

CHAPTER XXI

AN UNEXPECTED PUPIL

THE sound of running feet through the courtyard and a sharp rap on her door told Jeanne that something unusual was the matter. She had retired after a hard day in the school and must have been asleep.

"What is it?" she called.

"Open the door quickly, Mistress," said Peach Blossom.

Throwing on her kimono, Jeanne opened the door and looked into the frightened face of the little slave girl. "O *T'ai t'ai*, something terrible is happening out front."

Jeanne followed the *ya t'ou* through the two rows of dark buildings to the gatehouse where a dim light was burning. Great, misformed shadows struggled upon the wall. The subdued sound of voices and excited whispers could be heard as she emerged from behind the brick screen.

Jeanne saw a group of dark figures in the gatehouse standing about something upon the floor. The lamp was also set upon the floor and cast a sickly light upon the pallid features of a young woman who lay full length upon the bricks. Her head was slightly raised as it rested against the high threshold and her face was turned toward the light.

Jeanne saw that she was well dressed—indeed, with unusually rich garments such as might belong to a bride's trousseau or be used to clothe one ready for burial. The well-oiled and carefully combed hair was adorned with many ornaments, evidently bridal gifts. The face was full and somewhat coarse.

Galahad's uncle, without his scholar's gown and looking decidedly disheveled, had arrived just before Jeanne. Lao Li, the hired man, was repeating his story of how he had been awakened by sounds of groaning and had found the girl in great agony just inside the door. She was quiet now. How she had escaped his attention when he closed the doors for the night he couldn't imagine. Yes, he had surely closed the doors. Weren't they locked now?

The schoolmaster asked who she was, and although everybody but Jeanne knew perfectly well who she was, no one volunteered the information, as if the very admission of the knowledge made them guilty parties to some crime. Yao Hung-tai shook the prostrate form.

"What is your name?" he demanded.

The girl slowly opened her eyes and a look of terror (or was it one of triumph?) came into them. "Li," she whispered.

A chorus of startled "Oh's" came from the women.

"Are you Li Kuang-fu's sister?" asked the old man.

The girl nodded and closed her eyes wearily.

He shook her again. "What have you taken? Tell me."

"Poison." With the one word she relapsed into a state of coma and no amount of shaking could elicit anything further from her.

"She's going to die, brother," said the master to Yao Hung-nan, "and we've got to get rid of her before she goes below or we'll be in for a pretty mess."

Jeanne had pressed through the group and knelt by the insensible form. She unfastened the neck of the girl's silk tunic. As she did so a groan came from the blanched lips.

"She's not dead by any means. Some one get me some cold water." Jeanne looked up at the faces of the circle as she spoke. No one moved to obey. "Peach Blossom, get me some water in a basin and a

towel." The *ya-t'ou* left the circle and disappeared in the darkness.

"You mustn't do that," said her father-in-law. "We are going to put her into the street before any one knows she is here."

"Put her into the street?" said Jeanne incredulously. "You don't mean that you would put her out there to die, do you?"

"Yes, of course," snapped Yung-fu's uncle. "Don't you know who she is? She is the girl Yung-fu was supposed to marry. If she dies on our premises we shall be held responsible for killing her; anyway, we should have to pay for her coffin and funeral."

"I can never consent to such a thing," cried Jeanne.

"Consent! Who asked you to consent? If it hadn't been for you we should never have had such trouble on our hands. Get away from her and go to your own quarters. When we need your consent, we'll ask you for it."

Jeanne rose and faced the old scholar. "If you put that girl into the street, I shall go with her, and I shall stay with her until she dies. Then I shall tell everybody just how it happened."

"You will tell everybody—Oh, what fools women are, anyway! Here's one fool who has committed suicide, and here's another fool who hasn't sense enough to protect her own skin." With a double gesture of despair the master turned on his heel and made his way through the group into the dark. Peach Blossom, who was returning with the basin of water, ran full into the old gentleman and spilled the water upon him. "Another fool," he snarled.

Up to this point the women had been silent, frightened spectators; but with the disappearance of the head of the family they became articulate. The rapidly increasing volume of the sound of their voices threatened to rouse the whole neighborhood. Yung-fu's father

advised silence, but he might as well have cautioned a flock of barn fowl. Only Jeanne seemed to think of the would-be suicide. Again she knelt by her side and applied the cold water to her face and neck. The patient rolled her head from side to side. The aunt took the basin from Peach Blossom and held it for Jeanne.

"She is too far gone," she said. "Hadn't you better let the men have their way?"

"Is that doing as you would be done by?" asked Jeanne. "How would you like to be put into the street to die?"

"Well, she wants to die, doesn't she? If I had made up my mind to take my own life, I shouldn't thank you or any one else who interfered with my plans."

"She may not thank me; but at any rate I shall not violate my conscience by any such heartless action," said Jeanne with finality.

"It might be the kindest thing you could do for her, after all," rejoined the older woman.

Jeanne glanced at the face of this woman to whom life had not been very kind. She was not unfeeling, nor was she especially perturbed. Her advice sprang from a combination of fatalism and self-preservation. The girl was probably going to die; why should they bear the almost certain serious consequences of her decease within the house? She thought Jeanne was unreasonable, but she did consent, at the latter's suggestion, to help carry the heavy form to Jeanne's room. It was not without vehement objection on the part of Galahad's mother and considerable grumbling on the part of the hired man who was pressed into reluctant service.

"There, there," said the aunt, quieting her sister's protests, "let her try it. She may be able to save her life, after all."

"And what good will it do if she does?" persisted Jeanne's mother-in-law. Her remark was lost upon the

rest, for they were already following the retreating figures within. She was used to being ignored. Sighing deeply and shaking her head, she made her way to her own room and there prostrated herself before the Goddess of Mercy.

In Jeanne's room the aunt and the slave girl only were allowed to remain. There was to be a fight for a life and no spectators were wanted. They were laboring at a disadvantage because they were ignorant of the nature of the poison taken. Every emetic which Jeanne knew was tried and every antidote she could think of administered, from the whites of eggs to slaked lime, which she dug off the newly plastered walls.

The aunt had willingly done everything which Jeanne suggested; but more, she had caught the contagion of this unusual contest with death. It was her prescription which at last proved efficacious, an unbelievably nauseating dose which they forced through the pale lips of the victim. Dawn was stealing with wan light into the room before they felt assurance of victory.

"She will not die," said the aunt.

"Thank God," fervently said Jeanne.

As her companion passed through the schoolroom she shook Peach Blossom, who had fallen asleep with her disheveled black head resting upon one of the tables, and told her to go to bed. Jeanne lay down beside the rejected bride and was soon fast asleep.

The sunlight, softly mediated by the snowwhite tissue paper which covered the window, was flooding the room when Jeanne opened her eyes. She looked into the surprised black orbs of the patient. Jeanne smiled. The girl closed her eyelids, but almost immediately opened them again.

"You are better," said Jeanne reassuringly, as she stretched out her hand and patted her gently upon the arm.

Wearily closing her eyes, the latter slowly shook her

head. Power of speech seemed lost. She either could not or would not talk.

"Oh, yes, you are better," continued her unexpected roommate, sitting up. "A couple of days more and you'll be ten parts whole."

Peach Blossom, hearing her mistress's voice, appeared at the door with a brass basin of water. With this, Jeanne bathed the face of the girl upon the kang. The powder and rouge which had been liberally used in her preparation for burial and which now were streaked in a ludicrous fashion were carefully removed. The great jet eyes, whose pupils nearly coincided with the iris, followed her every movement as if mystified.

She did not speak all day, but slept a great deal. Jeanne did not offer her food until night, but even then she could not take anything. She did, however, permit Jeanne to remove her bridal garments and make her comfortable for the night before lying down beside her.

"You must hate me terribly for what I have done," said the sister of Li Cho pen the next morning. She had been watching Jeanne closely as the latter had combed her hair and had turned to greet her cheerfully.

"No," Jeanne assured her, "I do not hate you. I pity you. Do you hate me?"

"I thought I did; but how can I hate you after all you have done for me?"

"And that is why you tried to take your own life, because you hated me?"

"Yes, to haunt you, and to make them all the trouble I could."

"But why? You had never seen me before."

"You took away my husband. No one will ever want to marry me now. I shall be sold for a concubine to some old wealth lord, and beaten by his *t'ai t'ai*."

"But don't you see that if Yung-fu married you, you would be the *t'ai t'ai* and I should be the concubine?"

"Yes, I see now that one of us must suffer and I suppose it might as well be me."

"Did you love Yung fu very much?" asked Jeanne timidly, as though treading on holy ground.

"No, I couldn't bear him. When I used to come here as a child to play with his sisters he constantly called me silly."

"Yet you wanted to marry him?" exclaimed Jeanne in amazement.

"I wanted to? No one ever asked me what I wanted," said the girl bitterly. "Day before yesterday I wanted to die, but even that was denied me."

"But it is better to live."

"We women have no other way to maintain our rights."

"Except by dying for them?"

"Well, it may be that my death would be a warning and help some other girl to be better treated."

"But don't you see that Yung-fu had some rights too? They were taking away his right to choose his own wife."

"Yes, that's all right for the men. If they do not like their first wife whom their parents choose, they can take a second wife who really pleases them. But when are we ever to have the right to choose our husbands? Are we forever to be handed about as the men decide?"

"I hope not; and when the Chinese women get more education and become more used to liberty it will not be so. Then you young people, both men and women, will have the courage to assert yourselves as Yung-fu has done."

"It sounds plausible, but meanwhile his right is my ruin. What is there for me to live for? My family is disgraced, my brother is in prison, and he has gambled away so much of our land that there is no longer enough to support three of us. My mother is old and broken with sorrow."

"You must *will* to live for her sake."

"My brother, as soon as he is out of jail, will sell me to the highest bidder. Even if I live it will not be for her. O Yao, *T'ai t'ai*, let me stay here. Don't send me away. Let me be Yung-fu's secondary wife. I cannot face my village again. I will serve you as a slave, only don't send me away."

Jeanne put her arms about the girl whose life had been so strangely intertwined with hers. How tragic it all seemed, how hopelessly tangled the web of that life! Could she mend the broken strands for which she had unconsciously been responsible? Could she venture to design another pattern when one had so pitifully failed? At least one step was plain, and she would take that step.

"You shall stay," she said, drawing the girl to her, "not as Yung-fu's concubine, but as my pupil. I will teach you how to make lace and you will be able to help support your mother. As soon as you are well we will begin."

"I am better already, *T'ai t'ai*, for you have comforted my heart."

