

## CHAPTER VII

### FIRST LESSONS IN CHINESE

WHEN Yung-fu looked for his book the next day he could not find it. Suddenly he remembered that he had dropped it at the first onslaught of his countrymen. He was busy all that day and the next; but on Wednesday afternoon, having a little leisure, he walked toward the river to see if he could find the volume.

He was searching among the bushes when he saw a flash of skirts on the other side of the bridge. Drawing back into the scrub, he tried not to be seen. "O Mr. Yao," he heard a sweet, clear voice calling, "you're looking for your book, aren't you? I picked it up and took it home. If you will come over to the house, I'll give it to you."

Seeing he was discovered, he came forth somewhat embarrassed and approached the bridge on which Jeanne was standing. What a picture she made against the green background of the woods, her arms bare to the elbow, the neck of her blouse open, showing the white throat within. He thought he had never seen any one more beautiful. She greeted him smilingly, as he drew near the bridge, with a "*Bon jour, monsieur*"; then, pushing away a stray lock with the back of her hand, she added: "See what dirty hands I have. I was working in the garden when I saw you over there."

"Won't you sit down on this bench by the door?" Jeanne asked, when they had walked to the cottage. "It's cooler out here. I will wash my hands and bring the book."

He sat down and glanced about. The little vegetable

garden on the right looked well kept and flourishing. The neatly outlined flower beds on the other side were some of them already in blossom, while others merely showed evidence of recent work. Her trowel and basket were still lying where she had left them.

The red brick of the cottage glowed in the brilliant sunlight which flooded the clearing. The house faced the south and against the background of the trees presented a warm and cozy appearance. The thatched roof reminded Yung-fu of Shantung. The rosebush he noted for the second time. He was examining the buds more closely when his hostess returned and, sitting down on the bench by his side, handed him the paper-covered book. Never before had he sat on the same bench with a girl, his sisters excepted; never before, since he had come to manhood, had any woman, except members of his own family, handed anything directly to him. Well-behaved men and women in his country lay things down on a table or on the ground when transferring them to members of the other sex. However, "Every land has its own customs," he thought. He knew it was not boldness, but simply naturalness on her part. Her nearness sent unusual and not altogether unpleasant thrills through him.

"What is that book, Mr. Yao? I confess, I peeped into it, but I couldn't read a word."

"No, I suppose not," he laughed. "It's a Chinese Testament."

"Oh, a Bible? May I see it again, please?" She took it and opened it. "How odd!" she said. "It looks like a Chinese puzzle to me. Can people really read it?"

"Yes, indeed. The Chinese Christians all own Testaments, and no other book in all China has such a sale as this one."

"You are a Christian, then?" she asked, looking directly at him.

"Well, I have not been baptized yet, but I am a believer," he said frankly.

"Won't you show me how you read it? Where do you begin?"

He took the book from her hands, spread it on his knee, and explained how the back of the book was the front, and how the characters ran from top to bottom and the lines from right to left.

"Why, it's all topsy-turvy, isn't it?" she laughed. "Is everything upside down in China?"

"There is a good deal that needs to be changed," he said seriously.

"Please read me some so I can hear how it sounds. There, read that line," she commanded, putting her finger on the page. He put his finger where hers had been and, following the characters as he read, began, "*Yin-tz'ü jêr yao li-k'ai fu-mu, yü ch'i-tz'ü lien-ho.*"

"How musical!" Jeanne exclaimed. "But what does it mean?" She had not noticed the flush which slowly spread over his face, the slight catch in his voice as he cleared his throat, nor his growing embarrassment. "Translate it for me."

He could not refuse without making things worse, so he put it into the best French he could summon. "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife." Not knowing the background of his bitter experience, she did not take any particular notice of the meaning of the passage, and he was relieved when she changed the subject by asking, "What is that near the back of the book? I saw it yesterday."

He drew out a card. "That is my card." She took it from his hand and studied it intently. Three characters ran down the middle of it. As he stooped to pick up his hat which had fallen on the ground, she turned the card over and read, "Yao Yung-tu," in English type. When he had recovered the hat, he

heard her say: "Oh, I can read Chinese too. Watch me." She put her finger on the characters one by one and pronounced slowly as if reading, "Yao Yung-fu."

"Right," he laughed; "but you are reading it upside down. You must have seen the English."

"Is that your name? It's pretty; but what does it signify?"

"Yao is my surname. We always give that first. Yao is the name of one of our holy men. Yung-fu means 'Everlasting Happiness.'"

"That's a nice name, but I should feel queer calling a man 'Everlasting Happiness.' I think I shall call you Mr. Galahad."

"Ga-la-had? I don't think I know that name. What does it mean?" he queried in turn.

"I'll let you find that out, I think," she said mischievously; then impulsively asked, "What would my name be in Chinese?"

"Your name? Why, I can't say, for I don't know your name yet."

"Why, so you don't; I forgot. My name is Jeanne, Jeanne Rouget. Do you have that name in China?"

"Hardly," he smiled. "All foreign names have to be changed somewhat. I have it," he exclaimed. "Rou, Lu—Lu Chên-an."

"Does it mean something nice too?"

"Well, Lu is your surname and means 'Path,' while Chên-an means 'True Peace'—the 'Path of True Peace.'"

"What fun! How interesting! I wonder whether I could learn it. Would you be willing to teach me Chinese?"

"Teach you Chinese?" repeated Yung-fu, embarrassed at her directness. "Of course I should be willing, but wouldn't it be better to ask your mother first?"

"She might object if I asked you to instruct me in boxing, but the Chinese language surely is not dangerous."

"I am not so sure it isn't," he answered, thinking of his uncle's letter.

Yung-fu sprang to his feet as he saw Mrs. Rouget standing in the doorway. She had been listening interestedly to the conversation.

"O Mother, I'm going to ask Mr. Galahad to teach me Chinese; may I? It would be perfectly fascinating, I am sure."

"Mr. Galahad? I thought you told us it was Yao," she inquired, turning to him.

"Oh, I have rechristened him, mother," laughed the girl.

"And you have a new name too," her mother said; "I heard Mr. Yao give it to you. But won't you come in for a little refreshment?"

He followed the two women into the spotless room. It was low and had no ceiling; neither did it have any cobwebs festooning the beams, a fact which did not escape him. Some of the products of the garden hung from the rafters—onions, beans in their pods, and yellow corn, also a piece of dried meat. But such were not incongruous in a room which served for kitchen and dining room, as well as living room. The floor of square gray bricks was freshly sprinkled with clean yellow sand.

While the house was absolutely different from anything he had known, the simplicity of it and the flavor of rusticity about it put him at his ease. It all made him think of the Rougets as his sort of folks.

To the right and left of the main room were the bedrooms. The sight through the open door of one of them impressed him as being a view into quite another world. He would not have cared to go in there just then, lest he pass out of the pleasant sense of an environment in which they seemed to be on common ground into one where the distinction of race would be accentuated. He would have involuntarily taken off his shoes had he been going to step over the threshold into that foreign

room, as he would have expressed it. The kitchen seemed universal and masculine, but the bedroom, with its white counterpane, its pretty figured curtains, and its gayly colored rug, was French and feminine. No, he turned his eyes without reluctance from the evidences of cultured tastes to the solid elements of peasantry.

Madame Rouget had set out a plate of cakes upon the table. A large pitcher of milk and glasses stood by the cakes. "We have our own cow, so we can always have fresh milk. Will you have a glass?" she asked.

Galahad, without intending to, looked a bit doubtful and hesitated. Jeanne saw his embarrassment and said, "Perhaps they do not drink milk in China, Mother." He looked at her gratefully. "My people have not yet learned to use milk products extensively. Our men are learning, however, to eat your *fromage*."

"Perhaps you would prefer wine. I think there is a bottle which your father left, dear. You might go and see."

"Thank you, Madame Rouget, but the *lao shih* would never let us drink any wine."

"Who is the *lao shih*, Mr. Yao,—your priest?"

"Oh, no—my boxing teacher."

"Well," chimed in Jeanne, "if what I saw on Sunday is the result of total abstinence, I wish all France were dry."

"But what will you drink?" asked the woman, a bit nonplused.

He turned to the stove on which the teakettle was singing briskly. "If you will permit me, I will brew you a cup of Chinese tea." Both the older and the younger woman broke into a chorus of delighted exclamations. As they brought the teapot, he drew from his coat a small packet, saying, "I received this from home yesterday."

"Will you have cream and sugar?" asked Mrs. Rouget.

"No, if you will pardon my saying so, they only disguise the real tea flavor. We Chinese never use them."

As he poured out the amber liquid in the cups Jeanne brought, they thought that they had never seen tea with such a color, such a contrast to the muddy substance usually passing for tea. And the flavor, for they drank it Chinese fashion, was the most delicate, indefinable, suggestive aroma that they had ever had. It tasted like tea with which fragrant roses had been mingled, or a bunch of jasmire. Again and again he filled the cups without protest from them.

"Naughty, naughty puss," abruptly exclaimed Jeanne. Yung-fu looked up to see a large tabby enter the room. She licked her chops, winked one eyed significantly, and did not seem to mind the reproof. Galahad looked at the cage hanging empty at the window. "Yes," said Jeanne, interpreting his glance, "she ate up our canary this morning. We thought we had put her out when the bird had its bath, but she was hiding under the bed. You naughty kitty!"

"Would you think it bold of me to make a request?" Yung-fu asked.

"What sort of request?" asked Mrs. Rouget, cautiously.

"I have a bird that I brought with me from China. He is a lark and sings beautifully, but he is used to trees and yards; and since I have had him here in France I haven't been able to get him out much into the open."

"Do men keep birds in China?" jokingly asked Jeanne.

"It is one of our quiet pastimes," replied Galahad.

"Birds and boxing! What a strange combination!" murmured the girl.

"If you would only let me bring him here, you could enjoy his songs, and he could enjoy your woods."

"And tabby?" teased Jeanne.

"Now, Jeanne, Mr. Yao won't understand your joking," remonstrated her mother.

Yao laughed, "Yes, and tabby."

"You are very good, Mr. Yao," said Mrs. Rouget.

"No, you are the one who is good to take in my poor exile from his native land."

So they settled it that the lark should be brought the first free day Yao had. Thanking them for a delightful afternoon, he took his leave.

"Good-by, Mr. Galahad," said Jeanne, with a roguish twinkle in her eyes.

"*Lu Ku-niang, tsai chien,*" said he, and was gone.

"Now what did he mean by that?" asked her mother.

"I'll tell you when my Chinese lessons have progressed further," replied her daughter.

