

CHAPTER VI  
THE CAPTAIN

THE would-be masher, Li Cho-pen, and his three satellites painfully made their way back to camp. As it happened, the first person they met was Wang, the retiring interpreter. He was a thin-faced Chinese of yellow complexion, with an uncertain eye, which never looked directly at you when he talked. His transference to other work was due to the fact that he had been taking bribes from the men and blackmailing them.

"Why, you fellows look as if a tank had run over you. What's happened? get mixed up in the machinery of an aeroplane?" he grinned.

"That's the truth of it," said one of those least injured, as he looked at his companions with their bleeding lips and bulged and blackened eyes.

"Been fighting, eh? The *lao yeh* will fix you all right when he sees you in the morning."

"First-born, save me," whined Li Cho-pen, holding on to his broken wrist.

"Save you? How can I save you?" grunted the interpreter. "You know I don't count here any more. This is my last day. If you fellows had stuck by me, I might have helped you now."

"If you will go in and plead for us with the captain, and do it right away, it means fifty francs in your pocket, First-born. Besides, it gives you a chance to get even."

"How's that?" Wang asked quickly.

"That man Yao attacked us with a knife."

"You don't mean the new interpreter?" said Wang, incredulously.

"Certainly. He's a dangerous man. And you can fix it with the captain so he will let us off."

The interpreter considered a moment. Here was a chance to make some money, his master passion, and incidentally to make it unpleasant for the man whom he looked on as the usurper of his place. "Fifty francs wouldn't tempt me to do it, but I might try for a hundred," he said, pointedly.

"A hundred!" the men chorused. "Why, we should be strapped."

"Strapped, nothing, you old rascal," he said, looking at Li, "where's that pile you made last week at mahjong?"

Li professed innocence, but after some haggling, so dear to the Chinese heart, during which four pairs of eyes kept turning anxiously toward the way they had come, they compromised on the amount and promised Wang seventy-five francs.

"Now tell me the story," he ordered. They did so hurriedly, sketching the main details as they wished them to appear and leaving the rest to Wang's imagination. "All right, here goes," he said at last, "but don't blame me if he doesn't swallow it."

He went to the captain's quarters and asked for an interview on important business. The captain, a Canadian by the name of MacGregor, had been a missionary in South China for fifteen years. He was a large man, rather too stout for a soldier's uniform. His keen, gray eyes searched the face of the Chinese as he admitted him. Trouble among the men was never pleasant and he feared something now.

"Well, Mr. Wang, what's the matter?" he asked.

"I'm sorry, sir, but four of the men have just returned to camp very much beaten up. One has a broken wrist. It is too bad, but they say that Mr. Yao, the new interpreter, attacked them."

"Attacked them? Why should he attack four men?"

"Well, sir, their story is this: they were going to a little stream about a mile from here to bathe and do some washing. As they came near the place they saw this man Yao bothering a French girl, who was washing clothes in the river. She was trying to make him go away and leave her alone when they appeared. When Yao saw them he began to revile them and ordered them away, and when they told him the captain would not stand for the Chinese insulting the French women, he rushed on them and beat them unmercifully."

MacGregor had had plenty of experience with that wonderful gift of the Oriental in making black look white, and white look black. He was canny enough to know that he was never getting all the facts in the case.

"Say, Wang, that story smells like the dried fish they used to unload from the junks along the Chefoo bund. French girls don't wash clothes in rivers on Sunday morning. Do you mean to tell me one man can put it over four husky fellows?"

"Mr. Yao is an accomplished boxer; we all know that, sir," replied the Chinese, "and, besides, he carried a knife."

"Who are these men?" suddenly asked MacGregor; "and where are they?"

"They are waiting near by, if you want to see them." Reluctantly the interpreter gave their names, mentioning Li Kuang-fu last of all.

"Li? Do you mean that chap we have had to discipline ever since he entered the battalion? He's no good. I wouldn't believe him if he took oath over the graves of his ancestors. However, I will look into this. Have Mr. Yao come to me immediately upon his return to camp, and send the man with the wrist to the doctor."

Wang, having passed the word to the men to go and make themselves as presentable as possible, loitered about in the vicinity of the path by which the quartet had come. Before long he espied the new interpreter

approaching, carrying his bouquet of flowers. His heart misgave him when he saw the roses, for he knew they did not grow wild. "The *lao yeh* wants to see you at once, Mr. Yao," he said, innocently.

"That's good, for I want to see him."

When admitted to Captain MacGregor's presence, the latter said at once: "The men have come in with a nasty story about you, Mr. Yao. I am sorry to have you start off this way."

"What did they say, sir?" Yung-fu asked, looking him frankly, but not boldly, in the face. The captain liked his eyes; they were honest. He could not help making a mental comparison with the man who had just been in his presence and who in the six months they had been together had never looked higher than the second button on his coat.

"Why, they say you were bothering a French girl."

"Did they say that?" Yung-fu blushed to the roots of his hair.

"Yes, and that when they tried to protect her you attacked them and have broken one of their arms. What have you to say?"

Yao took out of his pocket the knife and laid it on the table. MacGregor looked at it, then at him. Then he told the whole story, leaving out only the details of his skill and courage. When it was done, the captain said, "Is that all?"

"Yes, sir."

"I believe you, Mr. Yao," said MacGregor, "and I'm glad you whipped them; but have you any visible evidence that what you have said is true—any evidence which would stand in court? Can you prove that that knife is not your own?"

"You will find the Chinese name of Kuang-fu carved on the handle. One of the men is Li Kuang-fu. There is another thing which may show my innocence." He

took off his cap as he spoke and showed the small pad of cotton with which they had bound up his wound.

"Who did that?" MacGregor demanded.

"The girl's mother, sir."

The captain grunted. "What have you there in your hand?"

Yao looked down. He was still carrying the roses. He looked at them as if he had not seen them for a long time. "My mother's roses—I mean, they gave them to me over there."

"Well, I am satisfied young ladies and their mothers do not bind up the heads of men who insult them, nor give them flowers. That's all, Mr. Yao."

As the interpreter turned to go, MacGregor looked at him thoughtfully, then called him back. "Say, Mr. Yao, just because those folks were kind to you, don't get ideas in your head, will you?"

The young man looked puzzled. "Ideas in my head?" he questioned.

"Yes, don't get silly. You're Chinese, you know."

"Silly? Chinese?" Yung-fu paused, as if searching for the meaning of the words; and then, as if a sudden light had come to him, he said, "Oh, I suppose you mean I must be more dignified and not forget my position. I fear I lost my dignity this morning, but I'll try not to do so again."

Seeing he was only mystifying, not helping, the youth, MacGregor let him go. "I don't care if he is a Chinaman," he said out loud; "I couldn't blame a girl for liking him."