

CHAPTER IX
FREEDOM AND A MATE

SO HERE you are, my beautiful captive Chinese," said Jeanne to the bird, as she took the cage from Galahad.

The bird was frightened at first (these larks are very timid of strangers), and fluttered about in the cage. Galahad spoke to him in Chinese and in a few moments he was quiet. They hung the cage a short distance from the door upon a branch of a tree, and presently the lark, conscious of the new environment, began to sing.

"Oh, how exquisite!" exclaimed Jeanne. "Some of his notes are almost like those of the woodthrush, but more varied."

"Yes," said Yung-fu, "these northern larks are our best songsters."

"How did you ever bring him all the way from China?"

"I wanted to bring a touch of home along with me," he said, in a burst of confidence, "something that was living and would be a comfort to me."

"Yes, of course," said Jeanne, sympathetic at once. "Tell me about your home, won't you, and your journey? Think of it, halfway round the world! It must be wonderful to travel. I've never been even as far as Paris." Thus she drew him out and led him to talk of himself.

"My home, as I believe I told you, is in Shantung province, the birthplace of Confucius."

"Yes, I have read of him. And is your father a prince or an official, or something like that?"

"No," laughed Galahad, "there is nothing romantic about me. My father is a farmer. We live in a quiet country village four days from the railroad."

"Railroad! Do you have railroads in China, and are they built by Chinese?"

"This one isn't, but there is one from Peking to Kalgan, built and operated entirely by the Chinese. The Shantung Railroad was built by the Germans and is now held by the Japanese, who also occupy Tsingtau."

"Germans? Japanese? How do they happen to be in China, in Shantung?"

"That is a long, long story; but to make it short, Germany stole Tsingtau first from China, then at the beginning of the war Japan took it away from Germany, and it looks as if she might keep it until China is strong enough to take it away from her. China seems to be always having to entertain some unwelcome guest." He spoke with some heat and no little bitterness.

"It seems as if stealing were quite common in the Orient," she commented.

"Yes, since the Western nations came," he said, with unusual bluntness.

"Oh, so you don't like Europeans to go to China, then?"

"It depends on what they come for and what they do after they get there. I know my people have been slow to welcome strangers. We are naturally suspicious, even of our own countrymen from other provinces. I presume this is due to the lack of railroads and the absence of easy means of communication. Friendship, however, cannot be forced and is often forfeited by too much aggressiveness."

"You think we Europeans are too forward, do you?"

"I think the white man is very determined, and I do not think that in the Orient he is always considerate of other's feelings. We have been treated at times as if we Chinese did not have any rights in our own country,

while the white man talks about his rights and his claims and his spheres of influence in Asia. It was, I believe, a European who discovered America; but I have not heard that it was either an American or a European who discovered China. After all, it has been our country for five thousand years."

Galahad had not intended to say so much. Jeanne, however, had both that sincere interest in others and their points of view which encouraged confidence, and an adroitness in eliciting a person's real feelings which was almost inescapable. She had a good deal of that white man's determination which, when coupled with genuine friendship, brings out the best in the Oriental. Besides, these were facts and impressions that she had never heard of before. She had supposed that the Chinese would be only too glad to have Frenchmen and Belgians and British, if not Germans, go and introduce Western civilization into their benighted land. She had not thought of their being any different than the peoples of Africa for whom France had certain colonial responsibilities and to whom the nation was obligated to give certain of the fundamentals of civilization. Of course she would not have said to him that she thought the Chinese were uncivilized. Moreover, as she realized that this son of Shantung was better educated and better informed than she herself, had traveled farther and thought more deeply, and was able to express himself more clearly than any of the young men with whom she was acquainted, she began to doubt whether the white man's burden was so imperative after all.

"Are there many men in the Labor Corps like you, Mr. Yao?"

"Like me? In what respect? There are one hundred fifty thousand of us."

"I mean, are there many who know as much, and who can speak French the way you do? Where did you learn it?"

"You flatter me, mademoiselle. The little I know I learned in the French classes at the Y. My French is very faulty, I assure you."

"You speak much better than many of the other nationalities we meet nowadays." She spoke very sincerely. "If you really will teach me Chinese, I might help you with your French."

"The obligation would all be on my side, Miss Rouget, if you would be good enough to put up with me as a pupil and as a teacher."

So it was planned that he should come twice a week for French and Chinese. She was frankly delighted with the arrangement, and for many weeks the schedule was rigidly kept. He felt the dignity of the new task and was very grateful for her assistance.

One day, as they sat at their studies on either side of a small cutting table set under the trees, Yung-fu suddenly dropped his book. "What's that?" he asked, sharply.

"I don't hear anything except my captive Chinese singing his love song," she replied.

"Yes, but didn't you hear the answering call? Listen."

They strained their ears to listen, and heard, away on the other side of the stream, a faint answer to the bird's call. Gradually it grew stronger. "It's the female call," he cried at last. "I believe she is coming this way."

Now they were not only listening but watching. Mr. Lark kept up his pleading. Of a sudden there was a flash of brown and a bird somewhat smaller and plainer than the one in the cage, but of the same general coloring, swooped down and perched on a branch near by.

"It is—it is the female," whispered Galahad, quivering with excitement.

"Where do you suppose it came from?" whispered Jeanne.

"I don't know—perhaps from some other battalion."

When the caged bird discovered the one he had been longing for without knowing her, the one he had enshrined in his heart and to whom he had sung his songs, the one he had called to so plaintively, he beat his wings against the sides of the cage and was beside himself with joy and grief.

"Poor little captive," said Jeanne, "let's let him free."

"I was just thinking the same, myself," agreed Galahad.

With a common impulse, they arose and walked toward the cage. The little ladybird, alarmed by the movement, had flown a short distance away among the trees. Quickly Galahad raised the door and drew out the lark. Like a flash it was off, calling, calling, and flying hither and thither. It was the game of hide and seek so familiar to birdlore and to real love. She would cheep and hide under a bush, and when he discovered her he would spread his feathers and begin to trot about. When he came too near, she gave him a proper little peck and moved a short way off.

Fascinated and delighted, the Chinese youth and the French maiden watched this comedy with smiles and ejaculations. At last they saw Mr. Chinese Lark sidle up to the lonely little miss. This time she did not peck him nor move away, but allowed him to stroke her neck with his bill and lay it alongside hers in a betrothal kiss.

"Isn't that too sweet for anything!" said Jeanne, in a subdued voice.

"It's a parable," he said.

"What do you mean?" she asked, with a puzzled look.

"I mean that that Chinese captive had to come all this way from the land of oppression to this land of liberty, fraternity, and equality to learn what freedom means, and to find a mate of his own choosing."

As they passed back to their books, Jeanne said, "Oh, see, they are already gathering grasses for a nest."

And so they were. As the lark flew past with a straw in his bill, Yung-fu said in Chinese, "That's right, little chap, go ahead and build a nice little nest just for two."

"Some day," said Jeanne, with mock severity, "it won't do you any good to talk Chinese, for I shall understand what you say."

"Yes, some day you'll understand," he answered.

