

CHAPTER XXII

THE FLU

IT'S worse than the cholera or the plague," said one of a group of bronzed farmers going home from market one November afternoon.

"You're right, there," rejoined another. "The doctors know what to give you for the cholera, and as for the rat plague, a red cat pasted on the door has kept that away from my house; but this new disease has the doctors all so scared they are refusing to prescribe."

"That's because so many patients have died and the families are charging that they gave the wrong medicine."

"Died! I should say they had died. The little village of Paopao had seventy deaths in a half month, and Shangkwang had forty."

"They didn't have wood enough for the coffins and had to break up their wardrobes to get lumber," chirped in another, who had been a silent and gloomy listener to the foregoing conversation.

"Well, I've got my coffin ready; that is some comfort," volunteered a man somewhat older than the rest.

"So have I," said the former speaker, "but what family has them for the young people?"

"I don't think I ever saw so small a market as to-day."

"Well, you'll see less next time. All the villages to the north are affected. Leafy Banks had its first case last night, so a man from there told me."

"Guess their theatrical performance to the Pearly Emperor to ward off the pestilence didn't do much good," said a skeptical one.

"They have collected a tax in our town to buy firecrackers," said the gloomy man.

"Don't you put any faith in this disease being stopped by beating tom-toms or shooting off fireworks," scoffed the skeptic.

"Well, anything is worth trying," asserted the other.

It was true that the influenza had reached Leafy Banks in its steady march inland which nothing could check. In a few days, thanks to the custom of friends crowding the tiny bedrooms to comfort or commiserate the patients, it had spread rapidly in the village. Dozens of families were down; but fatalities did not begin until, able to eat again (to the Chinese the sure symptom of recovery), they forced their dragging feet to carry them about their many usual tasks. Relapses followed and soon the wailing for the dead began.

Her husband had written Jeanne when the epidemic was nearly over in Chefoo. It had been comparatively light and, owing to the warm weather then, few had succumbed. With the letter, he had sent a supply of medicine which they had both learned to use during the epidemic in France. Not only was there enough for the immediate family but plenty for the neighbors, if they could be induced to take it.

Galahad's father was among the earliest to come down and he was followed quickly by his wife. Jeanne, who had had the disease while still at the hospital and knew what to do, took charge of the household. She kept her patients in bed as long as she could, no small feat in itself, and so carried them past the danger point. The girls were isolated in her own quarters. The work she did not mind at all. In fact, it gave her peculiar satisfaction to be able to do it; but the wailing which was to be heard day and night from all parts of the village grew to be a horror to her.

At the foot of the street stood the shrine of the tutelary deity, who was also the Sheriff of the Dead.



SHRINE OF THE TUTELARY DEITY

As soon as any one died, the family made its mournful journey to the shrine to "knock on the door of Hades" and to implore the help of this Plutonian official in setting the spirit upon its way "southwest." Ghost paper was burned, and thus by the alchemy of fire transmuted into necessities for the departed, and libations were poured out for their refreshment. All of which rites were accompanied by the most dismal wailing.

Three days were necessary before the spirit could be released, and three times each day the male members of the family in white robes filed to the shrine. On the last day they carried a paper horse, which was burned to provide the deceased with a mount upon which to travel to his final place of rest. Then the body was buried with further elaborate ceremonies.

As the epidemic progressed, four or five deaths a day were common in the town. The wailing of the bereaved was like that of Egypt for the loss of its first-born. The air was heavy with the odor of incense, while the shadows of the night were lighted by the lurid gleams of the burning ghost paper. Hardly an hour passed without its procession either to the shrine or to the tomb.

The terror of the plague became so infectious that neighbors who were not affected, though these were few in number, or those who had come off with light attacks, would not venture into the houses of others. The streets were deserted except for mourners. Men could not be found to bury the dead. Orphaned children were left with no one to care for them but the immune housedog. In several instances, the dead and living lay together for days upon the same bed, while in others whole families perished.

Jeanne's own family required almost her entire strength and time. But knowledge of conditions in the town was so terrible that she felt she must do something. Corn meal was abundant in their bins, so she

made a quantity of corn-meal cakes and a large crock of millet gruel.

Putting the corn cakes in a basket and ordering the protesting hired man to carry the crock of steaming gruel, Jeanne started to visit the houses up and down the street. Many of the doors were closed and barred and no response was made to her use of the knocker, except the barking of the dog. But in others she found a ready welcome for her and the simple food. One family, convalescing but with not a member strong enough to rise and make a fire, was trying to keep alive on dried sliced sweet potatoes. The eagerness with which they attacked the bowls of millet was thanks enough.

From one doorway a wan and frightened child peeped out.

"Is your mother at home?" asked Jeanne.

"She's at home, but she's dead," was the response.

"Your father?"

"He's sick."

"Have you had anything to eat to-day?"

"Not for two days."

Jeanne handed the little girl a cake which she snatched greedily and began to eat.

"Bring me a bowl and I'll give you some gruel for your father."

Farther on an old man staggered out into the street. His face was pale, his clothes awry and unfastened, his queue uncombed. He looked worriedly up and down the street.

"What were you looking for, old gentleman?" asked Jeanne, suspecting the reason.

"I hoped to find a vendor of cakes, but they all seem to have disappeared."

"Won't you take some of mine and some gruel too?" said Jeanne, holding out two cakes.

"Oh, no, I can't take your food away from you, you"

will need it yourself. My son and daughter both died six days ago and left me with a baby, and I have been ill; but the grandson is alive," he added proudly.

"But surely you will take a little gruel for the baby," pleaded Jeanne tactfully.

She followed him, swaying from side to side, into the house. The baby, fat and rosy, lay upon the kang. A bowl was dug from the *débris* upon the table, wiped, and filled with the "thin food." Taking the grandson upon her lap, Jeanne fed him as best she could with the small china ladle which serves for a spoon. He eagerly took the warm food and smiled at her with every mouthful.

"I'll come again to-morrow if I can. Meanwhile you might as well keep the rest of this gruel and some of these cakes," said Jeanne to the grandfather, as she bade him good-bye.

Jeanne did return the next day and for several days until the old man was able to provide. Every day that it was possible, as her own patients improved, she went out visiting the households which she knew needed help and discovering new opportunities to aid this much-afflicted and bewildered village.

The uncle and aunt had been requested by Jeanne to keep to their side of the house until her patients were well. The aunt assisted by sending over food, and could with difficulty be persuaded to observe the quarantine. She had, however, great confidence in the French girl and, although she did not see the sense in it all, consented. Jeanne also advised them to keep away from others.

The old man's school had early been broken up. Without his routine tasks he was not at all comfortable. Social intercourse was almost impossible, as the men he considered his friends were nearly all sick. When any of them died, which several did, he insisted, against the warnings of his wife, on donning his white

funeral robe and taking his place among the increasingly few followers of the oier.

"When my time comes to die, I'll die," he said with fatalistic finality.

Returning one afternoon from one of these funerals he found Jeanne administering some medicine to his wife, who lay weakly upon the kang. The schoolmaster was plainly irritated.

"You better let me give you a dose too, Uncle, just for a preventive," said his nephew's wife.

"What, take that devil's medicine?" he roared out, "I wouldn't take that stuff if I were dying."

Jeanne said no more about the medicine, but said she would bring him over some supper.

"Had my supper," he crossly lied.

"Why do you say that?" protested his wife feebly. "You know you haven't had anything since noon."

"What do you know about it?" he replied. "I tell you I do not want anything."

But Jeanne brought it just the same and left it upon the table. Before bedtime she ran over to see what she could do for the good woman. The old man was sitting outside the bedroom door smoking gloomily. The chimneyless lamp was filling the room with carbon and soot. Jeanne wanted to protest against this polluting of the atmosphere, but she noted his sullen look and did not dare. Instead, she said as cheerily as she could, "I've brought over some hot water to drink."

The aunt eagerly took the water which she had been craving for some time, but for which she had not had the courage to ask her husband. Jeanne poured out a cup for the master and then placed the pot where his wife could reach it through the night. Before leaving she bathed her face and hands with cool water.

"I'll see you get something to eat in the morning, Uncle," she said, taking up the dirty dishes.

He only grunted. He was plainly out of sorts. In

the first place, it always made him nervous when his wife was not up and about to wait upon him. In the second place, he had planned to perform on the morrow the rite of the road sacrifice to his most intimate crony whose funeral was to occur the next day. He would have to get it ready himself now.

Without a word of comfort or solicitude he went to bed by his wife's side. She tossed and moaned all night; but he slept soundly, indifferent to her sufferings.

The funeral of his friend to whom he was so eager to pay his last respects was to start at eleven o'clock. The way of the procession led past the Yao home. When he rose in the morning, the blare of the ten-foot long horns, together with the whine of the pipes, could be heard. The Hsu family was wealthy; and so, even at this time, when the demand for funeral music had sent the price soaring, they could have a luxury most people were doing without. The fancy wages they offered for hands to carry the bier also assured them a sufficient number of bearers.

The schoolmaster, with the assistance of the hired man, had stretched an awning over the street, under which the coffin could rest during the ceremony. A large square table had been loaded with food calculated to please the spirit of the departed. There were a huge raw pig's head and also the feet, plates of fruit and confectionery, colored ghost papers and pretty stucco figures. Three earthen cups of wine with sticks of incense completed the feast.

As the procession approached, headed by the band in faded red coats and funny, high-peaked hats, the table was moved into the middle of the road and a straw mat spread before it. The mourners were dressed in plain white robes, but the chief mourners wore sackcloth with a girdle of rope and paper-bag-shaped hats. Their eyes were veiled so that they must look down to see their

way. This white-robed company arranged themselves upon their knees on both sides of the road.

The fanfare of the trumpets ceased. The bier, surmounted by a wonderful catafalque of embroidery, gold braid, and mirrors, came to a halt. The old scholar, dressed in his best, advanced and took three sticks of incense which he lighted and raised before his face in salute to the departed. Then he prostrated himself upon the mat, kotoving three times. One of the cups of wine was poured out as a libation and the rite was repeated thrice. This was an invitation to the spirit to partake of the dainties spread out.

As he stepped back, the mourners groveled at his feet in recognition of his kindness. The music began, the table was removed, and the procession formed once more.

There were tissue-paper creations of art carried in that procession—life-sized horses, sedan chairs, white-faced attendants for the next world, deer, birds, and a yellow cow. There were also a miniature house, bundles of gold and silver ingots, and comical red-faced hobgoblins which revolved menacingly as the carriage upon which they were set was drawn along. All these were made of colored tissue paper at great expenditure of time and money, and all would be transformed by a lighted match into realities for the spirit world.

Later that afternoon, when Jeanne went to look after her patient, she found the schoolmaster shaking with a chill. She did not need to be told what was the matter; but when she suggested that he go to bed and take some medicine, he asserted he was all right, only a little chilly. The next morning he was not able to lift his head.

Fortunately for the nurse, her earlier patients were convalescing, and the girls could help some without so much danger. The teacher was, however, worse than all the other three. He petulantly complained of

everything, whined or railed by turns against Heaven which had sent him such fate, reviled his wife, and treated Jeanne's attempts to serve him with contempt.

Against all her protests and warnings he got up the third day and went out to sit in the warm sun. The following day his fever was raging and rapidly developed into pneumonia. For three days and nights Jeanne did not remove her clothes. She brought her bedding and made up a shakedown upon an old door laid across two benches. All the remedies she knew were tried, but a skilled physician or a corps of them, could not have saved the man's life. Yao Hung-tai's time had indeed come to die.

He seemed to sense this himself and with great effort, for his voice had grown weaker and weaker, whispered, "Bring my burial clothes." His wife told Jeanne in which wardrobe they were stored. She found the bundle without difficulty, unwrapped the cotton cover, and took out the carefully folded silk and satin garments, the satin buskins with thick soles, and the silk skull cap.

The aunt, whose strength was remaining, helped him to don the clothes which she had made him ten years before in anticipation of this hour. Jeanne was aware of the Chinese customs in part, and though her soul revolted from this cold-blooded laying out of a dead man while still alive, assisted to the extent of putting on his white stockings and shoes.

She was mystified to have him say, "Bring the door," and the more shocked when his wife explained that it was not customary for a person to die on the bed, which would necessitate its being torn down afterward, but on a shutter or plank. With sinking heart she brought in the benches and the door upon which she had lain those three nights, and laid them alongside the brick kang.

At his direction, and with supreme effort, she moved

this tall man over on to the door. His little strength was almost spent with the exertion he had been through. She thought for a moment he had gone. He seemed abnormally tall as he lay stretched out, and reminded her of the stone effigies she had seen on the tombs at home. The face, with its finely chiseled features, had taken on the color of old marble. Once more he opened his eyes and gazed at her as she looked pityingly at him.

"Good girl," he whispered slowly. "Good religion. If I could live—" He could not go on, but his eyes had a look in them Jeanne had not seen before. There was respect in that look and gratitude and affection. Slowly he raised his thin clasped hands together before his face in the salute of deep reverence to her and closed his eyes. Jeanne could not repress the sob that rose to her lips.

The shrill wailing of the widow began at once and was echoed almost immediately by the voice of her sister-in-law from her bed on the other side of the house, accompanied by the deeper voice of her husband. The girls, too, cried some.

"O my husband! O my brother! O my uncle! Would that I had died for thee!"

The sick ones could do nothing but wail. It was left to Jeanne to complete the last rites begun while the deceased still breathed. Old Li, the hired man, who was not old but only called so, was ordered to bring the coffin out of the storeroom. He could not have managed this alone, but an acquaintance passing at the time was pressed into service. The coffin was an immense thing made of planks four or five inches thick, painted black on the outside and red inside, and standing three feet high. It was, indeed, an "everlasting house," built to last a long time.

The coffin was placed in the guest room, and thither the body was later borne on the shutter by

Jeanne and Lac Li. Indeed, there was no one else to do it.

"Shall I go to the Shrine of the Sheriff of the Dead to burn incense and paper?" asked Lao Li.

"No," said Jeanne positively, "the young master would not like it. Besides, you are of another family and name."

Unsatisfied, the farm hand, who felt something was being neglected, went to the sisters. "Shan't I take you to the Shrine?" he asked. "Some one ought to go, you know, for the peace of the old schoolmaster's soul."

"Girls don't go," they replied. "Besides, what could we do?"

"You could at least cry; it would look a lot more respectable." The man went off grumbling something to himself about filial reverence.

