. Look at mine! They are hands. And they have been on my job—the fiddle-job—since I was three.” He spread his right hand out flat and broad on the Caressa, and challenged her with the laugh in his brown eyes. “Let’s

measure!” He covered a hand of hers lightly with a hand of his, and when he did, sprang up hastily.

“You are cold. Come, I must take you home.” He held out an insistent hand.

“Only my silly hands, just a little.” But she let him help her up, when she had put the violin in its case.

Gayford waited smiling down at her while she did it. She often did now. He knew she liked to touch and carry it—as she did her cousin’s old violin. And he had the bamboo basket and the rug to carry, and her light wrap, unless he could make her put it on.

“Better pull your gloves on—wish they were a muff.”

“There are no muffs now,” Miss Rathborn scoffed.

“Where are your gloves then, you careless girl? I saw Go See ram them in your jacket pocket when he brought it to me.”

He searched about, and found only one.

“One’s no use—and I’m not going to put gloves on anyway—gloves on a picnic!” She started down the hillside as she spoke, the violin in her arms. No man need tell her twice that it was time for her to go home.

Gayford turned for another lingering look at the old pagoda; a lovely and lovelier blue radiance in the gold burnishing of the slowly sinking sun. And standing so, he slipped the little suède glove into his own pocket, and knew that he did. There were two pockets in Helen’s light tweed jacket; and her jacket lay again across Brent Gayford’s shoulder.

Brent started a song as they went, but the girl would not join in. How could she after what he had said? The Englishman liked her for that.

He liked her for a lot of reasons. He had stayed on at Mr. Tolover’s all these months for the one paramount reason that had dictated and ruled all he had done since the evening he had told his grandfather that he could not be a soldier. But this girl had added a good deal to the pleasure that his sojourn at the missioner’s undoubtedly had been.

Brent Gayford and Charles Tolover had found each other at once. The bandit encampment had broken up—the bandits going farther north and farther west—a few days after Brent and Helen had met on the hillside. Tolover had urged the Englishman to be his guest for a time, and each time Gayford had suggested going Tolover had protested, begged him to stay. The violinist had

stayed gladly. A “composing fit” had seized him. There were peace and quiet in the roomy bungalow, congenial, friendly companionship when he cared to have it, uninterrupted solitude as often and as long as he preferred that. Miss Rathborn was an excellent accompanist; Mr. Tolover was a better one. It had been a toss-up years ago whether Charles Tolover was to become a doctor or a pianist. Family pride had turned the scale. But always he had kept his music. The younger man’s desire to find and study the folk music of the East delighted and excited Tolover. It began to look as if the violinist would have to leave the music of other Oriental races out of his programme, or speed up his itinerary—or else run the risk of being forgotten in the music world of Europe. But Mr. Kwan had a wealth of knowledge concerning Chinese music, a princely collection of its instruments, a not meaner one of all that had been recorded of it by Chinese and by European writers. And all he had, as all he knew, was cordially at Gayford’s service.

At first Brent had given all his day hours, many of his night ones, to his lifelong passion. He scarcely realised that, as the weeks passed, the hours, and even days, when music’s thraldom receded a little, but never far, from him, relaxed its grip of him, had increased.

But the American girl realised. She carried herself so gently-proudly; so insouciant and careless that she deceived everyone except her cousin Charles—and herself. Her father’s first half-suspicion slept, then died almost as soon as it came. Doctor Rathborn was glad to bury it. He liked Brent Gayford. It was his habit to like people when they did not make it quite impossible; an instinct so deep-grained that his profession, the most disillusioning of them all, had not destroyed it. And he knew a sound and manly man when he saw one—tinker, acrobat, organ-grinder. But a strolling minstrel was not his choice of a husband for his daughter, nor was any man so engrossed in anything but her as this young Englishman was. It amazed the daughter-obsessed physician that any unattached fellow could see as much of Helen as this fellow did, and not fall in love with her. But he did not resent it, and still less did he regret it. The change was refreshing. Poor de Mesurier would have been inconveniently *de trop* here—Helen herself the only white woman for many a long, difficult mile; the only woman of any race or sort in this *chia* household—unless you counted the Kitchen-god’s wife and concubine; both of whom Rathborn admired intensely.

Doctor Rathborn might have felt less sure of the accuracy of his own conclusion if he had seen how often Helen dimpled, and how happily, when she was alone in her own room. But Doctor Rathborn did not. And he came to regard Brent Gayford as a surprisingly obliging (for an Englishman)

convenience and godsend. He—Rathborn himself—was greatly interested in Oriental ailments, vastly amused by Chinese pharmacopœia and quackeries, deeply interested in Charles' practice. And Gayford's good-natured readiness to give his daughter a fair and increasing fraction of his companionship left the father free to accompany Tolover's constant professional calls. Thomas Rathborn was as keen on his profession as Brent Gayford was on music. Tolover ministered to both their appetites gladly. It never could have occurred to him to skimp or shirk his Chinese sick just because the man he loved above all others, and a girl he loved even more, were making him a visit which he knew could not last much longer.

As for Brent Gayford—one could not play or write music all the time. He always had worked sanely. Again and again Vogelweid had cautioned him against the rust and stalemate of overwork and overstrain. The few hours a day he gave to looking after Miss Rathborn, in her father's absence, and to trying to keep her from being hopelessly dull were not all a hardship. And it was a small enough return to make for all "Mr. Kwan's" exquisite hospitality and kindness. Helen Rathborn read Gayford accurately, and without the least effort; she was a woman, he was only a man, he was only English, she was an American. She knew. No wonder that her dimples deepened. No wonder that the courtyard was sweet with her soft laughing. No wonder that often a girl's blue eyes twinkled softly, and took shelter under their white velvet lids.

They did not see So Wing when they passed him—the bamboos screened him. They were busied with themselves; and they believed him still in Chihli. But So Wing saw them; and did not accost them. He *heard* their voices; he *saw* their faces as they went home together, going slowly down the hillside. And So Wing laughed silently and grimly—at himself. So Wing had a suède glove in his khaki tunic's pocket. He had found it here a few moments ago. And So Wing knew why he had come back to Yün-nan to make one of Mr. Kwan's house-party for a few days before he went to O-mei Hsien, to see if the time had ripened for him to kill the father who had made him nameless, who had robbed his mother of her girlhood.

When the bandit encampment had broken up, So Wing as well as Gayford had stayed for a time in Tolover's elastic homestead.

But reason and common sense soon had warned him not to linger on there. And So Wing had gone away. But what had tempted him to stay, even while it alarmed and repelled him, had pulled him back several times during the months that Brent Gayford had been Tolover's guest. And he had come because he had to; had come scoffing at himself that he did.

He should not come again! And to-day he would not go to the missioner's.

They would not miss his flute. The flute was not an essential instrument. They had the piano, two violins—half a dozen other musical instruments. Mr. Kwan could play most of them. Gayford could play them all; those white master-fingers could pluck and win music from whatever had keys or strings and resonance. It had been a delight to be one of the music-makers in the red-roofed house, and in the courtyard. But it was done—not to be again. But it would be a memory.

It is the impulse of all genius to give and to share, to interpret and reveal: its necessity to give out as irresistible as childbirth.

All love that is great love has to speak; most of all the musician's love of music. Else Brent Gayford need not have broken his grandfather's stubborn heart, but have feasted alone on the music that was the very soul of him—his strength and his manhood. Genius needs its outlet, craves the sacred stimulant of sympathy and response. Because the little boy who had played "The Spring Song" at school had grown a master, because the soul, as well as the art, of him was big, it was as sweet to him to give to the three or four music-lovers in the missionary's Chinese home as it ever had been, or ever would be, to give in the great music-houses of Europe.

Vogelweid never had heard his English pupil play so superbly as Gayford sometimes had played here with only three American friends and a Chinese flute-player to hear and receive.

There had been great music in the *chia* of Kwan Yin-ko's white brother—even while hideous clouds of peril slowly gathered above the Lower Yang-tsze.

"It has been a wonderful summer!" Brent said as he followed her through the wall-gate.

It had been a wonderful summer—to them all.

But when spring came again to Yün-nan, and the first violets peeped up shyly where the Niul An gave itself to the Yang-tsze, hyssop grew in the courtyard.

VILLAGE shindies are noisy in China. The great dramas come stealthily, in silence. When their toll is taken, the holocaust done, the blood-stained actors go as suddenly, silently: vanish without sound or warning. The guns in the distance only murmur softly; sound a lazy summer wind singing in the bamboos.

Go See was feeding the Kitchen-gods with honey. Tin-Bong was making dumplings. Rathborn and Tolover were playing chess in the *shu-chia*. Bees were buzzing amorously on the clover. Soot-black butterflies hovered over the wild white roses. The honeysuckle was in bud.

There was music in the courtyard: the sweetest music Brahms ever wrote, the sweetest love-song ever written.

Helen smiled her thanks (there were tears in her eyes) and took the violin from him, and shut it away in its case.

Gayford understood. He smiled back at her. She was right, of course. Silence was the only music fine enough to follow that—as Brahms had written it, and as he had just played it to this girl.

For a long golden moment neither spoke. Ivory clicked on the chess-board inside the *shu-chia's* open casement. But the man and the girl sitting on the old stone seat in the courtyard neither spoke nor stirred.

The silence throbbed.

Then a bird began to sing, almost apologetically, up in the pepper-tree.

The sun was distilling mignonette and heliotrope in the quivering air.

A vine all rosy with blossoms, indescribably sweet, dripped down, temptingly near, from a young silver-willow's low-growing branch. The girl put out her hand and caught a spray to her face.

"I wonder where their perfume goes when the flowers are dead? I wish all flowers had scent. To me the scent of a flower always seems its soul. I suppose to you its perfume is its voice—its language and speech?"

"I do rather translate everything into the language of sound," he owned, "or I used to, but now——" He broke off with a low significant laugh.

Helen let the pink-flowered spray spring back to its willow branch. She

still held the violin in its case resting against her knee.

The man, leaning a little nearer, gently but imperatively, took the case from her and laid it down on the ground.

“I will not let you spoil it. I am jealous of Fiddle. It is your servant; I am not going to let you pamper it. Helen—I have more than music for you. Helen ——”

The man’s hand closed upon the girl’s hand—the little white hand he had laughed at several times: wooing it so. The girl knew how often he had—when and where.

It had come to her: the thing she had craved. But now that it had come, she would have held it off a little longer if she could.

She dared not look down, dared not see the strong hand that was prisoning hers; she was not ready to meet the brown eyes she could feel as actually as her hand felt his. So, in such girlish plight, she looked up towards the red-pepper-tree, looked up and saw the horror leering at them on the courtyard wall.

Gayford saw her face blanch, turned, and saw the bandits creeping on the wall, heard the gate-man’s startled cry, turned again, and saw the wild men rushing the gate, swarming the jade-courtyard.

Hell had come to Yün-nan—as it so often has. Desperate feet were crushing the violets just peeping shyly up on the bamboo-jungled banks where the Niul An gave itself to the Yang-tsze.

Theft and murder had stalked the home of Mr. Kwan.

Unkempt, capless heads, snarling, vicious yellow faces showed above the wall. Tin-Bong ran screaming from the kitchen.

The soft sound of falling ivory, ivory chessmen in a panic, came through the casement. Tolover and Rathborn sprang through the casement—it was shorter so. Tolover said something in a low voice to Go See as he passed him. Go See replied with an insolent shrug.

The ragged, almost naked rabble were starving for the rice they had not tasted for days, several of them had eaten poppy, a score had filled their food-empty stomachs with rice-liquor that a terrified inn-keeper, who had nothing else to give, had given them.

Most of them were armed. All of them were desperate. They had come from famine.

The three men who loved her gathered close about her: their unarmed

bodies the only poor defence they could give her.

The maddened mobsmen pressed nearer, crushed closer.

The Englishman quivered with impotent anger. Thomas Rathborn tried to think to some possible avail—and failed; knew that he was weak with terror, sick-afraid for his child. Tolover began to speak—in Chinese; the bandits snarled him down menacingly.

Trapped! Death, and torture, worse than any mere dying, crouched at them.

Of the four the girl was the least to be pitied. For the others were men, men who loved her, and knew that they could not save her, could not hope to serve her even with respite, if indeed respite could be a kindness.

Gayford eyed the demonised men who were nearest, wondering how many he could throttle before they touched her. Not one of them was more crazed than he was—crazed with hate of the yellow fiends who menaced her. He loved Helen; and he had not loved before. The world held no other woman—never had.

Thomas Rathborn and Charles Tolover loved her with a double love; loved her for herself and for her mother to whom each had given the one great love. And Rathborn loved her too for his own blood and flesh that were hers.

They loved her, and were powerless to save her.

Of them all, at bay here and helpless, the missionary's plight was the sorest. He had believed that none in China would harm him or his; a foolish faith born of his own affection for all Chinese, and of his years of loyal, devoted ministering to them, their gratitude for which he had believed that nothing could undermine. His sudden disillusion was shattering. His self-reproach was worse. "God forgive me!" his soul sobbed. He ought to have realised how serious the widespread and growing discontent and disturbances were, and realising have sent them away, back into safety—these three trapped with him here. And he had urged them to stay! Tom would not have been here—Tom and Helen—but for him; but for him never would have come to China. And he had repaid them with this!

Go See had come to the edge of the jibbering crowd. He spoke to one of them; as evil-faced a ruffian as Asia ever countried. As he spoke Go See gestured offensively toward the old missionary, his master. The other laughed coarsely in reply. Presently Go See wormed his way to the girl and the three men beside her; he did it slowly, pausing for a word with one and another of the murderous crew as he did. When he reached them Tolover spoke to the servant, not severely, almost deprecatingly. Go See answered with an infamous

foulness, open contempt and coarse accusation. Rathborn, Helen, and Gayford could not understand the words, but the tone and the manner were unmistakable.

Go See lurched over Mr. Kwan, lurched across him truculently, and thrust a threatening doubled fist against the missioner's breast, insolently even pushed his yellow fist inside Tolover's robe. Tolover gave a cry of dismay as Go See withdrew his hand and went laughing, shambling off, and into the house.

Whatever the ruffians intended to do or to demand, their hunger gave the white prisoners respite. Most of them were raiding the kitchen already. The others followed Go See there now, all but a half-score left on guard. Four squatted down, on guard over Mr. Kwan and the other three Westerns. Another stood armed in the arch of the moon-gate, two others at the outer gate.

In the house Tolover's servants tended them obsequiously, gave them all they could eat and drink of Tolover's best.

"Is there nothing we can do?" Brent Gayford asked Tolover.

"Not yet," Tolover answered.

"It is all up with us, isn't it, Charlie?"

"I am afraid so," Tolover owned. "But there is always a chance in China. We must give them their head, oppose them in nothing. That is our only chance—until a bigger chance comes, if it does." In spite of himself, Charles Tolover spoke dejectedly.

And not all his sorrow was for his friends. His home was being ravished—his courtyards ruined. Everything portable and of value they would take; what they did not carry off they would destroy. Mr. Kwan was suffering acutely for his home that he loved as his own flesh and blood; which in a peculiar and intimate sense it was. He had begotten and reared it. He had tended and cared for it scrupulously, loved it dearly.

One of the gaunt animal-faced on close guard upon them suddenly spat out angrily. He was tortured with hunger. Why not kill these "red-haired devils" at once, and, relieved of their custody, eat? His hand went into his shirt, and closed on a weapon.

"Play to them—quickly!" Helen caught up his violin and pushed it into Gayford's hand.

He obeyed her with hands that trembled—obeyed because she had asked it, not because he hoped anything from it—not knowing what he played. To this

day he does not know. It was poor music, and he played it abominably. Vogelweid would have exploded at the badness of Brent Gayford's playing.

But it served.

The bandit left his knife in his shirt, sat back on his heels and listened. All four of them listened—and their fierce, squat faces grew quiet, if not indeed amiable. Helen saw it, whispered a word to the player; and his hands grew steadier, the bow and the violin were making better music now. It was still poor playing, but it was better.

Go See stalked surlily back from the house, and stood listening with an ugly sneer on his face. Tolover spoke to him again when Gayford laid the violin down. Tolover's voice had sounded civil enough, but whatever it was he said, it infuriated Go See. The servant again struck his master on the breast, and called out an odious threat over his shoulder as he stalked off to the gate, and made hail-fellow with the bandits on guard there.

For three hideous days Gayford's violin held death at bay—if death indeed was planned.

The bandits made this their headquarters for the present. They made sorties from it, and came back bringing loot with them. They were vicious and ugly, wantonly destructive. The jade-pool was thick with the rubbish they threw in it. The house was a wreck.

The prisoners were herded into a corner of the courtyard, not allowed to enter the house. But they were not assaulted, and they were not separated. Beyond that the captors' mercy did not go. Food was thrown at them contemptuously at long and irregular intervals; insufficient in quantity, and so coarse and unpalatable that it choked all four of them. But they ate; forcing and coaxing each other to eat what they could of it.

But they did not speak together much. For always two, if not more, of the bandits watched close to them. And it seemed to infuriate the ruffian warders when the "white-devils" spoke together.

But when the Englishman took up his violin the two who guarded them grew more human, and a strange audience of yellow, ragged bandits squatted thick in the courtyard, and listened as long as Gayford played. And Tolover, who had lived in China so long, and knew them best, wondered whether they four were being kept alive solely with an avaricious lust for the ransom that might be forthcoming, or in part for the sake of Gayford's music. It was music greatly un-Chinese, but all very great art, no matter how individual, no matter

how national, at core is international, and its lure and thrall are universal.

And Brent Gayford no longer played badly—since he found that his music was indeed serving Helen, protecting her.

“That dirty dog Go See has not been near us for two days and nights,” Brent whispered; “a small mercy, but a mercy. I shall kill Go See, if I ever get a chance.”

“I shan’t,” Helen whispered enigmatically.

“Hush!” Gayford suddenly cautioned her anxiously.

It was night and very dark. The old moon had gone. The young moon had not come. Tolover slept. The three men took turns in sleep, only one at a time, and when they could.

Gayford was right. Something was crawling towards them. But before it reached them it crawled away again. Only Gayford had heard; the musician’s sensitive ears could hear, and even classify, sounds that never reached others. Even the bandits who guarded them had heard nothing.

“Something was put down back of those geranium-trees. I am going to see.”

Again the violinist was right. A little feast of food lay hidden among the tall geraniums. And with it lay a small revolver.

It happened each night after that.

At first Rathborn and Gayford were reluctant to touch this food, afraid to let Helen eat it. They suspected poison.

“But that’s nonsense,” Helen argued. “They could poison all the stuff they give us, easily enough, if they wanted to. I’m sure they think we are worth more to them alive than dead, or why not have killed us in the first place? And would anyone who was trying to poison us have given us a pistol as well as chicken and bread and hard-boiled eggs?”

“Just their cursed Chinaman sharpness; to make us think we have a secret friend.” Doctor Rathborn was no longer a partisan of the Chinese. He disliked them because Charles would not leave them! And this last sample of the quality of a few of them had made him a nation’s foe.

Brent Gayford was inclined to think Helen’s argument sound; “at least if this is loaded and in anything like working order.”

“Oh—do be careful!” The American girl had been the pluckiest of them all perhaps, and certainly the most cheerful, and also the most resourceful. But she

wanted badly to scream because there was a pistol so near, and she buried her face against her father's breast, trembling violently, while Gayford examined the gun.

"I'll be careful," he told her. "I jolly well must in the dark like this. Don't worry; it won't go off; and, if it did, I am not holding it aimed towards you—or any of us." Helen shuddered and smothered a sob.

"The gun's all right, but there isn't a bullet in it. What a damned sell!"

Tolover woke. His contribution to the poison argument was the eager eating of a hard-boiled egg. "Glad he didn't forget an envelope of salt," he said gratefully.

Nor had he forgotten the bullets. Wrapped in a bit of clean muslin, they were hidden in the small loaf of bread.

Each night more food came, and with it a weapon of some sort. Handkerchiefs and other small comforts came also.

It was not difficult to get the food from behind the thick-set geraniums, nor was it difficult to eat it in comfort. Escape was impossible. The wall was too high here, the gate too securely guarded. Where the wall was lower, near the roadway, and might have been climbed, it was guarded constantly. But in all else their captors grew more and more careless. Rarely more than two guarded them at a time now, and they squatted farther away. More than once they slept, and most of the other time they gambled, and gambling, had eyes or ears for little else. They grew happier, all the bandits here did; happier and more amiable and tolerant; no longer gaunt-eyed and hungry. They were doing themselves exceedingly well in Mr. Kwan's well provided *chia*. And his servants waited on them devotedly while Tolover and his three guests sat or lay out in the dishevelled courtyard's open, and made such shift as they could there.

Tolover knew that the bandits were smoking heavily, not only an opium-sodden and accustomed few of them, but all of them, he thought. He very much wondered where they got their poppy. His own boys smoked a little, he knew. But he was sure that his servants had no great store of it; and a great deal of opium was being smoked here now. At times the courtyard reeked of it, for all that most of the bandits never entered the inner courtyard.

It made him distressfully anxious. Anything might happen in a wholesale opium debauch. They might burn the place down, and roast themselves and their prisoners alive.

"MOSES" whistled softly—and Brent instantly heard.

A devastating rain lashed down on them one day, as often happens there in the Lotus moon.

They huddled together miserably under the lee of the red-pepper-tree.

By night the courtyard was a thin lake. The "nipples of heaven" had poured fine, thin strings down on them all day, and seemed determined to do it even more thoroughly all night as well.

"If this doesn't double our tale of bricks!" Brent Gayford grumbled. "Double! Treble's more like it. I jolly well wish Moses would show up."

No one answered him.

Possibly the missionary, for all his debonair tolerance, disliked hearing the Biblical patriarch referred to quite so familiarly. Perhaps he had not heeded what it was the young Englishman had said; for both he and the other physician were wondering what could be done to save Helen from pneumonia, if this went on much longer.

Helen was engrossed in keeping the violin dry; fearful that such a deluge as this must soak through the stout case and soak the precious instrument. She loved this violin of his much more than Gayford himself did. She never had held a Guarnerius in her arms; and he owned three.

"My God!" Brent Gayford sprang to his feet, thrusting his electrified face up to the thick rainfall. Rain was nothing. "Hush!" He was listening intently.

The sound he had caught came again. This time they all heard it: a few notes whistled softly out there over the wall. Only the Englishman knew that it was the Eton "Boating Song."

And Brent knew that it was Dick who had whistled—Dick whom he had thought of as back in England now.

Gayford looked about him searchingly, peering through the tissue of the steady rain as well as he could.

Their two bandit gaolers had moved off into the shelter of the moon-gate, and sat there huddled disconsolately in their grass rain-coats—which are not coats but uncouth mantles. The Chinese millions who so constantly have to

breast it dislike rain as much as cats do. A lantern, hung in the arch of the gate, served to show them.

They were leaning against the round arch that sheltered them, both were smoking; both showed drowsy, the younger almost asleep. A smoker's-tray stood between them; its opium stove was burning.

Gayford turned towards the wall, went towards it the few steps he dared, and whistled, scarcely whistled, the same few notes of the "Boating Song," waited barely a moment listening—his back was toward the moon-gate. Then he turned carelessly and sauntered back.

"It means rescue, or an attempt to rescue," he said as he sat down beside them. "That was a friend of mine who whistled—I have told you about him, Wentworth"—he parenthesised to Helen—"he knows we are prisoners, or he would not have whistled so softly."

They sat and listened—it seemed to them a long time. All their hearts were beating wildly. They made a brave attempt not to show that they listened or were in any way expectant. They did not look at each other—fearful to show even that hint of alertness.

Rathborn and Tolover were badly nervous, frayed with nervousness and this new sudden strain.

Brent Gayford's heart was thumping also; but he was confident; he had a lot of confidence in Dick. And this would not be the first scrape out of which Dick had pulled him; in their schooldays Dick had done it in a masterly way several times. Lord, but he'd hug the bounder if he got them out of this one!

The three men kept their eyes—as carelessly as they could—on the moon-gate. Helen's eyes stayed on Gayford.

They all were listening.

There was nothing but silence—no other sound but the monotonous drip of the rain.

Gayford groaned angrily.

Go See was slouching toward them.

"He would come back now!" Brent muttered.

"I am glad he has," the American girl said.

In spite of himself, her cousin shot her an odd look. The other two looked at her darkly, surprised and vexed.

“Go See is playing a part,” Helen added quietly; “he has been all along.”

“He is showing himself for what he is; has been all along,” her father told her.

“He will perhaps when we least expect it,” the girl persisted. “That first time he struck Cousin Charles, he took something from him and hid it in his sleeve. The second time he hit him, he put something inside Cousin Charles’ gown——”

“Hush!” her father and Gayford cautioned her anxiously in one breath. They were sure that she was mistaken about blackguardly Go See, and Go See had almost reached them.

An acorn fell from an oak-tree; or had it come from over the wall? The soft rain blurred their sight a little; and only Gayford had heard where it fell. He was sure that he could locate and get it when Go See had gone, and when he was even a little surer that the two poppy-smoking ruffians were not watching them.

But Go See too had seen the acorn fall—almost at his shoe. He bent down and picked it up idly.

“Curse! I must get it from him, and I will!”

Helen Rathborn caught Brent’s hand in hers, and held him. “Don’t, don’t,” she pleaded. “And it’s only an acorn.”

“It is a signal,” Gayford insisted. “He shall not have it. Acorns don’t fall in June.”

But Go See seemed to toss the acorn down, as idly as he had picked it up. He came quite close to them, his face lowering and impertinent. He paused beside Tolover, and spoke rapidly in Chinese. Go See’s face was angry and insolent. He did not look at Tolover, or at any of them; his eyes never left the moon-gate. His face was threatening and contemptuous, but his voice was respectful, almost affectionate. And the violinist heard it unquestionably sincere—and wondered. For Brent Gayford believed that he could trust his “ear,” rely upon the accuracy of his hearing’s judgment.

Charles Tolover made no reply to whatever it was the servant had said, but dropped his head dejectedly, knitting his brows as if in unpleasant brooding.

Go See turned away with a vicious gesture of rude abhorrence, swinging a knotted fist toward Mr. Gayford menacingly as he passed him, and slouched off truculently to the moon-gate.

The Englishman, about to spring up—there are things past enduring, no matter what the cost of openly resenting them—was checked again by a girl's hand on his. And then he realised that the "nigger" actually had hit him. "By God!" Then Gayford's face changed almost convulsively. The missile Go See had flung into Brent Gayford's hand was an acorn.

"I beg your pardon—and his," Brent said huskily to Helen as he wrenched the acorn from its cup. "I wish the light were better here; it is very small." (They, too, had a lantern hanging near them—that the bandits might watch them the better. It gave but a miserable light.)

The bit of white paper in his palm was but an atom.

"Wait!" Helen bade him. "Watch the moon-gate, Daddy."

"Sure!" Doctor Rathborn promised. "One of the devils is asleep; the other will be very soon. And Go See is rolling another pill."

Helen searched over Gayford's pockets with swift fingers, found the one she wanted, and took out his cigarette and match cases. Their few matches were very precious, but she struck one resolutely, and bent over Gayford as she lit her cigarette, shielding the tiny match-flame so—just above Gayford's open hand.

One word was written minutely on the minute bit of paper: "To-night."

And it was Dick's writing.

Neither of them spoke. But Helen made a sound, a smothered, choking sob. He smiled into her eyes, and took her hand in his and held it quietly.

Neither Rathborn nor Tolover saw them, for neither let their eyes leave the moon-gate.

"Daddy," the girl whispered when she dared to speak. "Daddy! Cousin Charlie! there was a piece of paper in the acorn, and a message. It says: 'To-night.' "

"About midnight, Go See thinks," Tolover added. "They most of them are poppy-soaked by now, he tells me. He hopes to have all the smokers 'dead to the world' by then, and has a scheme to get the two or three who don't smoke locked up fast while we get over the wall. I wish we did not have to owe our escape to 'China's curse' though."

"I shall be peculiarly glad to owe it to anything," Thomas Rathborn stated. "By-the-by, was Nell right? Did Go See take something from you that first time he thumped you? And give you something the other time?"

“Yes—both. Nell was right. He took my keys, and he brought me my hypodermic—filled.”

Doctor Rathborn did not ask what the syringe had been filled with, and was filled with still! His face set hard and stiff; he could not look at his girl.

“Do you entirely trust Go See, Charlie?”

“Trust Go See!” Tolover’s tone was sufficient answer, and it was indignant.

“Some actor, Go See, if he has been true to you all along. And look at him now, blood-brothering with those two fiends!”

“Yes, Go See is an admirable actor. Most Chinese are—when they need to be. By nature they are the simplest and most direct of all races. But the continual exigencies of what Chinese life is now have taught them to dissemble. And being Chinese they do it well. Those two poor fellows drowsed over there are not fiends, Tom. Out of every hundred bandits in China, ninety-nine or more have been driven to it. It hurts me that Helen has been used so—and you. It grieves me terribly that the poor souls have knocked my house and the courtyards about the way they have, but I hold no ill-will against them, much less blame them—probably you and I would be worse men than they are, if life had used us as abominably.”

“Thank you,” Rathborn replied grimly.

“Do I trust Go See, did you say? Absolutely. I can.”

“Well,” his friend returned grudgingly, “I am glad if one of your precious servants has been loyal to you after all.”

The bandits themselves had not treated Mr. Kwan more outrageously than all of his own servants had. (There were more than a dozen of them.) And always he had been so father-good to them! It had made Thomas Rathborn blind and ill with impotent fury.

“What do you mean?” Tolover demanded. “*One* of my boys loyal! Don’t be an ass, Tom. Every one of them is loyal; every inch, every hair of him. There is not one of them that would not die for me, starve for me, be tortured for me. Every time one of them has slipped decent food into the geranium trees—food *and weapons remember*—he has known the risk he took, known he’d be boiled alive if he was caught—and his entire family horribly punished into the bargain.”

“Why didn’t you tell us, Cousin Charlie?”

“One learns to hold one’s tongue, if one lives long in China, my dear. And even the courtyard flagstones have eyes and ears. Your evident fear of the servants, your father’s very evident hatred of them—his and Gayford’s, and their open desire to slaughter them has been our valuable asset.”

In the Hour-of-the-Serpent Go See, with a noiseless procession of dish and cup bearers behind him, brought them an ample meal, hot and savoury; such food as they four had not tasted since the bandits came. And Go See bade his master that they should eat in peace. All but two of the bandits (except the alert sleuths keeping watch out on the road beyond the lower part of the wall) were locked in sleep, the opium sleep from which there could be no waking for hours. The two who never smoked were locked up in another way, so securely, and so securely guarded, that only an earthquake could free them. Go See did not think it necessary to tell the missioner that when he and Tin Bong and several assistants had pinioned and gagged they had given both those bandits most efficient hypodermic injections. Go See still had his master’s keys. And Go See frequently had acted as Doctor Tolover’s deft clinical assistant.

At the Hour-of-the-Horse Go See led them close to the wall. They had nothing to take with them, if they got away. Only Helen was not empty-handed. She carried Gayford’s violin in its case, and until now Gayford had not offered to relieve her of it.

They waited in sick silence, except that once Go See prompted his master to tell Gayford to whistle.

There was no answer.

Their hearts sickened.

But Go See seemed satisfied; told Mr. Kwan that he was.

Before long—it seemed eternity—the whistled notes of the Eton “Boating Song,” very soft, but blackbird-clear, came over the wall.

Gayford answered.

In a moment a stout sack at the end of two stout ropes was lowered over the wall.

Go See and Tin Bong stretched the mouth of the sack open, and motioned for the first passenger.

“One of us ought to go before she does,” her father objected when Brent Gayford put his hand on Helen’s arm and drew her towards the sack.

Go See spoke quickly to his master.

“He says,” Tolover translated, “that we must lose no time at all. Other bandits may come. The country is in flame. Let Helen go first. It is all right, Go See says, only we must not dawdle.”

“It *is* all right,” Brent Gayford insisted. “I *know* Dick’s whistling. There is no mistake.”

Doctor Rathborn protested no more.

“Leave the violin with me,” Gayford suggested as he and Rathborn settled her in the coarse sack. “I will not come without it. You will be more comfortable without it. See, Dick has made loops for you to hold on to; you’ll need both your hands.”

“I am going to take it,” Helen told him quietly.

Gayford laid his hand on hers for an instant; she smiled up at him, and he closed the sack, and lifted it up, stretching up to steady it as long as he could, whistled again with trembling lips.

The rope tightened, the sack rose. It bumped and scraped its way up to the top of the wall; there was no helping that.

It was scarcely a perilous journey that the girl made (unless an enemy saw or heard it)—but it was far from comfortable. Helen was confident now. And for herself she but little felt, and minded not at all, its discomforts. All her anxiety was for Gayford’s violin.

It was a long way that she had to be hauled. It had been necessary to select this spot where the wall was highest, because it was the part of the wall best hidden, almost secure from being seen, and because on the outside a hillock rose to halfway up it, making it comparatively easy to lower the sack on that side.

Something steadied it at the top, and it rested there a moment. Brent’s super-sharp ear heard Dick’s voice speaking softly.

Then he heard no more, and the sack had gone.

Almost at once it came back.

Rathborn went next.

Charles Tolover followed protesting.

Then Brent went.

"I THINK it will break Cousin Charlie's heart to go back," Helen told So Wing. "I don't think we ought to let him."

"His heart is broken already, Miss Rathborn," So answered gently. "His *chia* was his life, the core of his life, I believe. I believe that, without knowing it, he loved it more than he did China, more than he loved all the sick and needy to whom he ministered so devotedly. He is dying for his *shu-chia* and his courtyards. We must take him back, and let him rebuild it. I am sure that that is his only chance, and our one only way to serve him."

So Wing prevailed. It was his habit. And both Doctor Rathborn and Brent Gayford had little doubt that General So Wing was right about what would medicine Charles Tolover, if anything could. It would be a bitter drug for him to take. The journey must fatigue him; it would be rough, and he was frail and broken. The sight of his *chia's* ruin would excoriate and lash him. But, even so, to be there again might purge his homesickness that was so grinding him, draining still more his debilitated strength, which for years now had been far more strength of heart and of will than it had been strength of body. So Wing believed that homesickness was killing Mr. Kwan; an Oriental exaggeration that was not without excuse, for Chinese sometimes die from homesickness. And So Wing knew, as no one else did, how the old missioner loved his Chinese home.

The night he had rescued them Wentworth had had to stow them hard in a peasant hovel that was little more than a dugout; the two-roomed dwelling of a kinsman of Go See's; Go See vouched for him—and the man's wife was deaf and dumb.

Dick Wentworth had no idea why he had come to Yün-nan. He had grown restless, and more and more bored, after he and Brent had parted; unwilling to stay in China any longer, but unwilling to leave his sister there behind him while threatenings of war and anti-British mutterings grew every day. North China was in turmoil. Even Shanghai was threatened, Hankow was in danger. Edith would not trust her children to go to Shanghai or to Hong Kong; and no one could blame her for it. Even if they got to either city alive, it was by no means certain that they would be able to sail when they had. "We are safe enough here in Peking," Sir Robert had assured his brother-in-law. Wentworth had accepted Arnold's assurance, and had drifted, rather than gone with intention or energy, to have a look at the great French railway-engineering

achievement in Yün-nan. Cutting back from Yün-nan Fu to the higher Yang-tsze, to work his way back to Peking, so, if he could, he had encountered Go See sheerly by chance, during Go See's absence—on an errand for the bandits—from Mr. Kwan's invested and beleaguered *chia*. Go See had pounced upon the white man eagerly, instantly sensing in him a messenger to the nearest magistrate, who so appealed to, would have no alternative but to send succour to the four prisoners in Mr. Kwan's courtyard. The magistrate Go See had in mind, a powerful and unscrupulous official, would, for political reasons, turn a deaf ear to any such request of Go's own; promise to send, and fail to be able to do it in time. This Englishman would compel a prompter and more sufficient compliance. It would take time, of course; the nearest magistrate was not near, and he journeyed a good deal, but Go See could think of no better plan. But when the servant's quick Chinese eyes had seen the old schoolboy trophy, and recognised it, just as So Wing had, Go See had grown hysterical with joy; wept and laughed, spluttered inarticulately, and convinced Wentworth that this Chinese was a maniac. Dick had done his best to part company then and there. But Go See would have none of it. Go See had clung as only a purpose-ridden Chinese can cling. Wentworth knew no Chinese, Go See knew little more English. But fortunately two of Dick's servants spoke both. Hence the sacks over the courtyard wall, and the midnight rescue.

So Wing, again in the district on business, had gone to see his American friend, failed to gain admittance, seen the ruin of the place, and the character of the watchman outside it. He had been afraid to force his way in, lest doing it cost the bandits' four prisoners instant death. General So Wing had been sore perplexed. He had summoned soldiers, and had not left the *chia* gate himself even for an hour. So Wing had gone to Mr. Kwan's only a few hours after the escape. Few of the bandits had altogether recovered from their opium debauch, Go See and Tolover's other servants had continued to ply them with the poisonous pellets. When at last the bandits had shaken off their poppy stupor their dismay had turned them into gibbering cravens; flight their only thought. That the four Europeans had escaped, probably by a miracle of Kwan Yin-ko's, must entail soldiery and punishment. They knew the quality of the punishment meted out to bandits. They stayed not upon the order of their frenzied going, but rushed from the gate as fast as they could, to take cover and to save themselves as best they could—and found themselves surrounded by the soldiers of General So Wing. They were none of his, these bandits who had seized the homestead of Charles Tolover.

"I gave them short shrift," So Wing told Wentworth and Gayford with a cold laugh. "There are heads hanging on the courtyard trees thick as apples in August. I regret to say that before Go See could explain or intervene, I, by

mistake, also decapitated two or three of Mr. Kwan's most devoted servants. But it does not too greatly matter. For we can rest assured that they died cheerfully, since it was indeed in service to him."

When he had dealt with the last bandit, dealt greatly to Go See's relish, and to Tin Bong's, guided by Go See, So Wing had hastened to the hidden four, and had brought them here to the greater comfort of the hill-perched temple; as beautiful a hostel as China could boast. The temple commissariat and *cuisine* left much to be desired at first. But General So Wing had rectified that quickly. They were soft-stowed now, and well tended. But Charles Tolover was ill, and his kind eyes were terrible with longing.

They were back in the courtyard.

So Wing had done his best. Not a head in its open-work basket dangled from the trees. All was as restored and in order as had been possible in so short a time.

Dick Wentworth was with them. But to-morrow he was going. The *chia* was safe now. So Wing must go soon; he had much to do between invested Hankow and threatened Shanghai. Wentworth felt that he was in the way, and he had no wish to stay. Apparently it suited Brent, but it did not suit him. He would prefer almost any other place—even Peking.

Mr. Kwan sat resting on the old stone bench. Rathborn sat beside him. Helen sat at her cousin's feet, leaning against his knees lightly.

Gayford laid his violin down. So Wing put down his painted lacquer flute.

"This is happiness," the missioner murmured. "Happiness again. To be here again—at home, and in peace, and with you here with me. We are rebuilding the house and the courtyard! It will take a long time. To gather half its treasures together again will be impossible. But I can make the house itself and the courtyards what they were. What love did once love can do again. See how the new roses are climbing the moon-gate. Smell the heliotrope and those splendid tuberoses! I thank God for my *chia*, and for my memories, and for my friends!"

"And we thank God for you," Helen told him. She bent over and laid her cheek on his hand. And her cousin caressed her hair.

"And China thanks you, sir," So Wing added.

It was pleasant in the courtyard.

The day-star was going. The fire-flies soon would be sparkling, flitting from the moon-gate to the geranium-trees, flitting from the wistarias to the red-pepper-tree.

They were silent. They had no need to speak.

An uncouth Chinese woman crossed the jade-courtyard, came through the round moon-gate. Go See walked beside her in bitter disapproval. But his master's orders were emphatic. All who sought him should be admitted.

The draggled woman came up to the stone bench. She made no obeisance. She looked only at Charles Tolover.

"Greeting!" Mr. Kwan told her.

She pointed up to the oak-tree from which one night an acorn had fallen almost at Brent Gayford's feet—one of the trees on which, so So Wing had boasted, bandit heads had hung thick as apples in August.

Her hand dashed down; the knife her palm had hidden had ripped through Mr. Kwan's gown.

So Wing and Go See seized her roughly, with ugly oaths.

Kwan Yin-ko's white brother rose. "Let her go. Let her go in peace. Obey me! I am master here! Lead her to the gate, Go See, and send her away in peace. She but mourns her dead."

So Wing's hands fell to his side.

And for the last time Go See obeyed the master he loved.

As the woman went Charles Tolover raised his hands in blessing towards her.

Mr. Kwan staggered. So Wing caught him. One by one he looked at them, and smiled. He looked at the house he had builded, looked about his courtyard—with tired old eyes that were very tender.

Suddenly his face was transfigured, and was young and virile.

"Alice!"

Tolover lurched back in So Wing's arms.

And So Wing sobbed like a stricken child.

IN A YÜN-NAN COURTYARD *CHAPTER XLIX*

THE grave under the red-pepper-tree had been made but two moons ago. Yet already late violets, blue forget-me-nots, tiny ferns, and delicate little lilies were growing on it. And the clump of Kwan Yin-ko's own flowers that Go See had planted among them had rooted and was thriving and hanging its hearts of lovely rose over the rest of Kwan's American brother.

The courtyard was flecked with crimson, the crimson of the fallen peach leaves. Where the sun fell longest and warmest against the wall chrysanthemums of twenty colours were unfolding sumptuous ragged balls and discs of curled-and-curled vivid flame. Autumn came. The swallows were flying homeward.

Helen and Gayford were alone in the courtyard, sitting on the carved stone bench.

Helen Rathborn pretended to be sewing.

But the man beside her there had done with pretence.

"When are you and Doctor Rathborn leaving here?" he asked.

Helen shook her head indulgently. "Goodness knows," she answered. "When Daddy can tear himself away. It is going to hurt him even more, I think, to leave our cousin's grave all alone here than Cousin Charles' death itself did. I shan't like to do it either. But I don't think Cousin Charles will mind."

"I am sure he won't. He will not be lonely here in China—here under his own splendid pepper-tree, in his loved courtyard. By the way, who owns Mr. Tolover's *chia* now? Do you happen to know? I wonder if anyone does. I wonder what will become of it, if no one does."

"General So Wing owns it. I sold it to him for a few dollars; to make his title clear and secure. Cousin Charles left me everything he had to leave. When he heard of my birth he went all the way to a treaty port where the American Consul was a lawyer at home, and made a will and put it in bank for safe keeping. He never once wrote home after he came to China. But he saw about me in the 'Births, Marriages, and Deaths,' in a New York paper. He always has had home papers now and then. He told Daddy about his will soon after we came here, and that he never had altered it or made any other. I have done with this what we both thought would please him best. I am not going to live here,

of course. And I could not leave this home of his that he loved so at loose ends. General So Wing will take care of it, and add to it now and then just as he thinks that my cousin would have done, would have gone on doing as long as he'd lived."

"Fine!" Gayford said cordially.

"Yes. Go See and Tin Bong and the others are to stay here. And little by little Chinese babies and toddlers are to come—poor little mites who need a home. They'll have a 'mother'—a Chinese mother—and two or three 'aunts.' General So Wing is sure that he can find the right ones."

"Splendid! . . . And how beautiful," the artist added gently.

Helen nodded.

"Can't you see them? Happy little Chinese children toddling and running about the courtyards, picking the flowers, trying to drown themselves in the jade-pool! Oh—they'll keep the aunts busy!"

"Will they be brought up Christians?"

"I don't know. Perhaps not. There will be no stipulation about it. We think that my cousin would not have made one."

"No," Gayford agreed.

"But they'll have their hands and faces washed. They'll be made happy and healthy—have plenty to eat—lots and lots of ridiculous painted Chinese toys."

The man laughed—a low, tender laugh. "A very lovely monument to a man who had a lovely soul, lived a beautiful life, and incidentally was a saint!"

Helen looked up at him gratefully; it was good to be so understood.

"As for us"—she laid her bit of needlework down on the bench—"I shall take my father back home before the snow comes—by hook or by crook. I want him to remember this grave with flowers blooming on it, remember it all happy and glowing in the warmth of the yellow Chinese sunshine." She rose and went up to her cousin's grave. Brent Gayford followed her. "Just the bed his dear body should have," she said. Gayford nodded assent.

They stood looking down on it—not unhappily—in silence. The man and the girl were silent, neither spoke, or wished to, but the courtyard was not silent; it was making cheerful music of its own. Birds were singing, bees were buzzing about the flowers they liked best. Butterflies and dragon-flies were swift and many over the roses and musk. A turquoise-bird darted his lovely blue across the ferns and off beyond the fruited crab-apple-trees. Scent of

spices and of vanilla came delicately from Tin Bong's busied kitchen. But sweeter far were the scents of the wild white roses clambering over the courtyard wall and of the violets that grew a tender blanket on Charles Tolover's grave.

Musk has lost its perfume at Kew; it poured incense about Mr. Kwan's grave.

There was no stone; not even his name. His *chia* was his monument. Mended peasant lives were his memorial—Chinese lives cleaned, gladdened, and sweetened by the American missioner who living and serving his God had not reviled or scorned their gods: Kwan Yin-ko's white brother.

"How sweet the flowers smell! I wish," Helen said as she sat down on the old stone bench again, "that all flowers had scent." Then she flushed and bit her lip, remembering that she had said it to him before, and here, and remembering how he had answered her then.

Gayford remembered, too; he gathered a rose, a crimson bud just opening, and laid it on her knee as he sat down beside her.

"What does it say to you?" he asked.

Helen lifted the red flower to her face and smelled it lingeringly. "Music," she said.

"It is trying to say more than that."

"More than music?" She looked at him in unaffected rebuke.

"I wonder what colour your eyes are. I did that first time up by the Blue Pagoda. And I have been wondering ever since. Do you know?"

"They look grey in my looking-glass," she laughed. "They feel yellow. Daddy flatters me that they are blue."

"They are none of those. Their colour hasn't a name. I wish I could find one for it—the right word. Years from now, if I am alone and unhappy, I think that a violin may tell me their colour—up in the room where I wrote 'Caprice.' "

The girl fingered the flower on her lap, touching its soft folded petals idly with gentle lingering fingers' tips.

Brent took the rose from her, and lifted it up to her face. "Listen to it again," he begged. "It is not music it is saying. It is—love. Can't you hear it, Helen?"

The crimson rose fell to the ground; neither knew that it had.

“Will you take me?” he whispered hoarsely. “I’ll try to make you never regret it. I am not asking you to be the wife of a travelling musician, here one day, there to-morrow, nor anything like that. I care nothing for music now—except to speak to you with—nothing except to lay it at your feet. I will smash every violin I own—never touch one again as long as I live—if you will let me do it for you——”

“Do you want me to hate you, Mr. Gayford?” Helen Rathborn broke in coldly. And she looked at him with eyes that were cold and angry. “Oh! how could you say that odious thing? You!”

“I meant it,” her English lover said doggedly. “I mean it. I left my home, left my country, for music. I was all my grandfather had—*all*, and he was old, and I broke his heart for music. I had to do it. And now, I take God to witness, music is nothing to me without you. Tell me to play—for you, and I will go on playing, play as I never have played before—for you. But music must not be a barrier between us—only because I have the greater technical knowledge of it. If it can be a bond between us, I will cherish it; if not I will smash it, put it away out of my life for ever. You are just everything to me—my all; all I love, the one thing I love, all that I want or ever shall. I tell you again, I will put music away for ever—gladly—if I may be with you; you with whom I would gladly spend Eternity. I don’t want music. I don’t need it any longer. I only want you.”

“The woman who would let you give up your music would be a cheap, poor thing,” Helen told him gravely. “A woman who loved you would not wish to be more to you than music, or as much——”

Gayford protested with an inarticulate sound.

“—I am right! You belong to your music. Never say again the wicked, foolish thing you just said. No girl is worth it. No nice girl could like to hear you say it. Forget that you said it. Let me try to forget it.”

Helen ended with almost a sob.

But Brent Gayford would not lie to her.

“I am a blundering ass!” he owned awkwardly. “I want to win you, you and your love—even a little of your love; and I anger and repel you.”

“What you said did,” Helen said gently.

“Will you be my wife,” he asked roughly, “with or without the music, just as you like?”

The noise of a Chinese wedding crashed out in the path over the wall; neither of them heard it.

“Tell me: I have got to know, and know now. Do you know that you and I have not been together alone since that day when the bandits broke in here, just when I had started to tell you? How do you suppose I have liked waiting all these months? The way the devil likes holy water is how I have liked it. I have got to know now. I am at the end of my tether. Am I to stay or to go, Helen? I must go at once, if I have got to go; must go before I behave like a brute—take you in my arms, and hold you there, and crush from your mouth—just for once—all the sweetness that the rest of my life ever will know. Am I to go or to stay—to stay with you—together as long as we live? It is good-bye between us now, or never to be good-bye. Am I to go? Or am I to stay?”

“You are to go. You are to travel the earth for years and years, giving the solace of music to hearts that are sad, lives that are troubled, the cure of music to minds that are sore! And I am coming with you to carry the fiddle,” she said.

IN A YÜN-NAN COURTYARD *CHAPTER L*

LITTLE more than a year after Charles Tolover's death General So Wing was one of China's Big Four. The world knew his name. He was very rich. His power was more than his wealth. There was nothing in China beyond his possible reach. Generals and Governors had gone down like the human ninepins they indeed were in the long-drawn-out fratricidal broils, alien-stimulated and often alien-engineered, that had racked and riven China for more than a quarter of a century. But So Wing had contrived, or been lucked, to succeed and to prosper without interruption or setback. He kept his head, and he had a Midas touch. Should China grow whole again, Republic or Empire, there was no place, no power, to which he might not aspire reasonably.

Officially he was in Peking at this moment. Only he himself knew that he was standing by a banyan tree in Yün-nan, not far from where the Niul An, troubled to-day, was swirling into the angry Yang-tsze.

General So Wing was not looking off toward the Great River. He was gazing down into a tiny turbulent thread of water, a naughty, fretful baby thing all jagged with sharp rocks, all frothed and foamed with its own petulant haste. The smile on the coolie-clad war-lord's handsome face was both tender and sardonic.

He had come here by careful stealth, and almost as coolie-clad as he had come as a boy, to buy for Ko Ching-lin the insect grubs of Q'ūo Chung, because he had come to kill: to avenge and to kill, then go as he had come, none the wiser of his having been here, not even Go See.

He was not here to keep any love-tryst with an old memory. The riant face and the charm of an American girl had erased dainty Q'ūo Ssu from the man's heart—almost from his tenacious Chinese memory; in both of which the thought of Q'ūo Ssu and her lure had been somewhat blurred long before he had glanced across a room in Yün-nan Fu, and had seen Helen Rathborn.

He knew that the son of Ko Ching-lin's wife was strong and healthy. He need wait no longer in chivalry to a girl he once had loved, a girl he had seen kneeling in entreaty of the Baby-giver-god. His time had come at last. His time had come to kill Ko Ching-lin.

At O-mei Hsien he had learned that Ko Ching-lin, Ko Ssu, and their son, Ko Ping-ky, had journeyed to Q'ūo Chung, who was ailing, and pleaded to see

his very honourable grandson.

But the Kos were not there, and had not been. There was smallpox at the insect-farmer's *chia*. In their need Go See had welcomed the Great Man, his wife, his child, and their retinue to the home of Mr. Kwan. It had been the natural thing for Go See to do. The missionary's house always had been a cordial hospice, and Go See had So Wing's full authority to use it so whenever he saw fit—until the babies who were to live there were installed. The first of them were not to come for another three moons yet.

So Wing was amused but not vexed that the three were living within his walls. Even if he had disliked it, he could not have blamed Go See; Ko Ching-lin often had visited Mr. Kwan—the missioner had loved and valued him; and Q'ūo Ssu had had the run of Mr. Kwan's house and courtyards, as unquestioned and as welcomed as the roses and harp-flowers were in his gardens.

But So Wing could do no slaughter in the *chia* of Kwan Yin-ko's brother.

Sooner or later he would encounter Ko Ching-lin outside its walls, and alone. As likely here as any elsewhere. So Wing's knife was in his loin-cloth, and his knife was sharp. But he did not need it; his hands would serve.

A clump of wild azaleas upon the hillslope called him. He went toward it. In a moment he halted abruptly. A woman sat not far away, under the other side of the great banyan's wide shade at the stream's very edge—a woman he knew. A baby slept on its quilt at her side. And there were her women gathering flowers up on the hillside!

She had not changed.

She was dreaming, her red-painted lips deliciously curved in happiness. The jewels of her stick-pins flashed like daytime fire-flies. Her tiny idle hands were smothered in gems.

So Wing wished he might go closer—to look at the face of the sleeping child, his own blood and bone!

But he turned away.

The splash was so little, so less than the noise of the noisy water, that So Wing did not hear it, nor did the mother dreaming under the banyan.

But a woman up on the hillside, chancing to look, had seen Ko Ping-ky, who had not crawled until now, wake, stretch, then roll fatly over and start to crawl—away from its mother.

The serving-woman shrieked—too late. Ko Ping-ky was in the stream.

Ko Ssu, startled from her happy day-dreaming, did not understand at first. But she instinctively looked at the rug at her side, fearing her baby, too, had been startled, and wakened rudely. When she saw that the rug was empty her terror paralysed her; she could neither move nor scream. Then mother-love forced her to be braver. She staggered up, and looked about her with wild, haunted eyes.

It had been her fault!

Kwan, Hearer-of-Cries!

She looked, and saw the little laughing child—highly delighted, truculently proud—fall into the churning, rock-jagged water, and disappear.

A man dashed down the bank, and plunged in where the baby had fallen.

A painted, lacquer flute fell from So Wing's loin-cloth as he sprang. No matter how light he travelled, or why, So Wing always had one of his flutes, or a little Chinese fiddle within the reach of his hand. (He had written a poem in battle.) And as he swam after the floating baby he was glad that his favourite flute had fallen to safety on the forget-me-nots and ferns. But a sharp stone lay among the flowers. The flute was broken and ruined.

Ko Ssu no longer could see Ko Ping-ky. But So Wing saw him (the mite was too light and too ignorant to sink), and saw how soon it would be dashed to death on the terrible rock, unless he—So Wing—could swim as he never had swum before.

So Wing just did it.

He did it in torture. He knew how deeply a water-covered rock had cut his thigh as he swam, knew that he was bleeding badly.

He caught up the child.

Could he get back to the shore with it? He had but one arm to use—the baby filled his other arm. And So Wing was blind and sick with pain.

In spite of it all, he looked once at the babe he carried. And So Wing laid his face for an instant on the tiny face of his brother.

The frenzied girl kneeling on the bank, half in the water, snatched Ko Ping-ky from the almost fainting man.

So Wing, with a last supreme effort, caught at a down-hanging bamboo, pulled himself up, lost his hold, staggered back, and sank.

Ko Ssu sat in the courtyard crooning to her baby.

She had grieved to know that the coolie-one who had saved Ko Ping-ky a week ago had been drowned. But most of the water-people were drowned sooner or later—at least the men were.

Ko Ching-lin had had the river searched, knowing how little chance that its terrible current would give up its human prey.

“I have vowed him a temple—a hero-one’s temple,” he told Ko Ssu, as he bent over her and caressed their child. “See,” he told Ko Ping-ky, “see what I have brought you!”

Ko Ching-lin held out a broken painted lacquer flute to Ko Ping-ky.

The baby crowed and kicked, and grabbed the flute and sucked it.

Ko Ping-ky loves his painted lacquer flute. It is his favourite toy.

GLOSSARY

Amah: Serving-woman.

Bonze: Priest, monk.

Born-before: Sir, madam. The prefix of respect.

Cash: A small coin.

Chang: One of the ritual jades, red in colour, symbolising the element of fire.

Chia: Family residence.

Chop: Official stamp of a merchant or man of high position. It binds every important Chinese contract or edict.

Country-of-the-Clouds: Sze-ch'uen.

Dam: Small coin.

Day-star: The Sun.

Fêng Shui: The influence of winds and water. Luck. Magic. (Literally wind and water.) An adequate explanation would be complicated and very long.

Flower-Boats: River boats of frail women.

Flowery: Women's apartments.

Fu: A city of some consequence. It is walled, and is under a magistrate.

Hai-tse (literally sea): A lake or lakelet; of which there are very many in Yün-nan. They are "wet" and "dry"; the "wet" Hai-tse are always full of water; the "dry" Hai-tse are bone-dry for nearly half the year. Some of them are tiny, some cover many square miles of area.

Hearer-of-Cries: Kwan Yin-ko.

Heavenly River: The Milky Way.

Heaven's Well: The heart and core of the *kuei*. The court about which the women's apartments are built.

Hu: One of the Ritual Jades, white, symbolising the element of Metal.

Huang: One of the Ritual Jades, black, symbolising the element of Water.

Hundred Names: There are only one hundred surnames in China. “Hundred names” may mean (as it does in Chapter XLI.) the great clans or families. But it also is used contemptuously to mean the peasants.

Kang: A great box or square basket. The carry-all of the Southern Chinese.

K’ang: A large stove or oven (often the only heat in a Chinese house), also used for bed and seat.

K’o-tang: Guest-hall.

Kuan: One of Kwan Yin-ko’s many names.

Kuan-ti: God of War.

Kuei: Women’s part of the house.

Kuei: One of the Ritual Jades, green in colour, symbolising the element of Wood.

Kwan Yin-ko: The Goddess of Mercy. Written in several ways. Often called merely “Kwan.”

Li: About one-third of a mile.

Lung Wang: The God of Clouds and Water.

Mr. Red Coat: Chu I, the God of Good Luck. He is one of the inseparable companions of the God of Literature.

Moon-gate: An almost round gate or arch.

Night Lantern: The Moon.

Nipples of Heaven: Clouds.

Pai-fang: A memorial arch of great honour, usually in commemoration of some act of great sacrifice.

Pi: One of the Ritual Jades, blue-green in colour, symbolising Heaven.

Red-haired-devils: Westerns.

River of Golden Sand: Yang-tsze Kiang.

Sash-wearers: Aristocrats.

Shang-ti: The Supreme Ruler. (A once living Emperor deified.)

Shên Nung: A prehistoric Emperor. He was China’s first farmer, taught his people how to plough and till the land, and now is worshipped as the God of Agriculture.

Shoes: Lumps of silver—the weight of each lump is approximately 50 taels.

Shu-chia: “Reverence books” room. Library, study.

Tael: A unit of silver money. Its size, fineness, and value differ from place to place.

Ta-jên: A great man. A man of importance.

Ti-tsang Wang: The Purgatory God.

Ts’ai Shên: God of Wealth.

Tsao-Shên: The Kitchen God.

Ts’ung: One of the Ritual Jades, yellow in colour, symbolising Earth.

Yamen: Official residence—usually a mandarin’s. A government office.

Year-of-the-Cow: February 13, 1925, to February 12, 1926.

Year-of-the-Tiger: February 13, 1926, to February 12, 1927.

Yellow Springs: Purgatory. Where the disembodied spirit first goes.

Yü min: The Stupid People (Lower Classes).

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *In a Yün-nan Courtyard* by Louise Jordan Miln]