

## CHAPTER XV

### BREAKING THE NEWS

THE arrival of Yung-fu with his French bride was not unexpected in the village of Leafy Banks. For months it had been the chief topic of conversation among maids and matrons, and the cause of much head shaking and sighing on the part of old men who squatted and smoked near the village shrine and told of the good old days when children were more filial and obedient to their parents' wishes.

A six-inch shell exploding in the Yao courtyard might have caused more damage, but hardly less consternation and dismay, than the letter which was received just before the Chinese New Year. Galahad had, immediately upon his return to his duties with the Labor Corps, undertaken to convey to his people the information of his marriage. It was not an easy letter to write. He knew that to a family like his, steeped in conservatism and glorying in belonging to the past with its strict traditions, the news that he had chosen his own wife would appear like a declaration of independence.

Though he loved Jeanne tenderly, indeed with more adoration than his mother regarded her porcelain goddess, he was not deceived as to the abhorrence with which this proud family would hear of his forming a marriage alliance with the hated and despised foreigner. This would be in their eyes not willfulness, but wantonness. Whether they would ever allow him to return home was doubtful.

Furthermore, Galahad, who was of an essentially honest and frank nature, did not feel that he could keep back the fact of his acceptance of Christianity. This would doubtless be the final factor in their alienation.

To go to a foreign land without the parental blessing was bad enough. To have the audacity to marry a foreign woman without parental consent, was worse. But to forsake the worship of his ancestors to worship a "foreign god" was no less than treason.

Galahad knew all this. For a long time he meditatively rubbed the hard ink stick upon the stone plaque, added water several times, and rubbed again. The drawing of the brush pen to a point seemed an unusually long process, but at last the letter was begun, corrected, and copied. He was not satisfied with it, but it was the best he could do.

"Dearly beloved Parents:

"It has been some time since I wrote last. Sickness has prevented me. I have been in the hospital with a serious wound, and but for the prayers of my friends and the goodness of Heaven I should not be writing now. This experience through which I have passed is closely linked to others of which I feel it my duty now to tell you.

"You remember the French family of which I wrote you, which had been so kind to me a lonely wanderer from my native land. The father had been killed in battle. One day I went to their home to urge them to go away, as the place where they lived was too dangerous. In the effort to protect the daughter from insult at the hands of a German spy I was myself wounded. Her mother had been killed that afternoon.

"I was able to lead the young lady to a place of safety, but later fainted from loss of blood and awoke to find myself in an American hospital and Miss Rouget, for that was her name, caring for me. For days they thought that I would die, and I am certain that I should have if it had not been for this young woman. I owe my life to her and you owe the fact that you still have a son to her also.

"From the first acquaintance I have loved her and discovered that she also loved me, although of different race and tongue. What more natural than that she should become my wife? We were married five days ago. She

was absolutely alone in the world, so that, while possessing considerable property, it is not possible for her to occupy it. She is willing to return with me to China when I am discharged. You will find her a real gentlewoman, educated and refined, modest and sweet-tempered, a daughter of whom any family may be proud.

"Of course my wife is a Christian. Her grandfather, a man of profound learning, was a pastor. I once held the Christians in contempt but have learned to feel otherwise. Now I know that the most unselfish, loyal, honest, truthful, and happy folks are those who follow this Way. They are the ones who are really putting into practice the virtues of which our sages wrote.

"I now believe in the Christians' God and have become one of their number. I know I shall never have cause to regret this step, and I trust that the time may come when you will realize that my action is taken not only from loyalty to God, who has given me my life back, but to my family, whose best interests I seek, and to China, which is dearer to me than ever.

"I have arranged, with the authorities to send you fifty dollars additional this month so that you may not be inconvenienced if you are put to extra expense in preparing for our return.

"With greetings to all the household, your son makes three bows."

It was a bitterly cold afternoon in January when this letter reached the Yao home. A raw north wind had been blowing all day and it was then snowing quite hard. A few men, thickly clad in cotton-wadded garments and somewhat resembling animated bedquilts, hurried along the street toward home and a warm brick bed. One of them turned in at the Yao gate and, shaking the snow off his shoulders, drew forth from his bosom an envelope.

"I was over to the market," he said, "and they gave me this letter. I guess it's from Yung-fu."

Yung-fu's father, who had come to the door, took the letter. "Won't you come in and drink a cup of tea?"

he asked perfunctorily. It was the proper thing to say and was not intended to be accepted.

"Thank you, I'll get home before it grows dark, I guess."

Galahad's uncle and aunt were in the house. The women had been sewing on New Year's clothes and were sitting on the warm kang.

"There, what did I tell you?" asked the aunt, who had that very afternoon been trying to allay the fears of his mother. "I knew he hadn't been killed by those Germans. Bring the letter in here," she called out to her brother-in-law, "where we can hear it."

The letter was handed to the schoolmaster, who adjusted his spectacles, while his sister-in-law set the tiny lamp so that he could see. Rapidly he glanced over the lines before beginning to read. He could not suppress an ejaculation of surprise and disgust.

"What is the matter?" asked Yung-fu's mother, "Is he dead?"

"No, but he might as well be," growled the uncle.

"Has he been hurt, then?"

"He has been making a double fool of himself."

He read the letter aloud and threw it down upon the table.

"What does it all mean?" asked the bewildered mother, who had only partially comprehended the contents of the letter.

"It means that that boy has cut himself off from his family," answered the uncle, raising his voice. "He has forsaken us."

"You don't mean that he will never return from France?" she cried.

"He might better stay there than to bring such disgrace upon our proud name. We have never had such a renegade in the family before. Christian! A foreign daughter-in-law! Bah, it makes me sick."

"Oh, how could he do it?" moaned the mother. "If

he had had any filial spirit he could not have brought this shame upon us."

"What does this generation care about filial reverence?" broke in the uncle. "Ever since the establishment of the Republic, it has been nothing but Liberty, Progress, Reform. The young people trample on the rights of parents. They neglect the sanctities of ancestor worship. They want to turn the world upside down and are only thinking of themselves. I don't care if I never see him again."

It was a gloomy family circle, with one exception. The aunt's eyes were shining with an inner exultation. Eagerly she came to the defense of her nephew.

"Surely we cannot say that Yung-fu has thought only of himself. Remember how every month he has sent one half of all his earnings home. No boy could have done more."

"That's so," murmured his mother; "the boy has always been good about money affairs."

"And this letter says he is sending fifty dollars additional," continued her sister-in-law.

She did not need to remind her husband that it was more than he could earn in a year, nor did she need to emphasize the fact that Yung-fu had been the financial savior of the family. He was a financial asset, and, with the average Chinese, financial facts have the greatest weight. The addition of that fifty dollars was a thought born of the most practical psychology. It was both a reminder and a promise.

"Does he say he is not coming back?" the mother asked again.

"No, no, Sister; he says that he is coming back, and has sent fifty dollars to fix up the house so it will be decent enough for this French girl to live in."

"Why, what shall I ever do with a French daughter-in-law?" exclaimed the excited woman.

"Put her to work, of course. That's what daughters-in-law are for, and if she doesn't behave herself treat her to a beating." The old schoolmaster happened to glance at his wife after delivering this bit of sage philosophy. "What are you grinning for?" he demanded. "Is this affair funny? You seem to be happy over the prospect of being grandmother to a lot of white brats."

"I was only smiling at your profound knowledge of womankind. But do you really suppose that Yung-fu would allow any one to beat his wife? You forget that he is a Christian now, and Christians do not beat their womenfolk."

"Christian or no Christian, no foreign devil's daughter shall ever run this family. She will have to learn her place if she comes here. Am I not right, Brother?" he asked, turning to the other man.

"Of course, of course," assented the younger man, as usual.

News in China travels faster than the fastest courier. Secrecy is apparently an unknown species. Before the next noon, though the weather was still inclement, practically all the village knew that Yung-fu had married a French wife and had become a Christian. Human nature is the same the world over and their neighbors came at the first opportunity to weep with those that weep or rejoice with those that rejoice, but most of all to see how they bore it.

Galahad's aunt was frankly happy over the prospect. "I think it is fine," she told these inquisitive females, "for young folks to pick out their own mates."

"Well, you always did have queer ideas," they laughed.

It was she who urged the erection of new buildings in the spring and took upon herself the task of making them as attractive and comfortable as she knew how. She kept repeating to herself a verse she had learned

from the book her nephew had given her. "Do unto others as ye would that they should do unto you." She did not know that it was called the Golden Rule, but she remembered the terror of that ride in the closed sedan chair to this village of her future husband. She remembered the indifference to her comfort, the inconsiderateness towards her feelings, the stern discipline of her husband's mother; and she determined that, as far as possible, this new daughter-in-law should enjoy what she would have liked then and did not have.

Her own brother's wife had a little *ya t'ou*, or slave girl, whom her husband had brought her from Peking. She was only a mite of a thing, eleven years of age, when he bought her. The father, who was an opium sot, had been pressed by the soaring price of the drug to realize what he could from the sale of this child.

She had a bad temper to begin with, and the longer she remained in the family the more violent and unmanageable she became. Many the time they had tried to persuade Yung-tu's aunt to take the girl off their hands. She had never had a daughter and would have liked the child for her own, but she felt that it was a luxury beyond her means.

Nor would she have hesitated on account of the girl's disposition. The *ya t'ou's* mistress had a temper also, as she well knew. On her visits to her brother's home she had witnessed unrestrained outbursts against the child. Slight offenses had been met by abuse. Threats couched in the most extravagant language had been made. "Keep a civil tongue in your head or I'll cut it off," she had once heard her sister-in-law say. And at another time, "Don't look at me like that if you don't want your eyes dug out." She had seen her beaten and slapped, her hair pulled, and her fingers twisted. Distressed by this cruelty, she had remonstrated with the woman and had been told to mind her own business. The slave girl had come to her for sympathy, showing

her bruised body. "You buy me and take me away," she begged. "I can be good when I am with you."

When the brother heard of the new bride he suggested that perhaps the "big foreign devil" could govern the "little Peking devil." The thought tickled him so, that he laughed uproariously at his own wit and impulsively offered to part with the girl for a nominal sum. The aunt had been contemplating the step for some time; but, lest she seem too eager, agreed with apparent reluctance to take her on trial for a month. This probation would, she felt, induce the child to try hard to please and make her more amenable to the training which she intended to give her. As usual, her husband disapproved of her plans; but, as she was using her own dowry money to buy the slave girl, he did not feel he could forbid it. However, he did not attempt to conceal his disgust at her efforts to make a happy homecoming for Yung-fu's wife.

"You are making a perfect fool of yourself over this foreigner. Do you expect me to kowtow to her too?" he asked scornfully.

"I have never known you to recognize any good in women or to treat them with any consideration, so I suppose it is too late to expect you to begin now."

Fortunately, Yung-fu's own father and mother were of a milder type. While sensitive about being made conspicuous in the eyes of the community by this indiscretion of their son, they did not bear any ill will towards him or his bride. As it could not be helped, it might as well be accepted. It was not as they should have wished, but they could bow to the inevitable and hope for the best.