

CHAPTER XIX

THE LAW

GALAHAD wisely gave his anger against his uncle a day to cool, then he went and had it out with the arbitrary mold of his destiny. When he finished, the old gentleman realized that he was not dealing with a willful boy this time, but with a most determined man. To storm would do no good, to plead made no impression. His nephew was absolutely uncompromising on the whole subject. Yao Hung-tai's spirits sank lower and lower as Yung-fu remained obdurate.

"If you are going to treat me like this," said the schoolmaster, "you may as well put a knife to my throat. There is nothing for me to do but die. I shall never be able to face the town after this."

The old man's countenance was drawn and he looked appealingly at Yung-fu. His accustomed imperiousness was gone. His chin trembled and his hands fumbled with his tobacco pouch and pipe. Galahad noticed how much grayer his uncle had grown in the three years he had been in France.

He felt a strong pity for his adopted father and longed to find a way to make it easier. This was one of the few times in his life that the old scholar's will had been balked. It was a very bitter experience. Moreover, one of his most precious possessions, face, was in danger of being taken away. To have it known in the countryside that his adopted son had deposed him from his autocratic headship of the Yao family was to lose the prestige of forty years. He was perfectly sincere in saying he preferred to die.

"You mustn't talk like that," said his nephew.

"Nowadays engagements are often broken. Even if I did not have Chên-an, you now know there is reason enough why we should not marry with that family. You made the arrangements; what is to prevent your calling in the go-betweens and telling them that you have decided to break the engagement?"

"What," said the master, with a return to his former fire, "break my contracted word? You certainly have forgotten my early training. You would save my face and have me lose my honor. How can you suggest that I should do such a thing? If our plighted word is to be violated it will be you, and not I, who will do it. Yet I shall have to bear the disgrace. How you can think that having two wives is in the sight of Heaven a greater sin than breaking our family word is more than I can see."

"You forget that it was not my word," reminded Galahad.

"I do not forget that it was mine," sternly retorted his uncle.

The family were not long left in doubt as to the intentions of Li Cho-pen. Not a week had elapsed before two crafty individuals called, asking for the schoolmaster. His wife sent for Galahad, who went to his uncle's guest room to meet them.

"Where are the gentlemen from?" he asked politely as they rose.

"From the South Village. We want to see the old teacher on a little matter of business."

Galahad looked at them closely. They were as different as two men could possibly be. The one who had answered his query resembled an old goat. Two long tufts of gray hair grew from his otherwise smooth cheeks. Beneath his chin hung an unusually thick goatee. The long upper lip was without adornment and the mouth wore nearly a perpetual smile. His laugh crackled unmusically and his face wrinkled and puckered

with artificial merriment. He was a good-natured man, so he constantly reminded folks. To him had been intrusted the pleasant task of keeping everybody in good spirits. Why get so serious? It was just as easy to laugh as to cry. He had never found any difficulty so great that he had not been able to find a way out. Just keep jolly and things came your way.

His companion was stockier, thick-necked, and with a rectilinear head. The long full face had small piglike eyes whose pupils no one ever saw. A short upper lip disclosed long yellow teeth decayed at the roots. The lower middle teeth were missing, and the others rattled as he grunted out his contrary philosophy of life. He, too, was a man of affairs, but he spiced no interviews with jokes. Silence was his long suit. Talking prevented him from watching the moves. When the fatal opening came he was ready to rush in and gnash upon the adversary with those rattling tusks of his. They were a wonderful pair to be intrusted with the hymeneal destinies of two human beings, thought Galahad, a satyr and a boar.

"Of course you know me," chuckled the former. "I'm the trouble man. Everybody for twenty li around comes to me to get them out of their scrapes. If you have murdered your wife, or anything like that, I'm the man you want to consult." He took his long pipe out of his mouth as he spoke and in a familiar fashion tapped Galahad upon the chest with the wet mouth-piece. It was a pleasant little mannerism he had. His swinish companion grunted as if to confirm these jovial remarks.

Because of his habit of talking so much the satyr's pipe persisted in going out. It only held a pinch, anyway. Fortunately, in his friend he had a vestal who kept the social flame alight and stood ready as often as requested to join pipe to pipe and solemnly perform the rite of passing fire.

"I am sorry my uncle is not at home," said Galahad. "Might it be that you are the go-betweens who have been arranging—"

"Yes, that is what we have come about. The Ji family desire to hurry matters up a bit and to set an early date for the marriage."

"Perhaps I can answer as to that as well as my uncle. You will please convey to your friends the information that, as I already have one wife, it is out of the question for me to take another."

"What does an extra wife, more or less, matter?" the merry individual asked. "You certainly do not intend to repudiate the engagement on that account, do you?"

"As far as I am concerned there has never been an engagement," quietly answered Galahad.

"But the betrothal papers were properly exchanged and your presents sent to the prospective bride."

"This whole affair is one of which I heard less than five days ago for the first time."

"Then are we to understand that you take the responsibility of breaking the contract? If so, I do not know that we need to see your uncle at all."

"I hardly think it is necessary. The fact that I was married a year ago settles the whole matter."

"From your side, perhaps," grunted the pig-eyed go-between, "but certainly not from ours." They rose to go.

"Won't you wait a moment and have a cup of tea?" Galahad's aunt had heated the water in readiness.

"No need of that; we are not thirsty. We'll go back."

When Galahad had escorted them to the door and returned to the room he said, "Well, that is one unpleasant job over."

"But is it over?" asked his aunt. "Didn't you hear what he said at the close?"

"Of course I heard. I don't expect it to end here, but so far so good. We got through without a scene to-day. To-morrow they will be on their way to the county seat to lodge suit against us, and then will and wit must win."

"You do not seem very worried, Yung-fu."

"Why should I when I am doing right?"

Li Cho-pen, moved by motives of revenge and avarice, did exactly as Galahad had predicted. A runner from the county magistrate's yamen served a summons on him to answer to a breach of promise suit lodged by one Li Kuang-fu. Galahad went at once to the county seat and asked that the case be postponed for a half month to prepare a brief and gather evidence. This was granted.

The defendant in the suit reached home that night and made preparations to start on a journey the next morning. Only Jeanne knew where he was going. To the others he said he would be away a few days. Before the neighbors were astir Galahad was on the road, and it was twelve days before he appeared again, rather footsore but cheerful. There were still two days to spare before the case should be called.

"What will they do to you, Galahad?" asked his wife.

"Oh, cut a pound of flesh from over my heart probably, like that chap I read of in one of the English books," said he to tease her.

"Please be serious, and tell me."

"Why, there is only one thing they really want to do. Li Cho-pen does not care anything about his sister, nor does he wish me to marry her. What he wants is to divorce me from some of the money I saved in France and take it to himself. Of course, if I were willing to pay hush money the case would be dropped. And I should be inclined to make the family a present to compensate for their loss of face and to make

amends for the folly of my uncle, if, Li Cho-pen were not such a thorough rascal."

"Shall I have to appear as a witness?"

"Mercy, no," said her husband, with a twinkle in his eye. "If the magistrate ever got his eyes on you he might condemn me to marry Li Cho-pen's sister just to get me out of the way."

"Now, I know you are joking. You certainly are in high spirits for one who is defendant in a breach of promise suit. You better be good, young man, for you may yet need a Portia to rescue *you* from the clutches of your Shylock."

"If I were the plaintiff and you the defendant, I should not be in such high spirits."

Muping City, the official seat of the county of the same name, is one of the best cities of its rank in the eastern part of Shantung. Its well-kept walls are built of brick and have four gates at the four points of the compass. Two principal streets, one running from the east to the west gate, and the other from the north to the south, divide the city into four sections. On the east and west street, which is of good width and paved, most of the business places are to be found. One of the most popular and, to certain persons interested, profitable businesses is lawsuiting, and this centers about the yamen, or court,

A great gateway facing south ushers litigants into a series of empty courtyards and dusty buildings, through which they pass to the courtroom. The appointments of the latter are simple in the extreme. Two chairs upon a slightly raised platform and a small table between them constitutes the judge's bench. A table and two chairs below for the recorder and his assistant complete the furniture of the county court.

As one enters the building he has to run the gauntlet of numerous functionaries, detectives, and couriers who are always on the lookout for a tip, and who facilitate

or obstruct the passage of those having business with the magistrate, according to the size of the *cumshaw*. Yung-fu had gone to the city the day before his case was to come up. Finding a quiet inn, he engaged lodgings. Li Cho-pen had been about the city for days, making friends with different hangers-on at court and using money where it would count for most.

There was quite a crowd in the anteroom as the interested parties in several suits assembled. Li Cho-pen had come first and with the goatlike go-between stood in a group of men at one end of the room laughing and talking loudly. Galahad stood by himself quietly watching.

At a given signal and with a flourish such as the Chinese love, all the company of court officers, detectives, clerks, and gatemen came swarming from their places like hornets from a nest which has been disturbed, and together with the litigants and visitors formed a double line down which marched His Honor the Judge. He entered the courtroom and took his place on the dais, and the crowd swarmed in and knelt on the brick floor.

He was a man somewhat over fifty, fat and apoplectic looking. His watery, nearsighted eyes were shielded by huge crystal spectacles. Evidently His Honor was a left-over from the Manchu dynasty, for he still wore the costume of an imperial official. A crystal button surmounted his imposing headdress, while a peacock's feather hung from it over his shoulder. His purple coat had, back and front, the Mandarin squares upon which were embroidered red and gold phoenixes, and he carried a large fan in his hand. Buskins with thick soles gave him added height.

Ten yamen runners, wearing high conical red hats, stood about the dais. They had placed before the judge certain objects which were calculated to inspire respect, or at least caution, in the litigants — a pair of

handcuffs, a bamboo rod, and a solelike instrument for striking an offender upon the face. There was, besides, a tube containing bamboo lots by which he decided how many strokes the culprit was to receive. If the accused or witnesses said anything which offended the official the latter had a square piece of wood with which he would beat upon the table.

"Kneel down, kneel down," bawled out one of the red hats, and those who were still upon their feet made haste to obey. Galahad was at the rear of the room, unnoticed for the most part. He might have knelt too, and perhaps it would have been better if he had. He knew, however, that under the Republic no one was required to kneel in the presence of a magistrate, and both his experience in France and his new religious convictions prompted him to remain standing. He had removed his hat, which the others had not done. The spectacle of this one clean-cut young man standing did not escape the notice of the official, who looked at him sharply.

The Muping official had been in office for many years and was well known for his Solomonic decisions. It was, however, his cleverness in detecting the guilty party rather than his devotion to justice that had given him his reputation. Many were the tales of his astuteness. His court was always filled with appreciative listeners who came to laugh at his witticisms and enjoy his involving the witnesses in their tangles of falsehood.

One of the favorite stories about him concerned a leper. The fellow had been accused of stealing an iron kettle. Holding up his stumps of hands for the judge to see, he had asked in a whining voice full of self-pity, "How could I possibly steal a kettle, Your Honor, without any fingers?" The official had gone into a towering rage at the plaintiff for bringing such an evidently trumped-up charge before him and had ended by

commanding him to go and buy a kettle for the leper. The kettle was brought and laid before the judge. "There, my good man," he said to the accused, "take your kettle and depart in peace." With profuse thanks the leper stooped down and worked his stumps of hands under the edge of the large iron pot, then with a quick movement flipped it over and on to his head. Rising, he was making his way, thus covered, out of the courtroom, when he heard the judge say in stern tones: "Come back, I thought you couldn't carry away a kettle. Instead of the kettle you shall have fifty blows of the large bamboo paddle."

A farmer, after hitching his fat burro before the door of the yamen, had dropped in to drink at the fountain of wisdom. When he had drunk his fill and returned to his patient beast, he found that some rascal had traded donkeys with him, leaving a bony animal in the place of his well-fed one. Rushing back into the court, he approached the man on the bench and related to him how he had traveled far just to taste the flavor of his learning and refresh himself with the stores of his reputed wisdom, and how, as he knelt before him forgetful of time, some son of Belial had taken his precious ass. The judge, after getting the facts clear, whispered to one of the attendants, who went outside and loosed the scrawny beast, which promptly pattered off down the street, turned up an alley and around a corner, and stopped before his own door. The countryman's donkey was found within the yard feeding at his new master's crib.

The first case called that afternoon was one concerning the removal of a landmark. After the evidence had been taken and the judge had by sharp questioning of the parties determined who was in the right, he gave his decision. Then followed the plaint of a father who had been illtreated by his son. To this unfilial child the magistrate delivered a moral lecture on duty to

parents, and followed it with a threat that, if he did not repent and give his father his just dues, he should be imprisoned. On the promise of the culprit to reform he was dismissed.

Galahad's case was next called. From where he was kneeling, Li Cho-pen came forward on his knees. Galahad stepped to the front and stood before the judge. He was dressed in his uniform and looked very trim.

"Kneel down, kneel down," called out one of the runners.

Galahad remained standing.

"You do not kneel?" asked the judge.

"Does Your Honor command it?"

"No," he said, "it is optional." But he was evidently displeased.

A murmur ran round the courtroom at what they considered *lèse-majesté*, or something akin to it.

"Yao Yung-fu," said the judge, looking from the papers he held in his hand over his spectacles, "you are summoned to answer to the charge of breach of contract in refusing to marry the sister of one Li Kuang-fu, after the customary betrothal certificates had been exchanged between the two families. I have carefully examined these papers and find them undoubtedly genuine. Have you any reasons to present why you should not fulfill your part of the contract?"

"Your Honor," said Galahad in a clear, steady voice, "there are three reasons why I should not marry the sister of the plaintiff. The first is that I am a Christian. I already have one wife, and by the tenets of my religion I cannot take another."

"You belong to the Jesus Church, do you? A good many persons nowadays try to hide under the shadow of the church. I have looked somewhat into this faith and know something of their practices. Suppose you sing one of their songs to show us how far you have

gone. Christians all can sing." He popped out his eyes at Yung-fu, then narrowed the lids until nothing of them could be seen.

A titter ran through the assembled company. They knew very well that no fake Christian could meet this test. Galahad cleared his voice and sang without mistake two verses of "My soul, be on thy guard."

"That will do for that. How long have you been married?"

"One year."

"These papers are dated two years ago. What right had you, a Christian, to take another wife when, by Chinese law, you had one already?"

The crowd thought Galahad was caught this time. He waited a moment for the laughter to die down, then said: "That brings me to the second reason why I should not marry this woman. A month ago I had never heard of the existence of such a contract. For three years I was in France. My consent was not asked, my signature is found on no paper. I am a man of age and claim the right to choose my own wife."

"You do not then recognize the rights of parents over children?"

"Rights, certainly, but in parent or ruler tyranny ceases to have any rights. Has not our honored sage Mencius given utterance to a similar sentiment?" He quoted the passage.

"I see that you are familiar with these latest socialistic arguments as well as with the classics," said the judge, somewhat less critically. "I understand you have taken a foreign wife. Of course the introduction of another into the household might result in international strife."

The magistrate, who was inclined to be facetious, waited for the laugh from the rest of his auditors. During the interval, the kneeling Li caught the eye of the recorder, who rose and whispered something into

the ear of his superior. The latter had seemed in a playful mood, but it was the play of a cat which plans to devour its victim afterwards.

"While the court recognizes the impracticability of your fulfilling this contract, we hope that you realize the injury which your refusal to do so entails upon the good name of this family in the eyes of their neighbors. It is a possession not to be bought with money, nor can its loss be compensated for by the same. Nevertheless, it is within the power of this court to lay upon you the payment of an indemnity for their wounded feelings and impaired reputation. What objection have you to offer?"

Galahad glanced at Li Cho-pen, whose eyes gleamed with the assurance of victory, then he faced the judge.

"I said in the beginning that I had three points to make. I hoped that the first two would be sufficient for a dismissal of the case. I regret to speak of the third, but you have given me no alternative. I wish it clearly understood that in what I am to state I am saying no word against the lady's character. You have spoken of the good name of the family. In as far as the plaintiff represents the family, it is because of his notoriously bad name that I claim exemption from any such indemnity. Surely no decent man is under obligation to pay for injury to the name of a gambler, a thief, and a murderer."

"It's a lie," screamed Li Cho-pen.

"These are very grave charges," interrupted the judge, "and I do not need to remind you that, if unsubstantiated, they lay you open to serious trouble."

An attendant entered the room and, after whispering to the judge, who nodded, went out again.

"Have you any proof of these charges?" he went on, turning to Galahad.

"This man Li was also in France. We were in the same company for a time. I acted as interpreter at the

court. He was arraigned several times for gambling, twice for stealing, and—”

“It’s a lie,” called out Li defiantly. “Where are your proofs?”

“Yes,” said the magistrate, “if you have only your word to offer, his is as good as yours before this court.”

As he spoke, two men were ushered into the room. One was a man past forty, dressed in the uniform of a captain of the British army. The other was a young Chinese, evidently his interpreter. The official with courtesy invited the foreigner to occupy the other chair on the dais. His interpreter stood by his side, holding a leather brief case.

While everybody was getting into position again, Galahad stole a glance at Li Cho-pen. His face had turned a sickly yellow color. His eyes were fixed on the spot on the floor in front of him. Captain MacGregor, for it was he, looked curiously about. A look of recognition passed between him and Galahad.

“Your accusations must have proof to back them,” sternly said the judge to Galahad.

“Your Honor, the gentleman who just entered bears the proofs of what I say.”

The magistrate turned in surprise to MacGregor, having thought him only a visitor. His interpreter spoke: “Captain MacGregor is connected with the Labor Battalion Camp at Tsingtau. Having heard of this case coming up, he has made the journey hither and brought with him the official records of these two men who were in his company in France. If it please Your Honor I will read them.”

Permission was given. He first read Galahad’s record, detailing how he had started at the bottom and worked his way up to the top. Not one charge had ever been laid against him. Then he took up the record of Li Kuang-fu. It told of repeated infraction of rules, of punishment for gambling, of imprisonment

for stealing, and lastly of the climax of his career in France when, in a gambling brawl, he had killed one Wang Wên-tsi. For this crime he had been dishonorably discharged from the service and sent to China to be handed over to the Chinese courts of his native state for trial. The final item recorded was, "Escaped from custody after landing."

This, then, was the good name for injury to which Galahad was asked to pay. The magistrate took the records in his hands, glanced at them, and handed them back; then rising, moved forward, the proper embodiment of outraged justice. He dramatically flung out one hand and asked in a thunderous voice, "Where is the wretch?"

Li Cho-pen was groveling on the floor at his feet crying, "O Your Honor, have mercy, have mercy!"

"Take him away," shouted the irate official. Minions of the law rushed forward and dragged the unfortunate man out of the room. "Court is dismissed," announced the recorder.

The Great Man beckoned to Galahad to follow him and MacGregor into a small retiring room. When they had disappeared the crowd rose from its knees, feeling that they had witnessed the equal of the best they had ever seen on the stage.