

CHAPTER XVIII

WIFE' OR CONCUBINE?

THE little French woman with her Chinese clothes was apparently being absorbed by this ancient civilization which has always assimilated its conquerors and molded them to its own standards. This absorption, however, was only apparent. In reality, though she had been in the house only a little over two months, she was affecting its life in many and important particulars. Galahad, too, had learned a great deal in the years he had spent in France, and he and his wife, without much talk, had instituted radical reforms about the place.

The sanitary arrangements were improved. Efforts were made to diminish the swarms of flies. A screen door was put on the food cupboard and mosquito netting over the windows. Besides keeping their own rooms immaculate, Jeanne, who had one antipathy only and that for dirt, initiated her sisters-in-law into the mysteries of house cleaning "from cellar to garret," neither of which generally dusty places the house possessed. But there were plenty of cobwebs and dusty beams elsewhere. Never had the place looked so fine.

All this was done in such a cheerful and uncritical way that her mother-in-law, who was not a poor housekeeper from a Chinese point of view, inwardly congratulated herself, on having so industrious a daughter. Nor did she forget to burn several extra sticks of incense to Kuan-yin as a thank offering for her compassion.

Jeanne and the girls were together constantly. Their love for her was so spontaneous, and their admiration

so complete that it was not surprising that they soon asked her how to do their hair like hers. She gladly showed them how really beautiful their black hair might be if they would cease plastering it down with shiny oil. Before long other girls in the village were following the new style "straight from Paris."

Yung-fu's uncle was the only one in the family who maintained a studied reserve. They often met as Jeanne was sweeping out the gatehouse in the morning. She made it a rule to address him respectfully, and although he often ignored her greeting, once in a while he answered in monosyllables. Several times he had stopped as if to say something, then, thinking better of it, had passed on.

One forenoon she was later than usual in the gatehouse. She did not notice the schoolmaster coming down the street in company with a young man until they stopped before the door. As the stranger said farewell he turned and looked at Jeanne. She noticed he had a scar across his cheek and a leer in his eye. A peculiar sense of repugnance came over her. The face seemed strangely familiar; indeed, so much so that she was impelled to question the uncle who had passed her without greeting and now had his back turned.

"Please, sir, may I ask who that man is?"

The schoolmaster turned and retraced a few steps. "That man," he said slowly, "is the brother of Yung-fu's wife."

"Yung-fu's wife? Why, I am Yung-fu's wife."

"No," the old man went on cruelly, as if he had rehearsed the speech, "you are only his concubine."

"Concubine?" gasped Jeanne. "Why, what do you mean? Has he another wife?"

"I mean that before Yung-fu ever saw you he had been betrothed to the sister of this man Li."

"But he has married me instead," triumphantly answered the girl.

The old man raised a bony finger and corrected her. "No, with us Chinese, betrothals are fully as binding as marriages and cannot be broken. The arrangements with the Li family were made first and, although the wedding has not come off yet, she is the real wife and you are the 'little wife.'"

It came with such suddenness, so unexpected, that had Yao Hung-tai struck her between the eyes with his clenched fist he could not have dazed her more. All the words of warning with which her friends had attempted to dissuade her from marrying Galahad trooped before her mind. A cold fear gripped her heart. Had Galahad deceived her? Had she come to China for this, to become the second wife in a heathen home? Must she share her husband with another? Was she to be sacrificed upon the altar of a social system which permitted a man to multiply his wives at will? Was she then to be, not a wife, a companion, a mate to Galahad, but a human chattel belonging to this family like the beasts of burden standing at their cribs? The thoughts fairly paralyzed her. Things became black and she grasped the wall for support, then with a deep moan sank to the earth.

The schoolmaster took a few steps to one side of the brick partition and called his wife in a sharp tone. She came hurrying out, wiping her hands, which had been in the flour, upon her apron. He pointed to Jeanne's insensible form upon the ground. "She has fainted."

"Why didn't you help her, then?" asked his wife indignantly.

"You didn't expect me to touch her?" he replied haughtily.

"Wouldn't bite you, I guess. What have you been saying to the poor child?" she asked suspiciously; then, her suspicions strengthened, she continued accusingly. "You have been talking to her about the Li family, haven't you?"

But her husband had gone. Tenderly she raised the limp form and, with the help of Peach Blossom, carried Jeanne to her own room.

Meanwhile Li Cho-pen, for it was no other than Jeanne's former assailant, passed on down the street, to be stopped at the next corner by an old schoolmate. "Wasn't that the schoolmaster I saw you walking down with?" queried the friend.

"Yes, I dropped in at the school and walked home with him," admitted Li.

"Trying to get an introduction to their French daughter-in-law?" bantered the other.

"I don't need an introduction."

"Do you know her?"

"Yes, and plenty more just like her. That sort of women was always hanging about our camp."

"You don't say so!"

"Sure," went on Li, encouraged by the astonishment of his auditor. "The French women were just crazy about us Chinese. You know so many of their men folks were killed in the war that lots of them would have been glad to get a home in Shantung."

"How does this one compare in looks with the others?"

"Oh, so so. She does very well for a 'little wife,' and if Yung-fu can support a concubine, I don't know that we should object."

"A concubine? You don't mean to tell me he took her for a secondary wife?"

"I don't know what his idea was, but I know my rights, and I know that my sister is going to be his *wife*. That was settled while we were in France."

"Why, look here, Big-Brother Li, you don't for a minute imagine, now that this foreign girl has come, that contract will stand?"

"Stand? Of course it will stand. Do you think the Li family will submit to be flouted before the whole

countryside? Either they will take my sister or I'll squeeze them for every cash they've got." He savagely struck one hand into the palm of the other as he spoke.

"You'd better go slow," cautioned his friend. "We are living in a new day now, and the courts do not look on broken engagements as seriously as they once did. Besides, those who play with lawsuits often get bitten themselves."

"You trust me to fix things. I'm no spring gosling."

"No, you certainly never were," thought the man, as Li Cho-pen passed on, "and France hasn't changed you any for the better either."

It was not long before they were able to bring Jeanne to consciousness, but she trembled so violently and cried so hysterically that the aunt insisted on putting her right to bed. Unfortunately, Galahad had gone to Chefoo and was not expected home before the next day.

Jeanne moaned and wept a great deal during the afternoon. Her refusal of all food so alarmed the Chinese that some one suggested calling a doctor. "Medicine won't do her any good," said the aunt wisely. "She's been frightened and she'll be all right when Yung-fu gets home. You leave her to me."

Jeanne seemed relieved not to have the others crowding into the little bedroom, but clung to the aunt with pitiful eagerness. The good woman did not ask any questions. She tried to divert her thoughts, to soothe her, to coax her to eat a little of the dishes she prepared. In the first two she was successful for a time, but when darkness came on it seemed to Jeanne as if she would go mad. Her thoughts were like demons armed with whips lashing her to frenzy. She was alternately burning with fever and shaken with nervous chills.

Not a wink of sleep could she get all night, and when

morning came, haggard and pale, she looked like one who had passed through a siege of sickness. The wife of the schoolmaster had sat with her the night through, never leaving her for more than a few moments at a time. Though she had often nodded in her chair by the bed, the kindly presence of this Chinese woman, who was trying in some measure to undo what her husband had done, was a real comfort to the French girl.

By ten o'clock that morning Galahad was entering the town. The night before, on arriving at the inn, he could not free his mind from a premonition that all was not well at home. It was too late to press on then, but four o'clock in the morning saw him on the road. He met his mother in the first courtyard, who without preface said, "She's sick."

"I knew it."

"You did? Who told you?"

"No one told me. I just knew it."

He did not stop to explain either to himself or to his mother the phenomenon which is so common. Jeanne heard his step and was sitting up to receive him. As he entered, she stretched out her arms and, when he put his arms about her, she laid her head upon his breast and held him close to her. As a frightened bird which has been pursued by a hawk hides panting in the protection of the underbrush, this poor wounded soul, not yet assured of her safety, shook with pent-up emotion.

"Poor little girlie, it's all right now," he said comfortingly, stroking her hair.

"O Galahad, you didn't bring me to China for this, did you? You can't expect me to share you with another, when I love you as I do."

He thought she was complaining about his being away from her so long. "I came back just as quickly as I could, *chérie*; I didn't even spend one night in Chefoo. But if it frightens you I won't go away again."

"No, no, it isn't that. Just tell me, is it true that I am not your wife — that I am only your concubine?"

He started as if struck and sprang to his feet. "Who dared to say so? Who has told you such a lie?"

She caught the flash of his eyes and it brought to her mind two days, the one when he had fought for her against four antagonists, and the other more recently when he had put into swordplay his declaration of love and loyalty.

"Then it is a lie?" she cried.

"Of course, it's a foul lie. How could you believe otherwise, Jeanne?"

"Your uncle said you were betrothed to a girl named Li, and that you would marry her soon."

"My uncle, eh? I suspected as much. And he says I am betrothed? This is the first I have heard of it. Listen, Jeanne, I left home and went to France because my uncle was trying to force me into a marriage with that family. I tore up the papers he had written and absolutely refused to have anything to do with the matter. I thought, of course, it had been dropped. Why, that girl's brother was the man who insulted you that day by the bridge."

"I was sure I had seen that face before."

"You don't mean to say he dared to come here?"

"He was walking with your uncle yesterday and stopped before the door, and I thought he looked familiar and asked Uncle who he was, and then he told me that. But Uncle said by Chinese law betrothals could not be broken. Is that so, Galahad?"

"If it were so I would take you and leave home at once. God gave you to me when He gave me back my life. You are dearer to me than anything else in the world. How could you doubt my love, Jeanne?"

"I never have, but Chinese ways are all so strange to me that I didn't know but that you might become

the victim of circumstances against your will. I knew your loyalty to your family and thought—”

“That I would sacrifice my wife to keep peace in the family? Do you remember the first Chinese sentence I ever read to you?”

“No, I cannot say that I do.”

“Well, it was this, and I haven’t forgotten it: ‘Therefore shall a man leave his father and mother, and cleave unto his wife.’”

