

## CHAPTER IV

### SIR GALAHAD

**F**OUR members of the battalion located near Valetroi had wandered down to the stream which ran through the Rouget farm, and, finding a suitable spot, had proceeded to divest themselves of part of their clothing. One began to wash some garments he had brought in a bundle, sitting cross-legged near the water and pounding them on a stone with a club. Another coolie, who had removed his stockings and upper garments, stood in the stream and was enjoying the unaccustomed pleasure of dashing the cool water over his shoulders and breast. The muscles stood out on his back and shoulders like those of a wrestler.

The other two also, as it was an unusually warm Sunday morning in May, had their jackets open, showing thick chests and muscular torsos. Nature was at her best; but the Chinese were not her devotees. It was God's worship day; but the joss of luck was the deity they invoked. They sat shuffling a well-thumbed pack of Chinese cards.

One with a scar across an evil face, whom the others called Li Ta-ko, or Big Brother Li, was a thickset, brutal-looking fellow. He was evidently their leader. "Quit your splashing and come on," he commanded. "You can wash in camp, but you can't play cards."

Emerging from the bushes, which grew perhaps fifteen feet back from the water, a path made an abrupt turn and, trailing alongside the brook, halted at a narrow, wooden footbridge. On the other side, it continued through a dell to the cottage whose roof could be seen in the ravine beyond. Just above the

bridge the grassy banks sloped down to the river, where it widened somewhat, making a shallow pool.

As the coolies lingered, a girl came in sight, walking along the river road toward the bridge. Her path lay almost between the two on the grass. She was just returning from church and was walking slowly and with head bent as if in thought.

"Here comes a French girl," the man with the scar said. "Watch me have some fun."

"Leave her alone," warned another. "You know old Ging got twenty blows and a half month in the dark cell for speaking to a French girl."

"All the girls like me," was the boastful reply. "Why, when I was in Paris I had a lot of lady friends."

The girl had not noticed their presence until almost upon them. She had often seen the Chinese of the 138th Battalion, but never at this spot before. The French peasants of Valetroi, as of many other districts in which the Chinese were quartered, were giving a hearty welcome to these hardy sons of Han. No one thought of being afraid of them. They had never accosted her. She liked their smiling faces and happy ways as she watched them at work on the roads or wheeling their funny barrows. Throughout the countryside their reputation was excellent.

Now, however, she was startled to find four of them so near her home and in such *déshabillé*. As she looked up and caught the evil eye of Li, he smiled and said, invitingly, "You come sit down? I speaka Flench." She did not answer, but hurried forward. Li sprang up and barred the way to the bridge. "Me know plenty Flench girl." He put out his hand to detain her and she, terrified, drew back. The others laughed.

Angry that he had lost face before his companions, the man grasped her arm. She struck his hand off fiercely and, turning, fled the way she had come. The

Chinaman ran after her. Though swift of foot, her pursuer gained upon her. Just at the turn of the path where it entered the bushes, the fleeing girl almost ran into the arms of a young man who was strolling along, reading aloud from a book. She did not notice his face, but saw his tall, athletic figure and neat-fitting uniform.

"O monsieur," she cried, as she flitted behind him. He heard and took in the situation at a glance. Her assailant was running so hard that he had not time to stop, and to his amazement he came face to face and almost breast to breast with one of his own countrymen, the new interpreter of the battalion. Before he knew what to do or say, a blow sent him sprawling, and he heard the words: "Li Cho-pen, you here? You despicable cur. Is this why you left China? I might have known that you would be up to just such rascality, for you always were a nasty cuss."

His companions saw him fall and came running to his help. Without betraying the fact that he had ever seen Yung-fu before, he yelled, in a terrific voice, "Da," and they all rushed forward, repeating the cry "Strike."

There ensued a fight which even the embattled shores of France had never seen before. It was four against one, but it soon became apparent that that one had been through the rigors of the strangest and most perfect boxing discipline known, not excepting *la savate* or jiu-jitsu.

His people had demurred at his spending so many evenings at the boxing school. Boxing had seemed, so useless to them, but the *lao shih* assured him that the day might come when he should have to defend himself against *hung-hu-tzû*, or the redbeards,—robbers of Manchuria,—and guaranteed that one man properly trained could withstand five. He was now to test it. And they were no ordinary antagonists, tough as wire

nails, hardened by exposure, and, besides, goaded to desperation by anger and guilt.

They rushed him; but he was not there. Dodging, leaping, twisting, turning, striking ponderous blows and then getting away, he received some, but not nearly so much punishment as he gave. Again and again he broke their hold. He was no longer a biped, but a quadruped, and each limb a catapult. He was a gigantic scythe. His body, swinging level with the ground upon one hand, cut down all that stood in its way like stalks of grain. He was a flying creature swooping down like the air machines on the disordered ranks of the enemy. He was a windmill beating his way through their attack. He was the living incarnation of the eighteen-handed deity under whose shadow he had recited the classics in the temple school.

It was not a question of who would have been the victor in a fight to the finish. Not once but many times he could have given the deathblow which the *lao shih* had taught him alone of all the pupils. Indeed, his caution put him at considerable disadvantage, for though they, in their reckless madness, would not have stopped short of murder, especially Li Cho-pen, he must not kill. He was in France. He must uphold the honor of China. He would punish, but not slay. With perfect self-control his brain grew clearer every moment. Thoughts of the *lao shih* strengthened him. A plan shaped itself as he fought and maneuvered them toward the river's edge.

At this juncture, Li drew a knife. The face of the man blazed with murderous hatred, giving him, as he crouched, weapon in hand, the appearance of one of the scarlet, hunchbacked demon tormentors which fill the Buddhist frescoes of inferno. The girl's protector saw his danger. A blow from his foot, as he leaped into the air almost level with the bully's head, broke the wrist and sent the knife spinning down the slope

to the water's edge. The man groveled on the ground with screams of pain and awful imprecations.

Taking advantage of the elimination of the leader of the assault, the boxer pressed his enemies with redoubled energy. Never for a moment did he relax the vigor of his attack; never did he allow them to put him on the defensive. Every trick he had practiced so painstakingly before the tablets of his ancestors he now employed against his contemporaries to their complete stupefaction.

They grasped at him to find themselves gripping each other. They struck at him only to beat the air. Their efforts to trip and tackle him proved futile; and as a child might defend its head and face from the beak and wings of an angry eagle, so they sought to escape his ubiquitous onslaughts.

He ran through their fingers like sand. With winged feet he had leaped the prostrate body of Li Cho-pen, and, whirling like a dervish with arms outstretched, knocked another coolie down the river bank so that he sprawled half in and half out of the water. The washer of clothes grasped the boxer about the neck from behind. With a quick stoop he seemed to melt out of the other's embrace, and in a moment that worthy found himself hurtling through the air toward the deepest part of the river. The interpreter's grand strategy had succeeded. The fight was over; they had had enough. Quickly they drew away beyond reach of his terrific assaults and would have run.

"Now you get back to camp," he ordered; "I'll attend to you later. And if any one of you ever comes within three li of this spot again, I'll not spare you a second time."

Cowed, silent, dripping, they gathered up their belongings and slunk away. The man who owned the knife started to pick it up. "Li Cho-pen, leave that knife where it is. I want that," Yung-fu said,

advancing threateningly, and the man who would have killed him fled, leaving the victor to confiscate the weapon.

All this while the girl had stood fascinated. She forgot she had been in danger, forgot the impulse to run away. As she saw her rescuer strike and parry she wanted to shout encouragement. As it was, she only clasped her hands and watched breathlessly. She could think of nothing else but the words, "His strength is as the strength of ten because his heart is pure."

When all was over and they had gone, he turned to her with his eyes still flashing, and in good but stilted French said, "I regret exceedingly, mademoiselle, that my countrymen should have annoyed you."

"Oh, are you Chinese too?" exclaimed the girl. "I thought you were an Italian."

It was true that Yung-fu did not look at all like the proverbial Chinese. He was of fair height and had not a yellow but rather a ruddy complexion, seen often in northern Chinese. His large black eyes were not almond-shaped nor slant, nor were the lids puffed as so often are those of men who work in the glare of the sun. In place of a queue he had carefully cut, glossy-black hair parted on one side.

"Yes, I am from the province of Shantung," he said smiling. She noticed his well-shaped mouth and the beautiful teeth, even and pearly white.

"But you are hurt," she cried in alarm, as she saw the blood trickle down his forehead. He put up his hand and wiped away the blood. "It's nothing," he said.

"You must come home with me, and Mother will bind it up," was her sympathetic suggestion.

Abashed, he said "No," but she insisted. "Besides, I haven't thanked you for what you have done, and Mother will want to thank you too."

Reluctantly he followed her to the cottage, and when

the girl told her mother what he had done, tactfully leaving out the details which would alarm an already nervous person, the good woman curtsied and murmured: "*Merci, monsieur.* You were a true chevalier."

"Oh, it was splendid, Mother. You should have seen Mr. —." She hesitated and turned to him to supply the missing name. "Yao," he said quietly. "Mr. Yao," she repeated. "You should have seen him knock that bully into the river," and she began to laugh a bit hysterically at the memory. Yao laughed too.

After the wound, which proved to be only a deep scratch, was bound up, he being very much embarrassed during the process, Yao said, "I must be returning, as I should report to the captain at once."

As they came out of the house, Yung-fu noticed a luxuriant rosebush growing near the door, full of buds and with several open blossoms. "How beautiful!" he exclaimed.

"Do you have roses in China?" Madame Rouget asked.

"Indeed, we do. My mother —" and as he said the words his eyes filled with tears, which fortunately they did not see, "my mother has one very much like this, and it must be blooming now."

The girl picked a bunch of the flowers and placed them in his hands. "To remind you of — your mother," she said, "and thank you again."

He bowed gravely, thanked her, and turned abruptly away, striding briskly down the path and across the bridge. Yao buried his face in the flowers. He never knew when he crossed the bridge nor when he passed the field of blood. He was no longer in France. The fragrance of the roses had transported him ten thousand miles across land and sea. He saw again his mother's courtyard with its flagged paths, the water jar in which grew the lotus plants, the struggling clump of bamboos in one corner, and the rosebush under his mother's window.

He remembered that night three years ago when he had seen her for the last time. He had gone out ostensibly to the boxing class and had stolen back for just one more look.

Again he saw his mother through the open window. She was kneeling before a small shrine of Kuan-yin, the Compassionate Mother. Her lips moved in prayer. The odor of the burning incense sticks penetrated his nostrils and mingled with the fragrance of the roses. Three times she raised her clasped hands to the goddess, three times she bowed to the floor. The red tapers were blown out, the paper-covered lattice was closed.

The shrill sound of the bugle recalled him to his senses. China faded away like the moving pictures at the Y hut, and France once more demanded his attention.

