

## CHAPTER II

### TIGHTENING THE BONDS

SEVERAL mornings after the interview with his nephew, the master left the schoolroom, much to the delight of his pupils. The command to keep at their studies was promptly disregarded. They engaged in numerous fisticuffs and the time-honored sport of spattering ink on each other's faces. Irreverently, they hung their hats on the outstretched arms of the eighteen-handed goddess, who, they fancied, glowered down upon them with reproach. Of her, they stood less in awe, however, than of Yao Hung-tai. And the reason was not far to seek: his hands, though only two, cou'd and often did wield the heavy ferule over them; while each of her eighteen hands held out some coveted gift.

The goddess, larger than life size, sat gracefully upon a lotus cup. The bosom was deep. The face was placid. Benign eyes looked forth from under heavy, drooping lids. A crown was upon the head. But the arms and hands, of which there were nine on each side, were the distinctive and startling feature of the conception. How appropriate the symbol for a schoolroom! The gilded and once brightly colored idol embodied a sublime thought—namely, that divinity holds out life's gifts to those who will learn to take them.

The boys had not been so courteous to Milady Bountiful as she deserved. Mischievous hands had chipped the colored plaster which formed her gown. Some of her fingers, together with the gifts they held, had been broken off. Dust rested deep upon her many arms. But nothing could prevent her from still being the dominating figure in the room.



THE EIGHTEEN-HANDED GODDESS

The old man walked slowly down the "big street" (it was not more than fifteen feet wide), swinging his body and one arm with the peculiar gait of the Chinese scholar. This mode of locomotion, due to sedentary life and the scorn of exercise as plebeian, is as characteristic as the roll of the sailor on shore. Deliberately he approached the door of his brother's house, which was next to his own and shared with it a common gate. Within the house his sister-in-law was sitting cross-legged on the brick bed, sewing a tiny shoe for one of her daughters.

The master sat down on the edge of the bed, and presently, in response to the call of his wife, Yao Hung-nan entered, wiping the sweat from his face with his forearm. After a few odds and ends of conversation the older man asked, "Is Yung-fu about?"

"No, he's gone to the show over at Nan Hwang," returned the father. "You know how fond he is of those historical plays."

"Is it a theatrical performance to pray for rain?" inquired the teacher.

"No," said his brother, "Heaven knows we need that badly enough—the wheat is nearly spoiled; but this is the fulfillment of a vow made by that rich Chao family for the recovery of their son from fever."

"I am glad you have let the boy go," said the uncle. "Encourage him in it. Distract his mind. Keep him interested in things Chinese."

"Oh, he loves Chinese history all right," chimed in Yung-fu's mother, "if only he would forget this foreign stuff."

There was a pause, after which the older brother went on. "I have a plan. My idea is to fight fire with fire. The way to defeat one infatuation is to create another. Don't you remember how, when our brother got a bit wild, his wife started him eating opium to

keep him at home? It worked perfectly; the passion was killed in no time.

"Yes," said his wife, suddenly raising the wadded curtain which covered the doorway and entering the room, "and drove out a wolf only to admit a tiger. That really was 'casting out demons by the prince of demons.'"

"Where did you get that phrase?" asked her husband sharply. "That's not Chinese."

"Well, a Chinese woman just said it," she replied, secretly delighted to make a quotation of which her husband did not know the origin.

"As I said, it succeeded," he continued.

"But with Heaven's curse, as we all know," his wife broke in again.

"You surely are not suggesting giving Yung-fu opium, are you?" anxiously asked his mother.

"No, no," said her brother-in-law; "I mean get him a wife. Then he will have less time to run with these other folks. She may be able to keep him at home—for a while, at least. Haven't you already made some preliminary arrangements with the Li family of the South Village for one of their daughters?"

"Yes," said the father; "but it hasn't gone far yet."

"But Yung-fu doesn't want to get married, and he doesn't care for those Lis. He told me so himself," said his aunt. "That Li boy was always bullying him in school. That's the reason he learned boxing."

"That's true," murmured his mother.

"Doesn't want to get married!" thundered the man. "How long since we had to ask children whether they want to get married or not? And as for not liking the girl, did my mother ask me whether I liked you or not? If she pleases his family, that's enough. What are we coming to if we have to consult the young folks about family matters?"

"That's so," agreed the younger man, who never had to make any decisions for himself, having always had either parents or the elder brother to save him the trouble.

"My advice is to go ahead with the betrothal arrangements," continued the uncle.

"Why don't you send Yung-fu to that American school at Chefoo?" suggested his wife. "That is the thing he would like to do above all else."

"*Tei!* That is the most stupid remark we have heard to-day," said her husband. "Do you want to put his head into the lion's mouth? If the subdevil at the chapel is corrupting him, what would the chief foreign devils at Chefoo do to him?"

"The boy wants to study the Western learning, especially English," said his aunt, who really knew more of Yung-fu's ambitions than his own mother.

"Wants to? It is what we want that counts. You talk too much. It would be better if womenfolk would tend to the business for which nature intended them and leave other things to the men. Let them bear the children, if they can; we will see that they are trained. You go on home and get dinner," he ordered.

She lifted the curtain and went out hurriedly, letting the wooden slats which kept it from blowing open clatter against the doorcase. He smoked fiercely for a time, then said, "I'll make out the papers, if you say so, and you can get the go-between to consult with the Lis."

"I wish you would," said the boy's father. His mother said nothing; yet she was inwardly pleased at the prospect of having a daughter-in-law, not as a companion, but to help in the work of the house, which was already getting too much for her strength.

Nothing was said to Yung-fu about it; but gradually, because of remarks dropped here and there about daughters-in-law, his suspicions were aroused. One day

his mother had openly said in his presence that she would be glad when the new daughter-in-law arrived.

"What do you mean, mother, by all this talk about a daughter-in-law?" he asked.

"Why, we are arranging for your marriage," she replied.

"But I don't want to be married."

"I know," she answered, "but your uncle and your father think you are old enough to have a wife; and, you know, my strength is not what it once was and I need the help of a girl. Besides, the family has already been spoken to."

"What family?" he demanded.

"The Li family over at the South Village."

"You don't mean that simpleton sister of Li Chopen? She can't do anything but giggle."

The real name of the girl's brother was not Chopen; it was Kuang-fu; but he was the only-begotten son of his father and so infinitely precious. As a schoolboy he had always worn an earring like a girl, to fool the evil spirits into thinking he was a girl, and so to leave him to his parents. They also called him Cho-pen, Stupid Dolt, and spoke sharply to him so that the spirits listening would think he was a thorn in their side and not attempt to pull him away. And the children all called him Cho-pen, especially when he had been pommeling them.

"Why, you haven't seen her since she was thirteen," said his mother, "when she used to come to play with your sister. They are very careful of her now. She must be eighteen by this time."

"That's just it. Who has seen her? She may be blind and spavined, for all we know."

"You needn't worry about that," she said, confidently; "we can trust the go-betweens to guarantee her."

"Trust the go-betweens, indeed! Don't you know the kind of wife Wang Yuan-shou drew? The betrothal

papers described her as: 'Feet not extreme; straight; black hair; not any pockmarks.' The paper, of course, had no punctuation marks on it. When she appeared she was both lame and bald. His family objected that they had been cheated and brought the papers as evidence. The other go-between claimed they had punctuated it incorrectly. It should read: 'Feet not extremely straight; black hair, not any; pockmarks.'" His mother laughed at his sally and he laughed, too, for the moment, then sobered down and continued, "That girl doesn't know a single Chinese character, Mother."

"Neither do I," was the quiet reply.

"I know, Mother, but girls nowadays go to school; and I want an educated wife."

"What should I do with a college graduate in my kitchen, lording it over me? I think this little Li girl will suit me very nicely."

"Well, I won't marry her, that's all. I don't want any wife; but if I've got to have one I will have an educated girl, and I must see her first and talk with her to see if she knows anything."

"Son, Son, where did you ever get these revolutionary notions?" gasped his mother. "I believe you have learned them from that horrid man at the market."

Yung-fu closed his lips tightly. His mother had guessed correctly. Seeing that it was of no use to argue further, he walked into the courtyard to look after his bird. The northern lark was singing lustily in his cage, which hung from the lower branch of a diminutive cherry tree. The boy stood in front of the bird, which cocked its head on one side as if listening. "Little chap," he said, half aloud, "you have your food and drink, a bath daily, and a nice clean cage. I suppose you ought to be happy. And when you're old enough we'll get you a nice little mate. I wonder, all

the same, how you'd like to be free and fly away and pick your own mate, and build a nest just for two."

He heard the sound of a footstep behind him, turned, and saw his uncle entering. In one hand he carried a black bamboo stick, neither a cane, nor a staff, but more like a whip. In the other was a red paper. "Is your father at home?"

"I'll go and see," said Yung-fu, and started to go in. Catching sight of the paper, he turned back. "What have you there, Uncle?"

"Your betrothal papers, my son."

"May I look at them?" asked the young man quietly.

The schoolmaster, suspecting nothing, handed them over. Glancing quickly down the lines, the boy found the name Li. "Uncle, I have just told Mother I won't marry with that Li family."

"You will do as we say. You're not the only one to be considered. We have had about enough of this willfulness from you, young man. Give me that paper and find your father." As he said this, Yao Hung-tai reached for the paper; but Yung-fu drew back a step, and then impulsively tore the red paper twice across and threw the pieces on the flagging.

As the old man saw him start to tear the document, he rushed forward, and, finding himself too late to stop it, struck Yung-fu fiercely across the face with the back of his hand. Then he raised the whiplike cane and brought it down several times across his back and shoulders.

The floodgates of the master's passion seemed to burst. Such a torrent of abuse began to pour forth that all the members of the family rushed to see, and passers-by stopped in the street to listen. He reviled him by every dirty name in his vocabulary, comparing him with everything of a putrid nature—animate and inanimate.

The vile flood which poured from the old man's lips



revealed the depths of filth and depravity usually concealed, in men of his rank and age, by good breeding and self-restraint. But there was no self-restraint now. He looked like a demon-possessed person, with his face flaming red and his eyes popping from their sockets. He screamed and clawed the air with his long, bony fingers, whose length was accentuated by the inch-long finger nails of the literary man. He plucked hairs from his beard, threw his hat upon the ground, and brandished the whip threateningly, without, however, striking again. Such rage ends rather at the tongue than at the fists. All the while the flow of dirty epithets continued with monotonous repetition. What had started as a classic in vituperation soon degenerated into as sordid, as vile, as offensive a performance as any country boor who has been cheated out of a few cash could execute.

His brother and his sister-in-law tried to quiet him, but he only threw them off and continued to repeat those vile names which are not often heard in Western countries, even among the most depraved and bestial, finally simmering down to one or two most insulting. The family were not troubled so much by the language (that was common enough, and they had become used to it from childhood); but they were distressed to see the reverend old schoolmaster lose his dignity in this fashion. And they knew the serious results of such outbursts of passion.

Yung-fu had stood through it all with bowed head. He was deeply ashamed, not for himself, but for his uncle, whom he really respected if not loved.

At last Yao Hung-tai cried, "Get out of my sight and do not let me see you again." When the youth had gone out of the front gate, the old man's rage seemed to abate somewhat.

"Come in and sit down and have a drink of hot water," pleaded his sister, taking him by the arm.

They led him in and he, still muttering, yielded. Later, he returned to his own home next door and went to bed. It was three days before he was able to rise and attend to his school duties. The cholera had poisoned his whole system and had, as so often happens after such outbursts, made himself literally sick. He looked very pale when he at last appeared, and all the town knew he had had "anger-sickness."

Meanwhile, the culprit hurried down the steps, pressing through the group of wide-eyed children who had gathered about the door and the few adults who had stopped to pick up a bit of gossip.

"The old first-born is in a pet, all right, isn't he?" said one. "What's the rub?"

Without answering, Yung-fu hastened on, not glancing at the curious faces which looked out from the windows and from behind corners all the way down the street. Only when he reached the river's edge did he breathe naturally. Within, he was boiling. He had been whipped like a schoolboy. He wasn't a baby any longer; he was a man of twenty-two, and they were treating him like a child. His whole soul rose in revolt.

When after several hours he returned for his supper, which he ate alone as the others had finished, the only reproach he received was from his mother, who said: "You shouldn't have angered your uncle so. I should not wonder if he were sick after this."

After supper he strolled down to the boxing school; but he took no part in the acrobatics, giving as his excuse that he was not feeling well. The *lao shih* looked at him keenly. Yung-fu's unusual listlessness did not escape the discerning gaze of the boxing teacher.

The latter was neither a tall nor a heavy man. His prowess rested not so much in great muscular development as in the symmetry of his slender growth and the perfect coördination of every muscle. Each part of the body had, by an intricate system of exercise, been

developed to just the proper degree and was maintained in that condition by a strict abstemiousness. The *lao shih* was a vegetarian.

When engaged with an opponent he could move with baffling rapidity; but his ordinary movements were unhurried, easy, and graceful. A practiced eye would have detected the unusual length of the arms. But there was nothing of the bruiser type about him. He looked rather the ascetic. The closely cropped head reminded one of a Buddhist priest. He had been glad to obey the presidential mandate to cut the queue, not because he cared who was on the throne, but because the queue slightly interfered with boxing. His quiet demeanor and seriousness also seemed to belong to the temple. He rarely smiled, never scolded, and indulged in no superfluous movements or words. Boxing was more to the *lao shih* than physical exercise, more than a profession—it was a cult.

With the boys he was immensely popular. He never laughed at their awkwardness, was never impatient at their failures. No pains were ever too great for him to take. The man's self-mastery both of body and spirit wooed them to greater endeavor. Many of them could not have told what his name was; he was the *lao shih*, that was all. He was an institution.

The class had already begun when Yurg-fu reached the hall. The younger boys, stripped to the waist, were separately practicing the positions of feet and legs which would guarantee the greatest steadiness. With each position of the feet was a corresponding position of the hands.

As the lesson advanced, the young athletes would be paired off for attack and defense, for rapid footwork, and for rough-and-tumble action. The instruction included wrestling holds, tricks of tripping, falling, and jumping. It was aimed to develop quickness of thought as well as of action and to prepare by thorough

discipline for every emergency. Knowledge of what could be done with the feet as well as the hands tended to resourcefulness and self-reliance.

While one class rested from their exertions, their jackets thrown across glistening shoulders, another group took the floor. They were all very serious about it. There was no laughing, no joking. These twenty boys seemed to be about the real business of life. The novices were helped by the older pupils with suggestion and example. There was plenty of movement, but no confusion. There was the rapid patter of feet, the slap of open hands upon bare arms and shoulders, the panting of breath; but no noise, no shouts of encouragement or of derision.

The crown of the evening, for which all the hard work of the school prepared, was the class in swordplay and handling the spear. To attain this was the ambition of every small boy. And no wonder.

At first it was sword against sword, spear against spear. It seemed as if these youths would hew each other in pieces, they wielded the heavy swords with such vigor and apparent abandon; or be transfixed by the long spears whose points flashed forth like the tongues of striking serpents. How the eyes of the younger boys gleamed with approbation and anticipation!

Then sword was pitted against spear. Only three of the pupils had reached this, the final, stage of the course. Yung-fu was one of these three. The *lao shih* took up a spear and smoothed out the red horsehair tassel which dangled from the base of the spearhead. He looked at Yung-fu, but the latter shook his head wearily. So the teacher handed the spear to another of the trio and with his chin pointed the third to the sword.

As the stalwart fellows faced each other, waiting for the word to begin, a tense hush fell upon the whole company. The oil lamps, which hung high upon the

walls, 'cast a yellow light upon the muscular young bodies. Their distorted shadows hung above the rafters like black specters. They had removed their shoes for this act, lest a slip should result in some accident, and their queues had been wound tighter about their heads. The rest of the class crowded back into the ends of the room to give all the space possible and to escape the thrust of the spear and the slash of the sword.

At the command, each uttered a cry of challenge, and struck, and held for a moment, an attitude of defiance. It was all very theatrical. Even for China, it was an anachronism—but not for these young hero worshipers. They were transported thereby into the realm of romance. They became at once the companions of kings and mighty men. They were participators in high adventure and martial campaign. Here was the elemental stuff the adolescent mind the world around craves. In these coveted treasures the *lao shih* was their purveyor; in these mystic rites he was their priest. There was no anomaly in giving him the same title they gave the school-teacher. Both were the *Lao Shih*, the Old, and therefore Reverend, Master.

But Yung-fu could not respond to-night to its appeal. The play left him cold and indifferent. He hardly noticed whether his companions did well or ill. The flash of the sword awakened no corresponding flash of imagination. His thoughts were elsewhere. Yet he lingered until the evening lesson, which lasted until near midnight, was through and the others had gone.

He and the *lao shih* sat on the steps of the hall in the cool of the May night. The boxing teacher was still stripped to the waist. Overhead, the stars were shining brilliantly, and no sound could be heard except the distant barking of a dog and the clack of the silk loom in the factory, as some late pieceworker tried to increase his daily earnings and to cut short his web of life. The

two men were still for quite a time, communal spirits in many ways. Then Yung-fu broke the silence.

"*Lao Shih*, don't you think a fellow ought to have a voice in things which may affect his whole life?"

"It would seem so, wouldn't it?" was the non-committal reply. He would not have gone even so far had he known what was coming.

"Do you think it right not to consult a man about the woman he is going to marry?" went on the youth.

"Well," answered the *lao shih*, cautiously, "of course she doesn't belong to him alone; she belongs to the whole family. I have heard that men choose their own wives in France and other Western countries; but China's customs are different, you know, and China doesn't change. What are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know—yet," said Yung-fu, rising wearily. The boxer could teach him how to meet the sudden attack of physical force; he knew nothing of the subtle and dangerous onslaught of new ideas. The thought of quarreling with any of the traditional customs of his native land had never entered his head. The *lao shih* was a good friend, but evidently he could not help Yung-fu in his present struggle. So, bidding the athlete an "Again see," he turned homeward.

But the *lao shih* had helped him more than he knew. On the way home he heard again the words, "Men choose their own wives in France." France? Why, that was where the men were going who were being enlisted by the English at Weihaiwei and Tsingtau.

The word had come to the village recently and had been the cause of great excitement, especially among the younger farm hands. But it was not clear what the enlistment was for, whether to do coolie work, or to fight the enemies of France. The Germans they hated enough, but fighting with bombs and rifles was not particularly to their liking. Moreover, parents had put their foot down hard, declaring that the boys would

become standing grain for German swords. The question had not even been broached in the Yao household, as they were enlisting workers, not scholars.

But now the idea flashed into his mind like that meteor which lighted up the night sky. Why not go? He had always wanted to see the world. Here was his chance. He knew it was of no use to ask permission; he could go without.

He did not, however, make his decision that night. He lay awake for a long while and woke again about daybreak. Softly he dressed, so as not to disturb his brother, who was sleeping by his side, and made his way to the top of the hill back of the village. He was there in a little grove of scrub pines when the sun arose.

Mr. Han had told him to pray when in perplexity. As the red, glowing ball rose over the range of hills to the east, he saw the valleys below still shrouded in mists and shadow. Yung-fu prostrated himself upon the knoll, his face upon the ground, and remained motionless for a long while. When he arose, the mists had cleared away, and it was broad daylight. And the mists had cleared from his mind. There was no shadow of a doubt there. It was right for him to go.

During the day, he secretly gathered a few of his belongings together and carried them down to the ancestral hall. The bird and the cage were among them. He borrowed a little money of the *lao shih*, and that night took French leave for France.