

CHAPTER I

THE FAMILY

YAO HUNG-TAI did not easily change either his dress or his mind. Although long out of fashion, the "horse-hoof sleeves," which hung below the tips of his fingers, were still worn by the old Chinese schoolmaster. His scholar's gown swept the ground. The Republic had been in existence four years, but he continued to cling to his wisp of a queue, the once-hated symbol of Manchu domination. Nearly everything about him was long, even to his finger nails. The only garment which did not accentuate his slender height was a short black satin jacket with wide sleeves, down the back of which the queue had left its greasy imprint. The jacket was not new and was wearing shiny at the elbows.

The master's features were thin, and his slightly hooked nose and bright, piercing eyes reminded one of a falcon. Above the close-shut lips, which had a habit of curling now mockingly, now contemptuously, were long, drooping gray mustachios. These and the scattered hairs upon his chin which passed for a beard were brought into play when the schoolmaster was thoughtful or excited. Indeed, his friends judged the degree of his agitation or perplexity by the vigor with which he stroked the one and pulled at the others.

In spite of a rather sallow complexion, due to his life indoors, Yao Hung-tai was a distinguished-looking man and one to command attention and respect. He was tall, deliberate in his movements, and generally soft-voiced, except when impatient with the members of his family. Thirty-two years as the village schoolmaster



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had not diminished his respect for his own opinions, in which, it must be truly said, his fellow citizens usually shared. His imperiousness in dealing with others was marked.

The Yao family was an old and honored one in eastern Shantung. They belonged to the local gentry of the district of southern Muping. Originally, there had been three brothers, but the youngest had become a gambler and an opium smoker and had gone into a comparatively early grave, leaving no posterity, and only about half of the family estate. This, when divided between the two remaining brothers, gave them a comfortable living, but few luxuries. They had both married with well-to-do families, and their relatives were many and friendly. Two sons and three daughters had been born to the younger brother, Yao Hung-nan, who was a farmer, but the schoolmaster's family had not been blessed with children. Following a common custom, the elder son of his brother, a lad of twenty-two, called Yung-fu, had been adopted by him to perpetuate his name and to worship and provide for his spirit when it should have taken its departure to the other world. The youth still lived in his own home.

The Republic had brought in many new ideas on education; Yao Hung-tai would have none of them. The law banned the teaching of the classics and insisted on new-fangled studies, such as arithmetic and geography, neither of which could the old man have taught; but the new rules were not rigidly enforced as yet, and then there were ways of propitiating troublesome school inspectors. So the school went on as it had been going on from time immemorial.

Daybreak found his pupils in the temple schoolroom; and there they remained, with the exception of time out for meals, until there was not enough light to see the monotonous rows of black characters. Going to school was very much of a business and was calculated to

occupy all the student's waking hours. "The prison house begins to close upon the growing boy," was not poetry but grim reality for the sons of families able to afford an education.

For over three decades this cultivated jai'er had conducted his youthful charges through the dim passages of "The Five Classics" and "The Four Books." It was parrot work at first. Four years were spent in learning to repeat the classics word for word. No attempt was made, until the fifth year, to connect any meaning with these endless lists of unintelligible sounds. No wonder the path to knowledge was strewn with the dead bodies and the crazed brains of the unfit.

When a pupil thought he had mastered a passage sufficiently he left his stool and approached Yao Hung-tai's table. Laying his open book before the teacher he turned his back and began in a strident voice to repeat the day's lesson. This was called "backing the book." Woe betide him if he made too many slips or needed too frequent prompting. He might be sent to his seat with a sudden box on the ears.

Into a scene of this kind the schoolmaster's brother entered late one morning. It was not an intrusion nor even an interruption. No one paid any particular attention to the bronzed and sturdy farmer. He, too, was in blue; but his tunic, reaching only to his knees, was much shorter than the scholar's, and about his waist was knotted a piece of twisted and soiled cotton cloth. His full trousers were tied in at the ankles with broad white bands and the costume was completed by rough cloth shoes with pigskin soles and a thick skullcap of light gray felt.

After the customary salutation, "Have you eaten?" he filled the tiny bowl of his long-stemmed pipe and sat thoughtfully smoking. The pupils droned aloud over their lessons or shouted in singsong fashion to memorize the elusive phrases of the sages. Again he filled his

pipe, and the teacher, perceiving that he had something on his mind about which he wished to talk, looked not at the clock, for the school possessed none, but at the patch of sunlight just within the open door. As the sides of the patch were nearly at right angles with the threshold he knew that the hour was approaching noon. So he dismissed the younger generation with the curt command, "Begone!" and turned to his visitor.

Neither seemed in any hurry to begin. In their code, silence was neither discourteous nor embarrassing, but rather an opportunity to weigh one's words. Even when the silence was broken, there was no hurried approach to the topic which had brought the farmer to the school. On the contrary, he approached it warily, as one might an escaped bird, and by a circuitous route. The spring planting, the absence of rain, the recent epidemic of smallpox, were mentioned and other desultory remarks made before the pipe was finished and the ashes dislodged by striking it against his shoe.

"I don't see what has got into the boy," he said, as he handed his pipe and tobacco pouch to the schoolmaster.

"What's the trouble now?" asked his brother, in a bantering tone. "A little while ago you were all stirred up about his learning to box—afraid he would become an acrobat or a soldier. None of our family ever did become soldiers, thank Heaven; but as for theatricals, why, I don't mind a good show myself, though I don't go because I don't like to mix with the rabble."

"This is something more serious," said the farmer. "He is getting mixed up with these foreign-devil religionists. You know they have a hall over at the market. He's been going there a lot lately and bringing home books. His mother was so afraid that the family would be bewitched that she burned up the whole lot."

"I am glad you have told me this," said the teacher, stroking his beard meditatively.

"I thought you ought to know it, for I know how you hate foreigners."

"Hate them! Haven't we reason enough to hate them?" The old man had risen to his feet. "What has their coming brought us but trouble? What does their presence here do but weaken us? Our officials borrow their money only to become their slaves. They want to own our mines and operate our railroads and squeeze every cash out of us they can."

"Of course they do buy our pongee," said the other, thinking of the busy silk looms in the vicinity.

"What does that amount to compared to the territory they have stolen from us and the concessions they have wrung from us? See how they have fastened themselves on China like leeches—France and England in the south, Russia in the north, and Germany here in Shantung. They are bleeding us white." The master spoke bitterly. "Who wants their trade, anyway? China is quite sufficient unto herself. Would that we might return to the days when they were excluded. Would that our Great Wall were long enough and high enough to keep out every one of these white barbarians, as it kept out the Mongols.

It was not a new theme. Often had the old scholar discoursed to sympathetic listeners upon the injustices which China had suffered at the hands of Western nations. His indignation against the foreign governments, which he could not reach, and between which he made little attempt to differentiate, had crystallized into a contempt for every foreigner residing in China and for all things non-Chinese.

He had never exchanged a word with one of these hated beings. He had seen a few of them, and the sight of their pale faces, so he claimed, nauseated him. Moreover, they had reminded him of the white face

of his brother as the drug had wrought the death pallor upon it.

"I tell you, Hung-nan," he went on, after a slight pause, "that if any one should hate the barbarians, we should. Did they not force opium upon China at the point of the sword, and has not opium been the ruin of our family? However, I should rather have Yung-fu go the way of our brother than get this religious poison, which is worse than opium, into him."

"Heaven forbid!" ejaculated the father of the boy.

"I should like to see every last one of them driven into their ships, and their churches and schools razed to the ground."

"You mean another Boxer Uprising?" exclaimed the farmer.

"No, that was very clumsily managed, and the Boxers were wild fanatics. But by applying our well-tried methods of boycott we could make it impossible for them to live comfortably anywhere outside of Shanghai. We should not have to resort to the sword. Why, these folks couldn't live a month if our people refused to work for them or to have any dealings with them."

"Yes, yes, but that does not help us in our present difficulty," interrupted the father. "The thing which troubles me most is that already Yung-fu takes no interest in the family ancestor worship, avoids taking part in the ceremonies whenever he can, and kotows as if he were ashamed some one would see him. I am worried, I confess. What should we do if his mind became filled with their cursed heresies?"

"Do?" replied the older man. "Why, we'll cure him — we'll talk him out of it."

"I wish you would," said the brother, in a hopeless voice. "You have much more influence with him than I or his mother. You have been his teacher and are to be his adopted father. We can't do anything with him."

He seems perfectly bewitched by that man in the chapel over there."

"Send him to me; I'll fix him," confidently asserted the schoolmaster.

Yao Yung-fu had completed his studies in his uncle's school the year before. Because he had been a brilliant pupil, the family had had great hopes that he might obtain a position as teacher in one of the schools of the district. But since the overthrow of the Manchus there was little demand for teachers who knew only the classics. Even the possession of a literary degree was now no great recommendation.

The young man was vigorous and active and not one to sit idly at home. He was hardly typical of the numerous class of young scholars whose soft hands and tapering fingers had never been soiled by rough work. Yung-fu had not been spoiled, as so many were, by education, nor was he afraid of manual labor or the work of the farm. He did not assume the long gown of the scholar but rather the costume of a rustic.

These democratic tendencies of his nephew were not altogether admired by the schoolmaster, who from his silk cap to his velvet shoes was an uncompromising aristocrat. The fact was that the younger Yao was a man of happy, friendly disposition, abounding with life and good cheer. Often spontaneous song burst from his lips as he walked or worked, snatches which he had caught from the last traveling theatrical troupe, or tunes from his childhood days.

On being informed that his uncle wished to see him, Yung-fu had gone toward the temple, wondering why he had been summoned. The temple inclosure was unusually quiet. Only the cooing of the doves under the porch eaves and the scolding of the sparrows broke the stillness. As he passed across the cleanly swept yard and under the wide-spreading pine, he paused a moment to pass his hand tenderly over the red trunk

of the tree. Just above his head it forked, one branch making a great loop on a horizontal plane, the other bending like a crooked finger over the loop. The low-drooping branches had been propped up with cedar poles so that standing under the tree seemed like being in the interior of a great, green, circular tent. He loved the tree. It was an old friend, a second teacher with which he could take more liberties than with Yao Hung-tai. And he had learned many lessons from it which were not in the school curriculum. There were voices in its branches. Beauty and patience and peace were here. There was something quite indefinable which contact with this great tree brought him. He felt stronger for having touched it.

Nothing in the yard had been changed. The little stucco animals ranging one above the other on the edge of the temple roof seemed as pert as ever. The temple bell hung in its wooden frame a few inches above the floor of the porch and at the right of the open door. It was black with age, and the characters on the sides were almost undecipherable; but age had not impaired its deep tone. Twice in each lunar month, on the eve of the first and the fifteenth, its boom sounded through the village and echoed from the hill across the valley. The massive woodwork of the building, the four porch pillars, the roof timbers, and the heavy doors were all painted a dark red. Grass was growing upon the gray tile roof.

"Have you eaten dinner, Uncle?" asked Yung-fu, as he stepped over the high threshold into the sanctum of the schoolmaster. The latter did not answer immediately nor cease from the task he had in hand. His nephew stood respectfully before the table of the old man, who presently looked at him a little severely over his large, horn-rimmed spectacles.

"Yung-fu, what is this I hear about your getting mixed up with this devils' religion?" he asked, laying

down his brush pen with which he had been making copies of the Chinese ideograms for his pupils. "You are not thinking of joining this foreign sect, are you?"

"No, Uncle, I haven't studied their doctrines enough for that," was the frank reply.

"Why do you go there, then?" demanded his adopted parent. "Don't you know that your father is worried sick over it?"

"Well, I must say I am interested," he admitted. "Their teaching about the Way of Life is very fascinating."

"Bosh!" exploded the teacher. "You already know the Way. Haven't I taught you since you were six years old? The way of life for you is to respect your elders and do your duty."

"But our books do not reveal anything about Heaven."

"Heaven? Who ever went to heaven?" was the disgusted rejoinder. "Heaven, my boy, as I have often told you, is within you. The virtuous man has the only heaven there is."

"But don't you believe that we live on after death?"

"Who knows?" was the careless answer. "As the Sage Confucius says, 'When we do not understand life, how can we understand death?' Be a good man, a superior man, a benevolent man, if you will, but don't get crazy over this superstition, and don't try to know more than Confucius did."

"But, Uncle, what harm can there be in looking into their doctrines?" the young man argued. "The Sage himself says, 'Do not fail to examine a teaching whether all men speak well or ill of it. If it is the Way, enter it; if not, turn back.'"

"That is all right if decent people are propagating a doctrine, but only the low and ignorant join this sect. I cannot see how you can bear to associate with such riffraff."

"Why, Mr. Han at the market isn't low or ignorant," asserted Yung-fu. "His father has a degree and he himself is a graduate of the University. He has as good an education as you have, and writes a beautiful hand."

"Well, I suppose he is eating the foreigner's rice," sneered the older man, stung by the comparison of the new college graduate's learning with his own. "They are all bleeding the foreigner."

"On the contrary, Uncle," said his nephew quietly. "Mr. Han is supported entirely by Chinese in Chefoo, and not a cent of foreign money does he receive. Besides, he refused an offer in a government school at three times his present salary. They told me that at the market."

"You don't believe it, do you?" scornfully asked the teacher. "And if it were true, it only shows what fools they are--fanatics I call them, crazy preachers of a foreign religion."

"After all, Christianity is not Western, you know; it is Asiatic," ventured Yung-fu.

"It has been long enough in the possession of the foreigners to be thoroughly corrupted," rejoined his uncle dryly. "Don't think these missionaries are here from unselfish motives. They are hired agents of their governments, sent over here to beguile the hearts of our youth and induce them to betray their country. Every man who joins them is a traitor—a traitor to his family and a traitor to his country. What did the German government do when two of her missionaries were killed?—She promptly gobbled up this whole province to pay for their precious lives. And what is the argument to which these Westerners always resort?—Force, war. Do you think that any religion which sanctions the things the foreigners do, which favors war and permits the stealing of another nation's territory, is the religion for China?"

"No," answered Yung-fu, "but I think we ought to

distinguish between what governments do and what a religion teaches. Do you approve of all our government does?"

"No, ten thousand times no; especially since this crazy imitation of a Western republic has been set up."

"Exactly so. Are all our officials true followers of Confucius? Do they love the people as parents? Do they rule in justice? Do they never take bribes? Yet can we blame their sins on the Sage or his teachings?"

"Who has been coaching you that you so glibly turn against your own? Have you sold yourself already?"

"No; I only want to be fair, and I am only saying what I have heard you yourself say many times."

"When have I ever said such things?" protested Yao Hung-tai, flushing, however, to remember his own diatribes against the officials and the government. "Do you suppose we want our family name dragged in the dirt? You are shaming the whole clan by dabbling in this foreign devils' religion. I want no more of it; and I tell you I won't have it. You might as well understand once for all that you shall not have one copper of my money or one mow of my land if you don't give it up."

"But, Uncle—" began the boy.

"No buts with me—I mean it." The old man turned to his writing and his nephew saw that the interview had been closed. He had been exhorted, and that with a severe threat. A dutiful son listens to the exhortation of his superiors and profits thereby.

But neither youth nor man was happy. Yao Hung-tai did not feel that he had accomplished what he had boasted he would. Somehow, his persuasiveness had not been so effective as he had expected. His arguments had not seemed to move his adopted son, as, according to custom, they should have done; and, too, the young man had been provokingly controversial.

He told his wife all about it that night, trying by the retelling to persuade himself it was settled. She was a sweet-faced woman with a Harnah's sorrow, and her husband was no Elkanah. The fact that his brother had two sons and could spare him one was the only thing which kept him from bringing a "little wife" into the family and so adding to her shame. She saw that that might yet be the outcome if Yung-fu were rejected and disinherited.

"I think you had better leave the boy alone," she said. "Let him discover his own fate. He is not a baby any longer; he's a man, twenty-two years old. He has an inquiring mind, and you ought not to try to crush it."

"Yes, childless women generally know best how to bring up children," was the cruel thrust of her husband. He did not fail to see the quick flash of pain that darted across her face. It was not the first nor the last time that he maliciously wounded the feelings of his wife. In his opinion a woman who failed to bring children into the world was accursed—a barren tree which only cumbered the ground. She was guilty of the eternal sin.

