

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### THE NEW YEAR.

GALAHAD did not return to Leafy Banks at Christmas. School was dismissed the latter part of January for the New Year holidays, and he and his brother came home for a month's vacation then. The latter had already lost the marks of the country boy, and both in his dress and conversation showed that he had absorbed some of the superior culture of the port city. Leather Oxfords and foreign spectacles, a cloth cap worn well down on the ears, and the discarding of the ankle ties marked him as the typical student, to be recognized as far as he could be seen. Nevertheless, the boy was unspoiled and came home with all the eagerness of childhood for the wonderful days of the season soon to dawn.

Towards the end of the year life had begun to accelerate considerably. The family had for weeks been busy making new clothes. Every one must have some new garment and the children whole suits. The Yaos were still old-fashioned enough to prefer the white cotton stockings made from heavy cloth. A fresh supply for the family kept many fingers busy stitching.

The whole village was on the *qui vive*. The old year was growing infirm, but none seemed sad over it, unless it be those who saw staring them in the face the grim necessity of selling some of their land to "get over the year." The New Year was that great Day of Reckoning which could not be put off. Ere it arrived, bills were collected which may have been ignored through months of time, and accounts settled which were long in arrears. The last few weeks found each family busy collecting and paying old scores.

Every one was busy and very happy in being active, for the long weeks of idleness during the first moon would by contrast be all the more enjoyable. Then no stern-voiced necessity would drive them. They could dawdle, they could snooze, they would be at perfect liberty to stand or sit as long as they cared to. They were to enjoy luxurious inactivity, feasting, gaming, and gay converse, with just enough of solemnity, in the ancestral worship, to add significance to the happy home reunions and contribute that comfortable sense of having done all one's duty both to the living and the dead.

Pasted on the wall over Madame Yao's kitchen range was a bright-colored woodcut containing three crudely drawn figures. This was the kitchen god and family, a prominent personage in every home. All cooking was carried on under the constant surveillance of these household lares and penates.

Yac Hung-nan had brought home from market a new and gaudy portrait of the "King of the Range" in preparation for the annual parting with the old one. On the evening of the twenty-third day of the twelfth moon, which was called the Little New Year, the old picture was removed from the wall, the lips of his majesty were smeared with molasses so that he should report only sweet things about the family to the keepers of the celestial books, and he was then sent to heaven in a fiery chariot to be gone until the first day of the New Year.

Jeanne was eager to know about all these curious customs and asked many questions. Welcome to Spring, at her solicitation, told the story of the kitchen god and why each year he was burned in this manner.

Many, many centuries ago there lived a wealthy man by the name of Chang Lang. He had broad acres of land, beautiful and solidly constructed buildings, and two wives. The name of the first and chief wife was

Kuo Ting-hsiang, or Clove Kuo, and that of the secondary wife was Wang Hai-t'ang, or Crab Apple Wang.

Ting-hsiang was not very beautiful to look upon. Her one glory was her hair, which was extraordinarily long, measuring three and a half feet in length. She had, moreover, an abundance of common sense and managed the household so well that Chang Lang found himself growing more prosperous every year.

Besides, Clove could cook, and her original and savory dishes, as spicy as her own name, placed her in undisputed supremacy in the culinary affairs of the family.

It may have been this fact that aroused the jealousy of Crab Apple. Perhaps she felt that her pretty face and graceful figure were in the long run no match for her rival's ability to reach and hold in the proverbial way the affections of their mutual husband, who was, after all, a mere man.

At any rate, Crab Apple, with acid slander and mean innuendo, began to poison the mind of Chang Lang against his homely but gifted wife. So successful was the conspiracy that Chang at last divorced Ting-hsiang and ejected her from the house.

The wronged woman, cast out upon the world, became the wife of a burner of bricks to whom she brought a large measure of prosperity and happiness. Others might be idle, but his kiln fires burned brightly. Other hearth fires might be cheerless, but Ting-hsiang had brought to his humble home the warmth and glow of contentment and joy. The heart of her husband delighted in her.

How did it fare with Chang Lang? Alas! With the departure of Ting-hsiang from his home went also good fortune. One calamity after another befell the man. He lost his property; he lost Crab Apple, who would not share poverty with him; and, worst of all, he lost his eyesight. Reduced to penury, he became a beggar, tapping his way from village to village.

One day he came to the brick burner's village and began to beg from door to door. Ting-hsiang recognized him, though dressed in rags and so pitifully emaciated and feeble. Taking him by the hand, she led him wondering into her kitchen, where she had just been making noodle soup. Seating him upon a stool, she pressed a bowl of the noodles and a pair of chopsticks into his trembling hands.

"Where is your husband, good lady?" he asked, in a broken voice.

"Firing his brick kiln in the yard."

"Oh, so that was the source of the light and heat that smote upon my eyeballs as I entered your honorable courtyard."

"Yes, he has an extra large fire to-day."

"Your voice is very familiar, lady. Have I ever met you before?" he asked.

"It may be, it may be," she replied; "but eat your noodles, sir, or they will be cold and unpalatable."

He poised the bowl on the fingers of his left hand and held the chopsticks suspended as though reluctant to begin. He had not eaten more than half the bowl before he broke forth in praise of the noodles, declaring that he had not tasted such noodles since his wife, Ting-hsiang, used to make them for him in the days of his affluence.

"Ah, would I had never listened to the evil suggestions of that hussy Crab Apple and driven out my faithful wife. Heaven has punished me; however, for I have had neither peace nor good fortune since she left my hearth."

And so the broken man went on bewailing his luck and remorsefully bemoaning his sin against the virtuous Ting-hsiang, until the latter could not keep back the tears and cried, "Poor man, poor man!"

He sung of his wife's wonderful cooking, he recalled her marvelous tresses, longer than any other woman's

in the countryside, and spoke of her patience and gentleless and nobility of spirit.

"Ah, would that I might tell her how I wronged her! Perhaps she would forgive me. Would I might make atonement to her for the suffering I inflicted on her!" Turning directly to Ting-hsiang he asked, "Who are you, gentle lady, and why do you treat a dirty beggar like me with so much kindness?"

"I am one who pities your misery and cannot bear to see you suffering so."

"What is your name?" he persisted.

Ignoring the question, she reached for the bowl he held in his hand. "Give me your bowl and let me replenish it. You surely have not eaten your fill yet."

She heaped up the bowl with steaming noodles, but before returning it to Chang Lang's shaking hands she set it upon the table. Quickly extracting one of the longest hairs from her head she inserted it in the bowl of food.

As he ate, the hair got into his mouth. It was decidedly unpleasant, mixed with his food that way. He reached to remove it, but as he drew it through his lips it seemed endless. Then light dawned upon his blind eyes. No one had hair like that but Ting-hsiang. He could in imagination see her standing before him. This woman who had brought him into her home and fed him from her own larder was no other than his rejected wife.

"You," he demanded in a choking voice, "are Ting-hsiang, aren't you?"

"Yes," she answered quietly, "I am Ting-hsiang."

Chang Lang let the bowl fall with a crash. Overcome with shame and chagrin, he rose and rushed from the house. Turning his face toward the fierce heat of the burning brickkiln, he plunged headlong into the midst of the flames, and thus, expiating his guilt, mounted to the celestial regions upon a horse of fire.

Long years afterward, Chang Lang was canonized by Chiang Tai-kung and made the kitchen god.

And so on the Little New Year they take the old picture down and burn it, giving his lordship, the King of the Range, a fiery steed upon which to journey heavenward to make to the Pearly Emperor his report for the year. And that is why they eat noodles on that day.

After the Little New Year, preparations for the real day grew in intensity. Great quantities of food had to be prepared in advance, for, according to custom, no breadstuffs could be cooked for the first three days of the year, and enough must be made so that all callers could be treated to a bowl of hot meat dumplings.

Anticipation of so many goodies and surprises caused such feverish excitement among the children that they could hardly sleep for days. And what an event it was! No time in all the year could compare with this in popularity with young and old alike. What quantities of firecrackers were discharged! What bursts of sound! Surely for once the youthful lovers of noise must be fully satiated. Peginning on New Year's Eve a steady crack and boom, rising and falling in volume, but greatest as the New Year was ushered in, continued through the night.

Children were put to bed early in the futile attempt to snatch a few hours' rest before the passing of the old into the new year. Just before midnight they were allowed to get up and dress in their new clothes. How brave the little boys looked in their brand-new outfits, the exact replicas of their uncles' and their granddaddies'! The lassies' gay tunics and the artificial flowers in their well-oiled hair were not more attractive than their sparkling black eyes and dimpled cheeks.

To-morrow was the first day of the first moon, the best day of the year. A meal of meat dumplings had been made ready, to be eaten partly in the old and

partly in the new year. Even the poor might live on sweet potatoes for three hundred and fifty days out of the next twelve months, but for these days of celebration they would revel in good food. Their mouths watered in prospect.

There were no longer any little children in the Yao household, but there was plenty of spontaneous gayety. Galahad and Jeanne were very happy to be together again, and the latter entered into the exhilarating festivities of the family with whole-hearted enthusiasm.

She helped Galahad set off some special fireworks he had brought from Chefoo, much to the delight of the rest of the family and the complete consternation of the live stock on the place.

Cheerily they wished each other a happy New Year. Unabashed, they passed their bowls for a second and a third helping of the delicious dumplings. Every one was to eat his fill. Then more rockets and crackers, flowerpots and double-sounders. And so the hours of the night wore on until the explosions grew more infrequent, and the frightened dogs came out of their hiding places, and tired children needed little persuasion to lie down for a few hours' sleep before the morning calls were to be made upon neighbors and friends.

Crowds of children stood about rather awkwardly in the early part of the day. They were stiff in their new wadded garments and afraid of getting them soiled. Proudly the boys took off and put on their fur caps. Their suits seemed richer than their sisters', if not prettier. Perhaps it was the black silk jacket which enhanced their appearance.

Friends had given them pennies when they had made their formal morning calls in the company of their elders; and now the candy blower, a wizened old man who for decades had been making candy baubles, came down the street carrying his magic paraphernalia with him.

He was rather shabby. He had donned no holiday garments to pay visits to his friends, if indeed he had any other than the children, who cared more for his skill in blowing and twisting the hot sugar candy into curious shapes than for his lack of fine clothes. He took up a ball of the sirup and blew, and behold a pomegranate. To this he added another and to the pair a leaf, then blew from a brush dipped in color speckles of red and green upon the half-ripe fruit. The masterpiece was purchased forthwith by a delighted young miss for six coppers.

There were eager customers with ready pennies waiting for each creation as it came from his hand. And even if you did not wish to buy, you could stand with the fascinated group and watch the nimble fingers shape a cock and a weasel, or a weasel with his head stuck in a honey jar.

Perhaps not to-day, but surely to-morrow, the toy peddlers would come around. Their wares may have been of very flimsy construction, but to youthful eyes, seemed wonderful in the extreme—wooden spears and swords with silvered blades, whistles and shrill-sounding pipes, rattles which made exquisite noises when they were whirled, and red and white glass bulbs which made a ping-pong sound when one blew into the mouthpiece. Then there were plaster tigers, striped in yellow, which squeaked most realistically when their heads were pressed just right.

Or if there were those who preferred to add to already overloaded stomachs, they could buy sticks with half a dozen red haws threaded on them, and all dipped in candy sirup. A more delectable elaboration of the confection included sections of orange between the red haws and sesame seeds in the candy. Peanut bars, pure malt candy, and sugared balls of various gay colors provided temptations simply irresistible for any child with a penny burning a hole in those new pockets.



And the Punch and Judy man went from place to place gathering in his harvest of pennies. The roars of laughter he raised by his shrill ventriloquism and by the dexterity with which he made poor Punch flee before his persecutors were worth a generous contribution from the bystanders.

The older boys spent a good many hours of these idle days in gambling for small stakes. Discipline was lax, and parents made it a point not to nag their children unnecessarily. They wanted every one to have a good time, and so much was overlooked which ordinarily was severely frowned upon. The shaking of dice and the pitching of pennies in the streets might also be supplemented by a little family gaming in which even the women participated.

Lest the gambling become too fascinating or too habitual, groups of youths in the villages were encouraged to compose and rehearse plays for the holiday season. Weeks were spent in learning their lines and getting ready their costumes. After the family festivities were over they went from village to village and presented their dramatic efforts on the threshing floors or in the open lots outside the town. It was all taken very seriously both by the actors and the spectators, and the villages visited showed their appreciation by serving tea and cakes to the troupe.

Spring was in the air before life settled into its accustomed grooves. Gradually Jeanne's girls had drifted back and school began again. There had been a fresh exodus from the town of the young men whose commercial or studious pursuits called them to the outer world. Bereft of its more adventurous spirits, Leafy Banks began to turn its thoughts to the soil. Warm days saw the farmer digging those sunny plots of ground which lay with a southern exposure in the shelter of the hills. The nights were cold still, but the days were balmy, and the buds were getting ready to burst.