

## CHAPTER XVII

### CLOTHES

**B**EFORE daybreak Jeanne was awakened by the long, weird sound of a horn blown at the rear of the house.

"What is that?" she asked, awaking her husband.

"I didn't hear anything," he answered sleepily.

"Why, it was enough to wake the dead, an awful, creepy sound. There, there it is again," she said, in a tremulous whisper.

"Oh, that's only the village cowherd calling for the cattle to lead them out to pasture," he reassured her.

The night was warm and the lattice had been left open. The steady breathing of her husband told her that he had fallen asleep again, but there was no more sleep for her. Through the window she could see the soft moonlight on the white plastered wall, and the shadows of the tree. How strange it all seemed! The nervous feeling induced by the sound of the horn had not entirely left her; she shuddered. There were many strange things ahead, perhaps some unpleasant, but she would not turn back, even in thought. She would meet them all in a spirit of adventure.

Swiftly and with the amazing clarity of mind which comes with the silence of darkness, she sketched the simple outline of her method of life. She would learn to like this people, would live in their midst without any attitude of superiority. She would adapt herself to them, study their ways, seek for the good wherever it was to be found.

It was not the plan of one who expected to supplant an ancient civilization with a new one, nor of a reformer

who wished to turn the world bottomside up, but it was a very sensible start for a young woman dropped down into a Chinese home which was still suspicious of, if not actually hostile to, the fate which had presented them with a foreign daughter-in-law.

With the first streaks of dawn the barking of the dogs near and far increased. She could hear the creak of the neighborhood grinding mill together with the shrill voice of the woman who was early grinding her Kafir corn, urging the donkey on his endless path. Shouts of men and the high-pitched chorus of schoolboys, as they began to sing the day's lessons, came in due order.

Jeanne was accustomed to the life of the country, and early rising was no burden. She had not been used to running water or porcelain bathtubs, so their absence caused her no anxiety or conscious inconvenience.

To tidy up their humble quarters was not a laborious task and occupied very little time, as there were no carpets to sweep and no window glass to wash. The bed was made by folding up the quilts. All she could find was a short-handled broom and a feather duster. With these she attacked the dust and soon had everything within the four walls as clean as could reasonably be expected, and spotless from a Chinese point of view. This done, Jeanne looked for new worlds to conquer.

If her mother-in-law expected her to be a fine lady who would sit on a cushion and sew a fine seam, she was happily surprised. Galahad had dressed himself in Chinese clothes, a suit of plain white cotton with a short jacket of dark blue, which he invariably wore afterwards. He had silk and satin garments suitable to his position as one of the gentry, but fine clothes meant very little to him and he seldom wore them. Galahad had gone out soon after rising and now Jeanne followed, making her way through the second row of buildings to the first and kitchen to find the women busy preparing the morning meal.

One of the girls was feeding the fire; and the expression is a good one, for it is a process as painstaking as the feeding of an infant. The girls gave her a bright smile and asked, "Have you risen, sister?" And she, catching the phrase, used it with the mother.

"Can't I help? Let me do something. Here, let me tend the fire." Flowering Almond yielded her place before the square mud-brick range whose top was the thin iron kettle two feet in diameter and ten inches deep. In the front was a square hole through which the dried pine branches could be inserted in such a way as to keep the flame close to the kettle. To see how the fire was burning one had to squat or sit cross-legged on the floor. This was not easy, as Jeanne soon found out. How her knees ached! Besides, her skirts were in the way here as they had been in the process of climbing on and off the brick bed.

Because of her inexperience, the blaze would go out and then the stove would smoke, making her eyes smart, or she would use too much kindling and have the fire roaring enough to set the chimney afire. A Chinese daughter-in-law would have been scolded for her carelessness or her wastefulness, but of course a native bride would not have been so awkward in Chinese domestic science.

As it was, the girls laughed at her and Jeanne laughed also. The mother was secretly too pleased with Jeanne's trying to take her place in the family life to think of chiding. She was not a demonstrative woman, but she looked at her son's wife a great deal less coolly, and to their future relations much less apprehensively. To this attitude another incident materially contributed.

Jeanne's callers the first few weeks were many. Not only from Leafy Banks and from the South Village, but even from more remote places they came in groups and singly to see the foreign daughter-in-law. Among

others was a Mrs. Sen whom the aunt had brought to Jeanne's rooms.

Jeanne noted the deference with which Yung-fu's mother treated her, and from her good clothes and the handsome pipe and tobacco pouch which she carried, judged that she must be a well-to-do friend. She was a woman about fifty years of age, tall and large. Her face, while not kindly, was intelligent. But Jeanne was not attracted to her. Mrs. Sen had a poise and self-reliance which was unusual among countrywomen. Her businesslike manner indicated that she was accustomed to meet with strangers. Without embarrassment she came forward and took Jeanne's hand in both hers, asking politely after her health. Under the searching gaze of the older woman Jeanne's eyes involuntarily fell, and she suppressed with difficulty the tremor which ran through her at the woman's touch. As soon as possible she disengaged her hand and gently thrust Mrs. Sen, protesting mildly, back into the seat of honor at the right of the table. The aunt took the other chair, while Jeanne and her mother-in-law sat upon stools nearer the door. Flowering Almond and Peach Blossom, for so Jeanne had named the slave girl, busied themselves in preparing the tea and cakes for the guest.

The conversation was easy and interesting and Jeanne's repugnance was fast fading. Without warning, Mrs. Sen began to tremble violently from head to foot. In a subdued voice she said, "He is coming, he is coming."

"Who is coming?" asked Jeanne, mystified.

"Master Fox," answered the woman, her voice trailing off into a whisper, her eyes becoming fixed and glassy.

The little slave girl, who had just poured the tea, said in an awed voice, "The fox has come to bewitch her." The aunt motioned her to be silent.

Jeanne rose to go to her assistance, but the aunt warned: "Do not touch her. Wait."

The stricken woman's eyes rolled upward until nothing was visible but the whites. Her body became rigid. From the depths of her chest came a deep masculine voice speaking very slowly. "I am here." There was a pause, then her arm rose jerkily until it reached the level of her shoulder and moved about the circle until it pointed in Jeanne's direction. Again the voice sounded. "Blessing and cursing. Who honors this woman shall be blessed; who dishonors, cursed."

The arm fell limply at the woman's side, the body relaxed, the head fell forward on her breast and she slept, breathing heavily. A sigh came from the lips of Mrs. Yao. A few minutes, during which no one moved, and Mrs. Sen opened her eyes, lifted her head, and looked round on the circle of faces as if nothing had happened. Hastily she rose, patted her clothes, and said she must be going.

"Won't you drink your tea?" asked Yung-fa's mother, in a strained voice.

"Thank you," replied the strange woman, but did not take the cup.

They all accompanied her toward the gate while she protested that they were busy and pressed them to desist. One by one at her solicitation they dropped off until the last to bid her farewell was the aunt. They did not see the roll of copper coins which the latter pressed into her hand; nor did they notice the twinkle of the aunt's eyes as she glanced at the sober face of her sister-in-law.

"What sort of woman was that?" asked Jeanne when she was gone.

"That is the witch of the South Village. She can cure disease," answered Flowering Almond.

"A witch!" said Jeanne nervously. "What did she

say about me when she pointed in my direction? I could not understand her."

"She said you were going to bring us all good luck," answered the aunt, patting her kindly and looking in the direction of her sister.

"How nice!" murmured Jeanne. "I hope it will come true."

Jeanne readily mastered the routine of the household. The women folk seemed to have a great deal to do, grinding, cooking, washing, and sewing. It was wheat-harvest time and Galahad was busy in the field and on the threshing floor from dawn until dark, and unaccustomed as he had been for three years to severe manual labor, was nodding almost before the late supper was finished.

During the harvest days this was the only meal Jeanne had with him, and it was far from satisfactory. Galahad and his father and the hired man had done three hours' hard work before Flowering Almond carried their breakfast out to them. They were very glad to sit down in the open field and partake of the frugal meal and rest a bit before going again at the driving task of cutting and binding into sheaves the tufts of wheat. Flowering Almond sat a little to one side waiting for the empty bowls and the hot water pot, while the dog lay in the cool furrow between the sweet potato vines or chased birds among the conical graves in the neighboring field.

Jeanne accompanied her sister-in-law the third day when she carried out the noon meal. Their harvesting was about over. Others were already threshing. The whole countryside was specializing in a single task. Upon the sunny threshing floors the women were turning over with wooden forks the heads of grain. Ever the children helped, driving the pattering burros to and from home.

The poorer men, who did not own a donkey, were



ALL DAY IN THE WHEAT FIELDS

stripped to the waist and wielded the flail with steady strokes. Others drove donkey or mule around and around, dragging a stone roller over the severed wheat tops, while the women swept up the separated grain or winnowed it with reed winnowing fan.

These were the busiest days of the year except those in the autumn when, following hard upon the cutting of the beans, the winter wheat must be put in. These were the days upon whose success all the rest of the year hung. A poor wheat crop and it had been a poor year. Not even an abundant supply of sweet potatoes, the real staple of diet, can make amends for a lean harvest. Every one is busy and every one knows he is busy and every one wants to tell how busy he is, for that spells prosperity.

There was no family life in the Yao household, as she had known it—no family meals, no reading beneath the evening lamp, no family prayers, no excursions all together. She and Galahad had their meals together, but it was a concession to her feelings and not customary. Usually the male members of the family ate first and then the women and girls.

Nor was there any social life in this village of two hundred families. There were plenty of young people, but no mixed gatherings. No sound of church bell called the people together for social worship. It is true, relatives came once in a while for a day's visit, but such events were made stiff by prescribed etiquette, and everybody was relieved when they were over. Now and then some family gave a feast, but only the men were invited. A wedding or a funeral broke the monotony of life and afforded a bit of excitement; and once a theatrical performance was given by traveling actors. This was an offering to some local deity and shared by young and old alike.

The Yao family, being the schoolmaster's clan and mindful of their position in the village, lived a rather



retired existence. As the mother said, "I do not propose to have my family seen running to the street every time a dog barks or a child cries." Consequently the women folk rarely went outside the gate, unless to take their turn at the mill, to buy a little oil of the peddler, or to go to the river to wash their clothes.

The last was indeed the place where the younger women had most freedom. Oftentimes on a bright day and after a recent rainstorm had swollen the slender trickling stream somewhat, a dozen girls and women with brass basins of clothes could be seen along its banks. They sat cross-legged upon grass mats or knelt by the river's edge, beating some folded garment with a wooden club upon the flat stones. Here they would remain for hours pounding and gossiping.

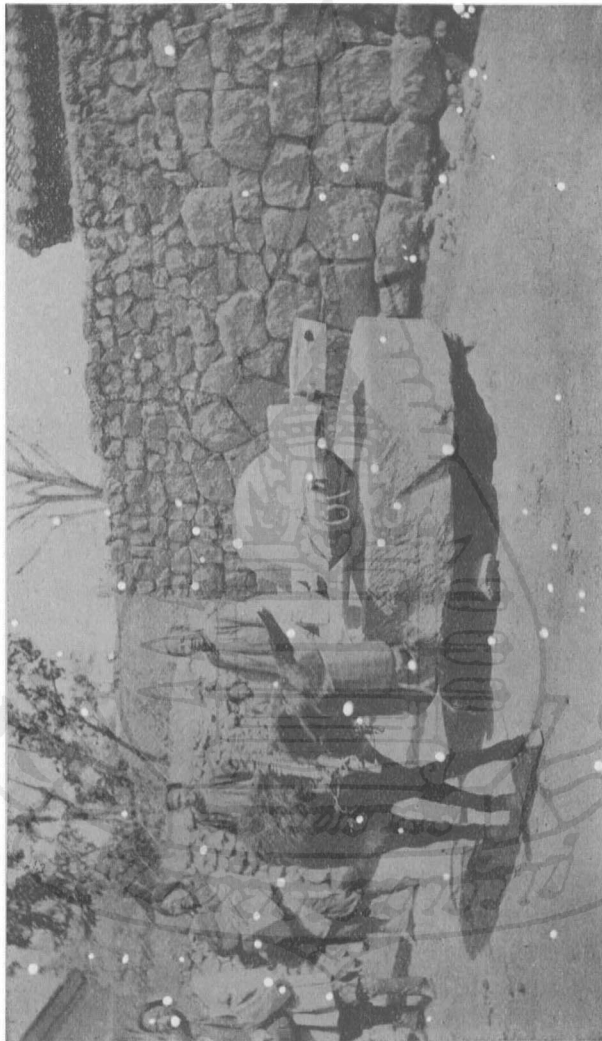
Jeanne went several times with the sisters to this rendezvous. Here she was able to get on common ground with the rest. The girls and women were cordial to her, but still she found her foreign clothes made her too conspicuous. They wanted to see how she was hooked together. Besides, her skirts were always being drabbled in the water.

She made a decision. The immediate cause of it was that all along the way to the river the dogs, unused to seeing skirts on a woman, ran at her fiercely. At one time she was really in danger, having been surrounded by half a dozen canines who only desisted from attacking her because of the shouts and blows of a man standing near. Half apologetically, he said to Welcome to Spring, who was accompanying her, "The dogs see she wears outlandish clothes."

When she reached home Jeanne said to the sisters: "I am going to do something, but you mustn't tell. I want to get some clothes like yours. Will you help me?"

"Do you really mean it?" asked the elder.

"Certainly I mean it. I'm tired of being fingered and felt of, tired of showing how these dresses button



WOMEN AT THE MILL

and unbutton, tired of being barked at by every dog on the street."

"Oh, goody, goody," cried Flowering Almond, clapping her hands, "we'll dress you up like a real bride, all in red."

Jeanne swore them to secrecy and for the next few days one might have thought that there was a conspiracy against the government on the part of the suffragettes. Every time a cloth peddler twirled his rattle, rat-tit-atat-tat, they had important business on the street.

"What are you folks doing so much whispering about?" asked Yung-fu.

"You wait and see," taunted his sister.

The younger was so eager to see her in red that she almost cried when Jeanne declined to buy scarlet cloth. Again and again she took up the piece. "This is pretty," she would say. But Jeanne was obdurate. Her plan was to become inconspicuous and felt that in a costume like that she would appear like a scarlet tanager.

More modest materials were selected and for days the three used all their spare time in cutting and sewing. One afternoon, when the coast was clear, Jeanne, bearing the fateful garments which had been brought from their hiding place, retired to her room.

It was quite a transformed young woman who emerged from her magic cabinet. To Western eyes she would have seemed like one who had stepped from the pages of a fairy story—Peter Pan might well have been her twin. No Worth gown could have set off her charms more completely or have been more becoming.

It was simple in the extreme and consisted of a short blue jacket fastened with small white frogs on the shoulder and beneath the arm, and loose trousers of blue print cloth tapering at the bottom and fastened with a plain red silk ribbon wound about the ankle.

White stockings and black cloth shoes edged with bright Chinese braid completed the costume. Jeanne had parted her hair and had done it low in her neck.

The sisters were on the watch for her as she came out into the yard. Her cheeks were unusually rosy, for she could not help blushing, and she wanted to run in again lest Galahad or her father-in-law should see her.

At the girls' shout of pleasure the aunt appeared and hugged Jeanne, saying: "You look too sweet for anything. Let me get my hair ornaments."

She clambered into her house through a window which opened on to Jeanne's courtyard and soon returned the same way with her hands full of silver and enamel ornaments, pretty dangling things as precious to the Chinese woman as the string of ten silver pieces was to the woman of the parable.

"I brought my rouge box too," she panted from her haste and eagerness. "Just let me put a bit on your lips and you'll look real Chinese."

"I think the ornaments will be enough," said Jeanne, quietly pushing away the rouge box and landing her aunt one of the pieces of jewelry. "How does this one go or?"

The older woman deftly adjusted the pin and, wishing to let the others see the effect, turned Jeanne about so that she faced the window through which the aunt had climbed. Suddenly Jeanne became conscious of a man's face framed by the window. With one frightened cry she ran swiftly to her own door and disappeared within.

The other three turned to see—the schoolmaster. The old man, ashamed to be caught taking any interest in these feminine affairs, asked crossly, "Where's my pipe?"

"Sticking up out of the back of your collar," replied his wife, and as he shamefacedly reached up and took it out, she continued, "You might at least cough the next time you come on folks so suddenly."



BY THE RIVER BANK

"I haven't any cold," he answered and disappeared from view.

With difficulty they persuaded Jeanne to come out of her bedroom.

"I can't wear these clothes," she said; "they make me feel like an actress."

"What, not wear them after all the time we have spent making them?" said the younger sister in a grieved tone.

"You look just like the rest of us," remarked Welcome to Spring.

"That's so, but I know I shall run every time I see a man," answered Jeanne.

As she spoke, her husband's voice sounded from the middle courtyard, "Hello, Jeanne, come here a minute."

"I can't just now," she called back, all consternation.

"Go on out and surprise him," urged Galahad's aunt, pushing her toward the door.

"Oh, I can't, please don't," she protested. But she found herself in the yard with the door closed behind her.

"I've something to show you, Jeanne," called her husband again.

Fearing to stay in the courtyard lest her uncle might glower at her again through the window, she walked swiftly into the central row of houses. The light there was somewhat dim. Galahad was in the court beyond with his back to her, squatting over a tub in which were several goldfish, funny little things with bulging eyes and tissue tails. Hearing her step he glanced over his shoulder and, seeing one whom he took for the older of his sisters, said: "I didn't call you. I want Jeanne."

"But I *am* Jeanne," she said slowly, in French.

With a whoop he sprang to his feet and, forgetting his dripping hands, threw his arms about her and began dancing about in a most unrestrained fashion. Abruptly

he stopped and holding her off at arm's length said, "Jeanne, you're simply perfect."

Words were inadequate to express his emotions. He snatched an old sword from the wall where it hung, drew it from its scabbard, and ran to the courtyard. Jeanne followed hastily, not knowing what he was about to do.

As she came through the door he struck an attitude. He was a prince and she a princess. Dangers threatened her and he had drawn his sword in her defense. The enemy must have numbered a good many, but with one leap he landed in their midst and began to slash and thrust, to parry and hack. He rushed to the attack with terrific sweeps of the blade; he retreated, fighting hard. Surrounded, he fought his way through, circled, dodged, and drove them back.

Heads must have been severed, not to speak of arms and legs. The survivors of the fearful carnage he drove through the window from which his uncle had recently dared to look, thrusting his sword through the window after their retreating forms. Then, victor of the field, he brandished his saber in the faces of his laughing sisters, who were peeking through the door, and again struck an attitude before his princess.

To the girls it was only a bit of by-play, but to Jeanne it was a new declaration of love; it was a reassurance that he would defend her against all comers, whether family or foe.

As he stood before her, Jeanne's eyes sparkled with admiration and love. She clapped her hands together and said, again in French, "My Chinese Sir Galahad."

Her two fellow conspirators and aunt, laughing heartily, thrust their heads out of the door and asked, "Is it safe for *us* to come out?"

"Yes," answered Galahad. "and I'll give you each two goldfish for reward."