

CHAPTER XXIII

PRINCIPLE OR COMPROMISE

HIS mother's greeting upon his arrival sounded very ominous in Galalad's ears. "Too bad you were not here when your uncle died to burn the incense and paper."

"I am sorry I was not here to help you," was all he said.

As soon as possible, however, he went alone to the room where the coffin stood. The customary light was burning beneath the great box. Three sticks of incense were smoking in the pewter urn which rested upon the table in front.

"I have just done something which may make us a good deal of trouble," he told Jeanne, on returning to their room.

"Yes?" she said inquiringly.

"I have put out the incense which I suppose my father lighted and set a potted rosebush in its place."

"Of course I did not feel I had any right to touch it," said Jeanne.

"Perfectly so; it is my place to carry the fight against this evil."

"You feel, then, that it is a real evil?"

"Unquestionably it is the strongest bond binding my people to superstition and darkness."

"Of course it seems heathenish, but is it so different from some of our Christian practices? For instance, you put a flower in its place. I should really like to know where the difference is. Do you remember, too, that the great American general laid a wreath on the tomb of our Lafayette and said, 'Lafayette, we are

here'? How can his action be distinguished from that of any one performing these rites of ancestor worship?"

"That is very easy to explain. Both the flowers and the flowery speech were for the living and not the dead. Flowers are a suggestion of hope, a flash of captured sunshine to illumine the night of sorrow. We do not expect the dead to smell their fragrance, but we do desire those who mourn to derive some measure of comfort from them."

"Then these Chinese customs are really idolatrous and not merely commemorative?"

"Worship in the temple is called by the same name and performed with the same things, incense and paper. The sacrifices are of the same sort. Whatever may be the theory, to the ordinary person they represent one and the same thing. Ancestor worship is, perhaps, more spiritual in form than other idolatry, because with the latter you have an image to look at; but it is really more materialistic because it demands that regular material provision be made for the spirits of the other world."

"I begin to see why you hate it."

"My people are chained to the dead by this accursed system, that is why I hate it. Living children go naked that the ghosts may have paper clothes. Youthful minds are left in ignorance because the money which would educate every child in the Republic is sent across as tribute to the other world. The Boxer Indemnity is nothing as compared with this drain on the resources of every family in China."

"What will your people do?"

"I am not afraid of what they will do, but of what I, in a moment of weakness, might do to compromise my convictions. It would be easier to let them go on and do as they please; but if we do not stand out now, it will be a continual struggle, and we shall have to make concession after concession hereafter."

"I wish I could do something to help you," said Jeanne earnestly.

"You can; you have already: and the knowledge that you are with me heart and soul will make me strong."

Jeanne saw the intense strain under which Galahad was laboring. She felt the unusual earnestness of his speech, and saw, as she took his hand, that he was quivering.

Galahad's father, usually a mild-tempered man, was thoroughly aroused when he discovered the incense urn gone. He came tearing through the house, asking, "Who dared to take away the incense from my brother?"

Galahad met him at the door and said quietly, "I am responsible for putting out the incense."

"You are? And what did you do that for?"

"Because I do not believe in such things."

"A pretty religion you have taken up with if it is going to rob you of all filial piety."

"But it doesn't rob men of filial reverence."

"Then why don't you burn incense to your uncle and adopted father as you ought?"

"Do you consider the burning of incense and paper an essential part of filial piety?" asked the younger man.

"Certainly."

"Then our neighbor Liu is one of the most dutiful of sons. You know as well as I that he broke his old father's heart by his gambling and carousing, and he afterwards hounded his mother into her grave. Since then he has been most faithful in his observance of all these outward forms. Is that your ideal of filial piety?"

"No, of course not; but I can't see, if it is such an unimportant thing as you think, why you do not conform and burn it. It can't hurt you."

"But it can hurt others. The whole business is a senseless and wasteful custom, and I am opposed to it on principle."

By this time the rest of the household had gathered. In addition, there was a member of his aunt's family who prided himself on being an educated man.

"But what will folks say if we do not have the paper and incense?" asked Yao Hung-nan.

"That is one of the great weaknesses in us Chinese. We are more afraid of ridicule than of wrong. We tremble at the voice of criticism and the finger of scorn more than at the rebuke of conscience or the hand of God."

"It isn't that way, Yung-fu," broke in the relative with a suave tone, which aimed to be soothing. "Of course we educated people understand that when a man's dead that's the end of him. It is like blowing out a light; he's finished. So, of course, it is silly to believe it does him any good to worship; but, as you said a moment ago, it's a custom."

"A senseless and wasteful custom," corrected Galahad.

"It's a custom," went on the relative, too charmed with the sound of his own voice and his flow of wisdom to note the force of the correction. "It is a custom honored by millenniums of usage, a custom which Confucius himself taught us."

"I am surprised that a man who prides himself on being educated should make such a statement," interrupted Galahad. "Don't you know that paper had not been invented in Confucius' time, so how could he teach us to burn it? Furthermore, I'll say something which is not often mentioned; the Sage did not even know where his family graves were."

"Of course, of course; but it's a custom now, and there is no use being a crank and trying to change the whole world. The convenient way is the best in the long run, the golden mean, you know. My advice is

for you to avoid gossip by doing as has always been done."

"Thank you for your advice," said Galahad, tartly.

The Yao clan numbered nearly twenty families in Leafy Banks. Among them were men of conviction and influence. There were others who, lacking any standing, tried to make up for it by surreptitious trouble making. They were the busybodies of the village.

The clan life was not a particularly close one, but it had powers of centripetal contraction when any danger threatened it, either as a whole or in any of its constituent families. Let any outsider lodge a lawsuit against a Yao and the combined resources of those who bore that honorable name were enlisted on his side.

But the power of the clan could be united just as well, and even more inexorably, against one of its own number who had ventured to break with any of its cherished customs or run counter to the decisions of the organism. The influential men sat at times as an informal court adjudicating the cases in which members of the clan had offended against the welfare of the community or of one another. When necessary, force and intimidation were resorted to to enforce their decisions. The bullies of the clan stood ready on command to beat a refractory member. A man must be unusually brave or unusually foolhardy who would stand out against the combined opinion of the rest of the group. He must inevitably pay for his temerity, and in most cases ultimately submit.

The information that Yung-fu proposed to omit the customary burial rites of burning incense and ghost paper was soon in the possession of every member of the clan. Many were properly outraged. The schoolmaster had been one of their most honored citizens. To refuse to accord him every mark of respect and every possible spiritual aid seemed both a sacrilege and a neglect of the common decencies. Not only were the

Yaos indignant, but the other families in the village who for a generation had sent their sons to the temple school shared this sense of irritation.

Yung-fu detected on every hand the coolness in his reception. Men engaged in earnest conversation became mute upon his approach. Old friends were gruff in their greetings. Rumors came through the hired man that the clan members would refuse to carry the bier, and that a good beating might be in store for him if he did not kotow at the grave.

Some of the busybodies attempted to set Yung-fu's father against him by suggesting that the younger brother should be substituted for Yung-fu as Yao Hung-tai's heir, on condition that he perform the necessary rites of ancestral worship. They maintained that the omission was a violation of the fundamental agreement of adoption and automatically deprived Yung-fu of any rights.

Many were the informal conferences with the head of the clan and others most eager to enforce conformity to ancient usage. Repeatedly Galahad stated his position and the reasons for it, until he was thoroughly weary. No, he was not trying to substitute foreign for Chinese burial rites. Was he not wearing the white robes of mourning? Had he not allowed his beard and hair to grow since the decease of his uncle? Were they not to have musicians at the funeral and provide food for all who attended? True, he had declined the offer of a road sacrifice in his uncle's honor, and refused to accept the presentation of any banners if he must kotow to them.

The amount of controversy, oftentimes bitter and generally heated, which filled the days preceding the funeral, was very distasteful. It was, moreover, extremely fatiguing. Galahad tried to be calm, to keep his temper under the vexatious attacks and mean innuendoes. He did not always succeed. Irritated

beyond measure, at times he took the offensive and attacked without mercy the customs the clan was so intent upon preserving, until his antagonists writhed under his ridicule.

Fortunately, there had been no formal agreement by the heads of the family that Yung-fu must be bent or broken. Yao Hung-nan was, as usual, waiting for some one else to make his decision for him. If he had given the word to press the issue against his son, twenty families would have stood back of him with disciplinary measures calculated to bring to order the rebellious member.

The decision to which not only Yao Hung-nan acceded, but which the score of families recognized at once as final, came from an unexpected quarter. They had been having an unusually sharp review of the whole situation at which some of the milder leaders tried to arrange a compromise. It was that Yung-fu should be personally excused, but that others should be allowed to perform the rites. This compromise Galahad refused to accept. He was standing for a principle and was not desirous of merely conforming to the letter of his new faith.

To the surprise of every one a new voice broke into the conversation. "I have had to live with Yao Hung-tai for over forty years; it seems to me I should have something to say as to how he should be buried."

"So you should, Auntie," said her nephew, sensing aid from a new quarter. "It is high time the women had more voice in affairs."

"Well," the old lady went on, slowly feeling her way over unfamiliar ground, "I think I should like to have him buried according to this way Yung-fu believes in. I've seen enough to convince me it's the true way, and I am quite sure, had he lived, he would have felt differently toward it."

It was the speech that quashed all opposition. When

the two most resolute wills in the household were united, those who had been used to letting others make their decisions simply acquiesced from force of habit.

The schoolmaster was buried like a Christian. None of the familiar rites were altered except those of an idolatrous character. The costumes, the catafalque, the music, were as of old. Before the coffin was brought out, Galahad made a simple speech concerning the human spirit and the life beyond, which made a favorable impression upon his hearers. He tactfully explained the reasons for the omission of the paper and incense and asked the indulgence of those whose gifts of these things had been returned.

