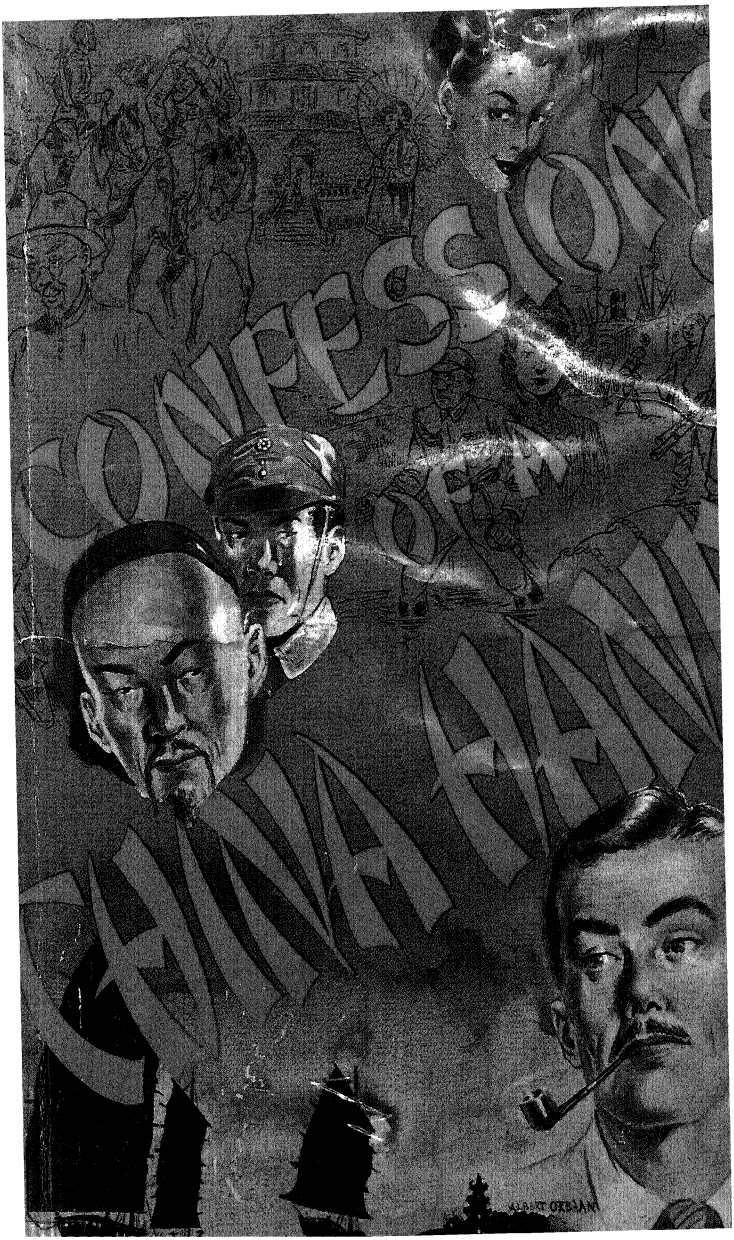
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OF
CHINA

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CONFESSIONS OF A CHINA HAND

By RONALD FARQUHARSON

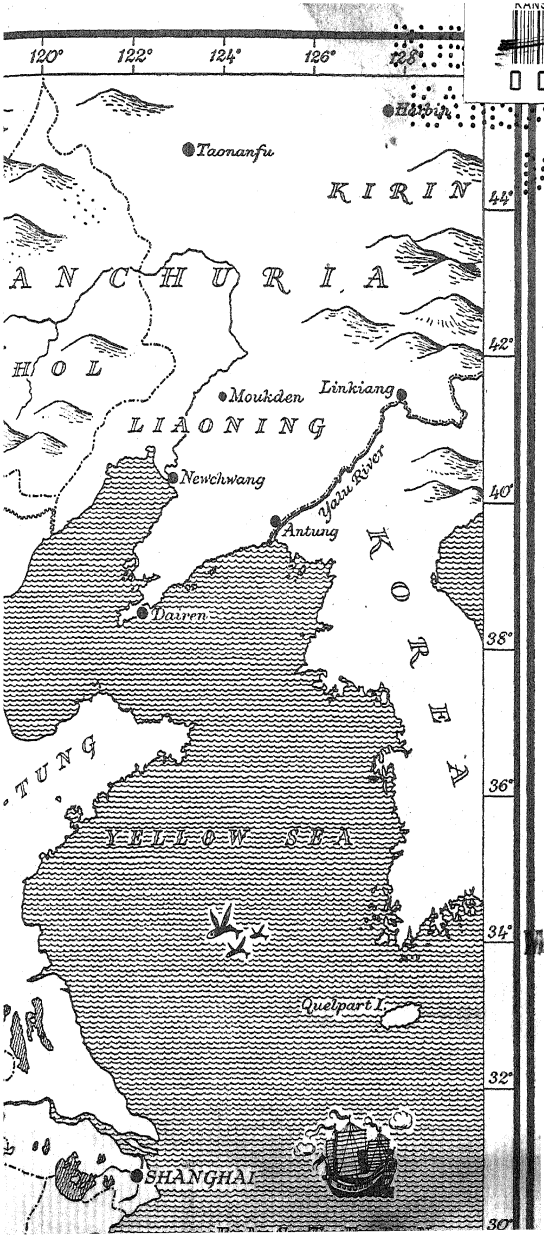
Ronald Farquharson lived and worked in China for ten years preceding World War II. His experiences there proved to be a rich fulfillment of his boyhood belief in the phrase, "Adventures are to the adventurous."

The Twenties and Thirties were a halcyon time for the spirited young men who went out from Europe and America to sell their products in the East. And the centuries-old land of China was an exotic market with unlimited possibilities. Ronald Farquharson turned down bids of a career in Peru, then in Rangoon, preferring to wait until he could establish himself in the land of his boyhood dreams.

(*continued on back flap*)

Jacket by ALBERT ORBAAN

WILLIAM MORROW & COMPANY



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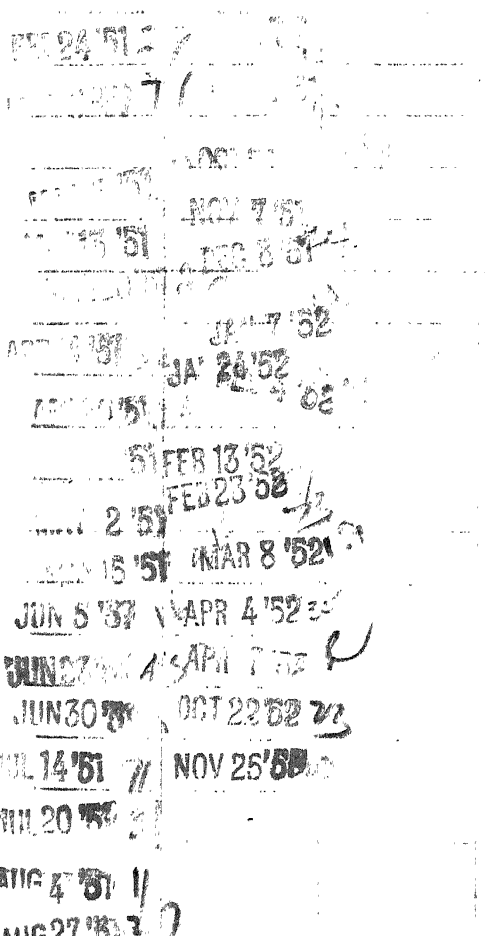


Ronald Farquharson

CONFESSIONS OF A CHINA HAND

WILLIAM MORROW AND COMPANY

New York: 1951

Contents

Foreword

IN OFFERING to the public these stories of incidents so largely concerned with my personal activities in North China during an earlier decade, I would like them to be accompanied by a word or two in both explanation and acknowledgment.

With the exception of "The Hill," which is a fantasy in actual surroundings and somewhat different from the others, the incidents in themselves are recorded very much in the manner of their actual happening, although I have considered it expedient in certain instances to substitute names and in others to alter localities or sequences. I have deliberately added adjustment and a little colour to my "Portrait of a War Lord" in order that he may emerge with the best characteristics among three whom I knew; and, though I have no doubt that many of my contemporaries in China will recognize him despite it, it might be unwise—even at this date—to make him more widely apparent. "Return to Eden" is very much a personal story, so personal in fact that I have deliberately cloaked it with another, losing my true identity in both; I hope some may read it who were my companions on the famous Kikung-

shan train in the summer of 1926—they, at least, will know the reason why.

As for the other incidents, I think they may be offered without further comment.

I am proud to acknowledge the fact that a few among the happenings recorded in these "confessions" have already made their appearance in Blackwood's Magazine; and I am particularly grateful to Mr. G. D. Blackwood for the encouragement which he thereby extended to a new and unknown spare-time scribe.

My final word is one of affection for the Chinese, particularly those whom I met and knew during my travels through the remoter regions of their country; quite a few among whom figure in the pages of this book and are—need I say it—real characters. To each of them, whether they yet survive or already are journeying towards "The Yellow Springs," I owe and acknowledge my deepest debt of all.

RONALD FARQUHARSON

June 3, 1950
22, Alexandra Drive,
Liverpool, England

CONFESSIONS OF A CHINA HAND

Chapter 1

HERR HAO

"ADVENTURES are to the adventurous" was an expression I first heard as a child. It might have left less impression on me had I not heard it uttered time and again by my Great-Uncle Aeneas who had travelled, as he put it, "everywhere from China to Peru" and boasted that he had lived dangerously in five continents. I knew that I could never emulate the possibly exaggerated exploits of Great-Uncle Aeneas, but at least I might start off on the right lines by going to China.

Somehow that childish ambition not only stuck but grew in intensity and was foremost in my mind when, just after leaving school at the age of eighteen, I made a successful application to join a large industrial organization as a trainee for a post abroad.

To this firm, later to be known to the world as Imperial Chemical Industries, I owe a great debt of gratitude. Quite apart from the fact that they still subscribe in a handsome manner to my existence, they have been both tolerant and kind to me from the very beginning. In 1922 they said in effect, "We have

now trained you for two years: we propose posting you to Lima." I thought that Peru to start with, seemed to be jumping too far ahead if I was to follow the trail of Great-Uncle Aeneas, and in any case, as I emphasized in some trepidation to my indulgent employers, I had rather set my heart on going to China. Six months later they sent for me again and asked how soon I could be packed up and ready to leave for Rangoon. This, at least, was a considerable step nearer; but again, at no little risk to my continued employment, I intimated that I would still prefer to wait until an opening became available in China. It was evident that by this time I had fully exhausted their patience, for they immediately ceased to regard me as a foreign trainee and put me on the road to sell to laundries a substance called Sesqui-Carbonate of Soda.

But, by some miracle, I was not entirely forgotten; and one day, a few months before my twenty-second birthday, I received a brief notice to the effect that a tentative passage had been reserved for me from London to Shanghai if I was prepared to sail in three weeks' time. Of course I was.

So it all came about; and it seemed not long afterwards that, within an hour of my first setting foot on the Shanghai Bund, I presented myself to the sales manager of our organization in China, hoping to create the impression of a young man determined to lose no time at all in justifying his appointment.

I discovered my immediate chief to be a preoccupied person, possessed of an imperial liver, who shot me a disparaging glance, rebuked me for arriving

on mail day and forthwith dispatched me to the native city in a ricksha. There, greatly aided by Mr. Yee, who had accompanied me from the office, I immediately proceeded to prove my prowess by disposing of a case of cod-liver oil to a Chinese apothecary who normally dealt only in native herbs. It was Mr. Yee, however, who had insisted that this early opportunity must be taken of extending face to the newly arrived Englishman; and the apothecary, boasting a single tooth of startling prominence and the equally odd and appropriate name of Mr. Fang, had expressed himself as willing to comply on the understanding that if thereby he extended face to a twenty-one-year-old Foreign Devil, he, in turn, must be extended twenty-one days' credit. On such agreement and the promise of immediate delivery, Mr. Yee and I bowed ourselves backwards out of the premises into our rickshas. Of this incident it remains only to relate that twenty days later the case of cod-liver oil was mysteriously translated from Mr. Fang's shop back into our godown.

During the intervening period I had entered my proper apprenticeship in the simpler aspects of the Chinese commercial art, and face was preserved through my having disposed of a modicum of merchandise in a more genuine market. Nevertheless Mr. Yee continued to exploit this same expedient whenever newcomers arrived from England, in the rather vain hope, one can only suppose, that on some such occasion the face-extending Mr. Fang might, prior to the expiry of his credit, forget to return the goods.

I may say that for a young man who had previously confined his salesmanship to a single chemical for one specific trade, I found—quite apart from new and peculiar methods of approach—that I was unexpectedly called upon to school myself in the selling points of almost every commodity that a Chinese might conceivably employ to advantage. My company not only sold the widest possible range of its own imported products but, as a prominent British concern with a well-established organization covering most of China's vast territory, also acted as selling agents for a considerable number of other industries. It was natural that in Hong Kong, Shanghai and the principal Treaty Ports, as they were called in those days, our scope was greater than in the less Westernized expanses of the interior. "Chemicals to cod-liver oil" might well have been an apt slogan for our sales activities in the main centres of China. But, despite restrictions, it had long been realized that a far greater future for foreign industrial enterprise lay behind the ability to probe the unscratched surface of a nigh-limitless hinterland.

If Great-Uncle Aeneas made me a personal legacy of some of what my family have politely referred to as his "amicable weaknesses," then I also inherited from him a strong desire to pioneer. Here again my ever accommodating employers gave me a rich opportunity to indulge this ambition by shortly posting me from Shanghai to the northern port of Tientsin to act as district manager. It was there that my modest attempts to introduce and foster British

trade, chiefly among the up-country merchants and farmers, assumed for the first time a far more fascinating aspect than was ever confined within a homing case of cod-liver oil.

There were established native industries, invariably of a crude and primitive nature, to be discovered in the scattered and far-distant cities and *hsiens* which, with the aid of our technicians, we aimed to encourage and develop for the prosperity of Chinese and British alike. There was new ground to be broken in the less accessible, unexplored territories which lay close to Mongolia in the north and stretched out towards Turkestan and Tibet in the west: here we tried to open trade in a world oblivious to the march of a thousand years. And over all lay the soil, so much of its pristine richness spent through centuries of crude cultivation—that once good earth of China, from the meager fruits of which countless millions took their pittance or, in the unyielding years, perforce must perish. We sought, through small beginnings, to nourish that soil, to enliven it with the scientific discoveries of a modern era, and thereby to increase the slender resources by which vast communities lived or died. It was essentially trade, but brightened by humane purpose. I, with the ardent ideals common to youth, interpreted it as commerce with a cause and at intervals trekked out into the unknown, mentally panoplied as though on a crusade. It was a propitious state of mind, for in the 20's and early 30's there was little else in favour of forsaking the easy club com-

forts of a Treaty Port for long weeks of hard and hazardous journeying through uncharted wilds where, blown by winds from the Gobi, only the grey dust danced along age-old solitary ways. And after the rains the dust made mud: such mud as that in Flanders' fields or, say, on the devious track that travellers take to reach Yangchu.

Yangchu, more familiarly known by its pre-Republic name of Taiyuanfu, is (or was) the capital city of Shansi province. During the days of which I write, all communications, including the dilapidated railway which spasmodically ran north and south through the province, were permitted to function only in the interests and at the dictates of the local war lords. This indeed was the era when only bribery was brother to belligerency in the control of provincial affairs, and under such conditions of corruption and chaos none but the sorely tried and overtaxed merchants strove to maintain that high standard of honesty which is inherent in the character of the Chinese trader.

Mr. Kim, who was a Chinese born in Honolulu and a graduate in agriculture from an American university, and I approached Yangchu overland from the east in a springless ox-drawn cart. After a full week's journey from Tientsin across the plains of Chihli, we had since travelled a further five days, jolting our precarious way along a hundred and fifty miles of scarcely discernible track from Changtingfu, in the adjoining province now known as Hopei, where we had done good business. But we now faced a more formidable task; for we had learnt that

our German competitors had established in Yang-chu a native agent, called Mr. Hao, who was so much more progressive and resourceful than our own representative that stocks of the German product were flooding the whole of Shansi. We, on the other hand, had not so much as a picul * throughout the province. While this was to the extreme detriment of British business, it had also an even more irritating aspect. Over the earlier seasons *we* had broken the ground and almost our hearts in the process, *we* had staged the experiments, *we* had first nourished the earth and sown the seeds that waxed as magic to incredulous eyes—all this we had done before a competitive *chop* had even been designed; and now, through some artifice as yet unknown, it seemed that the Boche had ridden home with the harvest. The object immediately ahead of us was simply to discover the answer to one question: the spring far spent now, the season lost in Shansi, we must know how the Germans had won it—that was all. With that knowledge, we might plan a campaign even better than theirs and recapture the province next year. But how to glean the secrets of Mr. Hao? He would not be delivering them as a gratuitous gesture to any who asked; most assuredly he would hold them more precious with the ears of the enemy around. Our problem was one of approach—for probe those secrets we must.

One of the wheels struck a boulder embedded deep in the mire, we lurched suddenly to one side, and my head came into violent contact with the

* Chinese standard weight equal to 133⅓ lbs.

bamboo stay across which curved the blue cloth cover of our primitive cart. To Mr. Kim's consternation, the blood trickled down from my temple, but I waved aside his ministrations. The jolt had dislodged a dormant idea.

"Kim," I cried, "I have it! It's come to me at last! This fellow Hao," I went on, "I've no doubt he's progressive. Maybe somewhat of a wizard in his way but he's more than likely to be a local lad who wouldn't know a Highlander from a Hun."

"So what?" drawled Mr. Kim.

"Just this," I explained. "Suppose we breeze straight into Herr Hao and introduce ourselves as a couple of the *Farben* freaks on a routine round. You know, same as we do with our own agents; checking up stocks, surveying the market, finding out about this and that—the usual rigmarole. He'd be none the wiser while *we* most certainly would."

"You mean—we'd learn the know-how?"

"Exactly. All's fair . . . isn't it?"

Mr. Kim ruminated for a while and then, to minimize the risk of losing either in the act of speech, secured his last bit of spearmint to a loose filling and remarked:

"That's right. So long as there are no genuine Huns in town."

I thought this a remote possibility. The Germans were no fools and, with the sowing season over in a locality that bristled with fireworks, nobody but inquisitive fools like us would venture in.

"Little chance of that," I said then added, "Incidentally there's just one thing."

"What's that?"

"You'll have to do the lying for me. I don't know enough of the lingo yet."

Mr. Kim leaned forward on his haunches and then looked back at me with a growing expression of horror. "Now if I were British, I'd say you had a bloody face!"

I put the best construction I could on his remark and dabbed at my head with a wad of disinfectant.

Mr. Hao steamed his spectacles above a bowl of tea, wiped the lenses clear on the wide sleeve of his gown and, having replaced them about his nose, proceeded to regard us benevolently across a red-lacquered table. He was a rotund, middle-aged son of Shansi, surrounded by an atmosphere that betokened both prosperity and importance.

Mr. Kim, with a dead-pan expression on his features, had duly intimated to Mr. Hao that we were adherents to the agricultural interests of the Fatherland. He had achieved this not without difficulty, for his Chinese conversation was an odd mixture of Mandarin and Cantonese, a combination of dialect which was entirely unaided by the addition of a strong American accent; nevertheless it appeared effective since no shadows of doubt darkened the beaming countenance of our seemingly unsuspicious host.

During the subsequent conversation I was able to comprehend the substance of much that was said by Mr. Hao, who spoke slowly in the same measured tones which were invariably employed by my native

teacher in Tientsin. I formed the impression of his being both scholarly and astute, a learned live-wire but above all a kindly and a courteous man, with such an obvious abundance of charm that I became increasingly conscious of a growing distaste for my presence before him as an impostor. But it was too late for withdrawal now; I could do no more than attribute my reaction to weak-mindedness and endeavour to overcome it by silent self-assurance that the objects of our mission were too vital for considerations of sentiment. But I still found difficulty in convincing myself that we were here to outwit the Germans and that Mr. Hao was no more than a means to an end.

Without the necessity of obvious questioning, the factor which lay behind the overwhelming success of our competitors in Shansi soon became abundantly clear. Their agent was a man of wide influence who cultivated the right people in the interests of his business. Unlimited quantities of the German product had been transported into the province under the umbrella of "military supplies," by means of the commandeered railway running south from Kalgan. In the recognized order of things, there was little doubt that Mr. Hao subscribed handsomely to the local war lord's coffers in return for the privileges of this monopoly; but, even were it an expense not recognized by the Germans, it was an investment which, with now only obscure prospects of British competition in the future, would reap for him ever-increasing dividends.

"If the earth declines to yield a harvest," ex-

plained our host, "then a million piculs of rice must be imported into the province, by the military, in order that the soldiers of Shansi will not starve. It is wiser, I think, to assure the harvest; and that is why supplies of your product become a military necessity."

This utterance, with all that emphasis of sincerity which the Chinese language commands, appeared so logical as to allay my suspicion that bribery had entered into the arrangement and, in my mind, Mr. Hao immediately assumed the stature of a statesman. He had now told us all that we wished to know, and it seemed obvious that, short of appointing the Military Governor of the province to act as our agent, we might as well under present conditions write Shansi off the map. I concluded that we had better proceed to peddle our wares elsewhere; but since Mr. Hao appeared amicably disposed towards us, the elementary courtesies demanded that our stay be prolonged, at least until our host had been allowed further expression of matters which he regarded as momentous.

"I am," he was saying, "no more than a humble native of a troubled province in the centre of a civilization that crumbles and decays through sheer antiquity. It is good," he went on, now regarding me steadily, "that the science and culture of the great German nation should contribute to the reconstruction of our worn-out way of life, and I am honoured only less in my unworthy association with your great industry than I am by the privilege of your presence in my humble surroundings."

Mr. Hao bowed elegantly in my direction and then took a sip from his bowl of tea, which he imbibed with an audible degree of relish. I glanced across at the faintly amused expression on Mr. Kim's face and, having finished my own tea, could accomplish no more than a slightly parched swallow. With a rasping noise, our host cleared his throat and went on:

"It is good that this victory in commerce should have been won over a country which some years ago cheated you out of victory in war. It is but a beginning: the wise ones say that shortly a man may rise from obscurity among your people and that through his inspiration your arms, too, will be all victorious and that within a decade you will conquer England."

There was a deep and deathly silence, during which it seemed that Mr. Hao was expecting me to confirm or deny the intuitions of his wise ones; but I felt that it was better to remain dumb than to risk betraying any sense of my discomfort. It was Mr. Kim who broke the rather tense atmosphere by saying, with an exaggerated air of cheerful indifference, "So the product is selling well?"

The agent turned to face my companion, who was nervously chewing on his remaining particle of gum, and replied in the briefest possible terms:

"No."

Mr. Kim stopped chewing and his jaw dropped open. "No?"

"The quality is poor," said Mr. Hao.

The incredulous Kim repeated the first syllable

of the Chinese expression for *poor,* but the act of framing it caught him unawares. The gum shot from his mouth across the table and lodged on the side of Mr. Hao's tea bowl.

Quite oblivious to this slight domestic tragedy, the agent went blandly on:

"I have acquired samples from competitive sources and though the selling price does not differ, my experiments show that the substance does. I think you must improve the quality of your product, for it is indeed far inferior to that of your enemies, the British."

I observed Mr. Kim anxiously regarding the now somewhat embellished pattern on the tea bowl across the table; but I knew his perplexed expression was more attributable to the fact that he was as well aware as I that the analysis and quality of the German product never varied and was, moreover, identical with that of the British make.

"Nevertheless," continued Mr. Hao, who now rose and drew open the drawer of a chest behind his chair, "since there are no stocks of the higher-grade commodity in the Province, I have managed to dispose of a paltry nine thousand piculs; and, again, since the disturbed conditions prevent me from relying on the postal service, I trust you will excuse me for asking you to accept personally my draft for sixty-eight thousand dollars in settlement."

Never before, nor I am glad to say since, have I been called upon to accomplish such a feat of fast thinking. As I struggled to explain that travelling with such a sum on my person would invite the un-

welcome attention of bandits, I was interrupted by an alarming sound which emanated from the region of Mr. Kim's epiglottis. In the maelstrom of these unexpected developments, he had swallowed his loose filling.

"Very well," concluded Mr. Hao, as with extravagant courtesy he bowed us back to our waiting cart, "I will bring the remittance with me when I next travel to your honourable Treaty Port. Local affairs, I fear, will keep me here these next three moons but after that I will allow myself the humble privilege of acknowledging the distinction of your call upon me today." He bowed twice. "So—until the seventh moon—safe journeys to you both."

My companion and I were some distance on the long trek home before we found that words once more came easily to us.

Some two weeks later I sat within the solid security of the British Concession in Tientsin and, for the edification of my directors in Shanghai, proceeded to compile my report. When it came to touch upon the unhappy state of our affairs in Shansi province, any qualms of conscience concerning Mr. Hao had entirely forsaken me and I dwelt extravagantly upon the artful subterfuge which I had successfully adopted, in the company's interests, at Yangchu. The task completed, I relaxed even more deeply into a blissful state of self-satisfaction, visualizing at delicious intervals the nods of approval which the report could hardly fail to evoke round the board

room table. I was impatient only for adequate recognition of services so resourcefully rendered.

I had not long to wait: an epistle arrived for me by return mail.

Since the close of our contemporary days in the Far East, I am still frequently fortunate enough to run across the one-time director of our China company who dictated that letter before signing it with a discernible degree of emphasis about his familiar flourish. In mellowed maturity he politely professes to have forgotten the incident, and I take delight in reminding him of certain expressions which he rightly considered appropriate to the occasion. Indeed, those expressions (like the remarks contained in one of my earlier school reports on chemistry—"might do better if he desisted from playing with every tap, bottle and drawer within reach") remain indelibly implanted on my mind, despite the tumultuous years that have intervened:

> I must now refer to that lengthy section of your report wherein it is stated that you unhappily chose to represent yourself as belonging to the German organization, in order to elicit certain information from a native agent. Any value which might be attached to your discussions in Yangchu must be discounted entirely through the harm which will inevitably result from such an ill-considered action. What will be Mr. Hao's opinion of you and what will be his impression of the company which *does* employ you, when he learns of your true identity? I must point out most emphatically that this is not the manner in which our

> company would wish to go about its business. British commerce in China has been built up on unerring principles of absolute honesty of approach and undertaking . . .

and so it went on, *ad lib;* there were pages of it!

Subconsciously at the time, I suppose, but more realistically later on, I appreciated the full worth of the man who wrote me that letter; he was grand and he was genuine, and, moreover, every word of it was absolutely right. I read it through but once; then hurriedly stuffing it into my pocket, I took a ricksha round to the Club where, aided by the ministrations of the bar boy, I proceeded to peruse it many times more. Then I relapsed into an easy chair and started to consider the implications of the whole thing.

Some few hours later I emerged—a man of action—upon the world again; and if there was a slight unsteadiness about my gait, this was amply countered by the firmness of my resolve. First I sought out my native teacher and emphatically declined to be parted from him until he had succeeded in imprinting, for all time, upon my memory the means of expressing in Chinese—"Good Morning. I am not German, I am your British competitor. I offer my most humble apologies for having deceived you. May your offspring remain forever fertile. I must now return. Goodbye." Next, I lost little time in completing arrangements for an absence of at least a month; and that same afternoon I was on my way. I was going back to see Mr. Hao again, in faraway Yangchu; and this time I must needs make the journey alone.

The hunchback who owned the inn at Showyang-hsien kept no calendar to relieve the monotonous mud walls of the sanctuary which I had shared with a variety of resident vermin and where I had continually held court to a colony of neighbouring rats. But, as I took my departure, I calculated that we must be approaching the sixth moon, that I had lain here for over a week and, if not yet free from fever, I should at least by now be safe from the attentions of the armed and grizzly horde who had so long persisted in their endeavours to track me down.

Except during the period when I had been spasmodically delirious, unsought circumstances had granted me ample opportunity for reflection: dysentery, aided by a touch of the sun, had proved a depressing malady, no doubt adding weight to my self-recriminations. I realized that my plight was primarily due to the fact that, over a month ago, I had risen from an easy chair in the Tientsin Club on no more than a starry-eyed impulse. Thereafter the flood-swept city of Hokienfu, with its promise of more perilous paths ahead, should have sufficed to soften the hard core of my stupidity. But I had continued to play the persistent fool who deliberately blinds himself to risks for which, should calamity come about, his unsuspecting and innocent employers would be called upon to accept a large measure of responsibility. It would have served me right, for instance, if in the quite likely event of my capture by bandits, my directors had flatly declined to bail me out; but, of course, they would have felt reluctantly obliged to pay the price of my ransom,

a sum many times higher than all my potential worth. Yet despite such inescapable considerations, I had persisted along indiscernible, mud-submerged tracks, more stubborn, more deserving by far of its cruel fate than my companionable mule which slithered whimpering to eternity in a six-foot depth of mire. Its last despairing look of helplessness was to haunt and sicken me on later, more solitary days, during which I perforce must proceed on foot.

Even in retrospect I prefer to gloss over the difficulties into which my sheer pig-headedness led me. Lack of food, stagnant water, sweeping rains followed by damp humidity and a scorching sun, inadequate ability to seek and understand guidance, with the inevitable result that one wandered a hundred miles off course: these were a few of the hazards to be met in the tracks of that treacherous mud. They put me on familiar terms with gnawing hunger and heartbreaking, unsheltered loneliness; they gave me a knowledge of how it feels to be stricken with sickness when one is alone and utterly lost, far beyond the limits of habitation. There seemed such little advantage in it all at the time, though in later days one appreciates the wealth of philosophy that is born of precarious plight. If my discomforts were no lasting cure for dogmatism, at least they left me with these legacies: a tolerance of conditions which seemed exacting; the certainty that ever to despair is to dally with disaster; and, most comforting of all, the knowledge that a sense of fear becomes strangely allayed in the realization that relief lies beyond the power of personal action. Indeed, in such circum-

stances, one becomes most conscious of human frailty and its utter dependence upon sublime and simple Faith; such, indeed, as that which brought me through the merciless miles of mud, to meet again with Mr. Hao.

Mr. Hao sat bolt upright at his red-lacquered table as though he were a figure hewn from stone. If his features betrayed any sign of emotion as he took stock of the unkempt creature that stood before him, then it was no more than one of mild surprise.

My mission was of brief and specific purpose and, having greeted him in Chinese, I proceeded to the simple task which I had journeyed desperately over great distances to fulfil.

"Wo pu shur Ter-kuo jen: wo shur Ying-kuo . . ." I began and thus continued until, my apologia concluded with a slight bow, I half-turned to take my leave and embark immediately upon the uncertainties of the long trek home.

But, as I was turning from him, I observed that an unexpected change had overcome the mien of Mr. Hao: whereas he had listened in polite and solemn silence to my address, a measure of animation now swept across his features and he stretched forward an arm to indicate the dragon-gilded chair which was placed opposite him across the table. It was as though some graven image had come to life, maturing as an unemotional enigma who for no more than an unmasked moment was, none the less, unmistakably moved.

"I thank you." He paused perceptibly. "Now—please, sit down."

Instinctively I obeyed, since physically, and to a certain degree mentally, I was utterly exhausted. Then my sluggish mind stirred me abruptly to my feet again and I looked keenly across at the man who had spoken. He now wore a tolerant smile such as might become some ancient sage from whom no secrets of the heart and mind are hid.

"You would appear," he went on, "to be a little surprised."

"I didn't . . ." I stammered. "I never thought . . . that . . . I didn't realize that you spoke English."

As I sat down again Mr. Hao inclined his head slightly forward and regarded me rather gravely over the horn rims of his spectacles.

"It is not easy," he remarked, "for one who speaks only Chinese to obtain a degree in one of your English universities."

"No . . ." I observed, in a poor attempt to conceal my bewilderment. "No—I suppose not. But last time, when . . . when . . ."

"When you were a German?" suggested Mr. Hao blandly. "Perhaps then it would have appeared discourteous to address you in English."

I was given time to consider the implications and aptness of this remark whilst two bowls of piping hot tea were placed on the table before us. Simultaneously we removed the saucerlike tops and bent our heads to the steaming fragrance.

"Mr. Hao," I began presently, "you may not have

understood . . . I have come to offer my most humble apology. I . . ."

With a deft twist which shook it free from the deep folds of his sleeve, my host raised an elegant hand.

"Your Chinese was excellent," he interjected, "but it was unnecessary, for I am quite unworthy of your remarks."

Then, as though to lend a greater degree of emphasis to his words, he leaned towards me across the table and went on, "But as an honourable gesture I shall always treasure it as the greatest courtesy which I have ever received from a foreigner."

That was sufficient for me. Now, for the first time in five doubtful weeks, a warm glow of gratification enveloped my whole being, leaving me singularly refreshed in the assurance that, after all, I had not plodded on, through torturous days, to no avail.

"When I received word that you were coming," continued Mr. Hao, "I dispatched a request to the Garrison Commander at Pintingchow to furnish you with a bodyguard, so as to insure your safe passage from the provincial borders to Yangchu."

As he paused to take a further sip from the bowl before him, I leaned back in my dragon-gilded chair, utterly dumbfounded by the fact that any knowledge of my journey should have reached him. But I knew that to give tongue to my curiosity would be discourteous and probably prove no more than a vain attempt to probe the unaccountable art of Chinese Intelligence, which foreigners will forever fail

to comprehend. Presently he proceeded serenely on.

"It was known that you had crossed into Shansi east of Chengtingfu and were seen to be approaching Showyanghsien. But after that, all trace of your movements was lost: the garrison escort had searched some days before presuming, to my dismay, that you had perished along the road."

Maybe I might have been forgiven an audible sigh as my hands moved along the arm rests to clutch at imperial claws and I sank back into bitter, unavoidably ironic reflection. I found no heart to inform such a solicitous friend of the extent to which I had employed my meagre resources to achieve sanctuary from the armed rabble I had steadfastly believed to be a fearsome horde of marauding bandits. In retrospect, how frequently have I smiled grimly at the thought of the heavily bribed hunchback at Showyanghsien turning them twice away from within feet of where I lay.

"I must express apology," Mr. Hao droned on, "for my discourtesy in not meeting you personally at the borders of the Province in order to allay the natural suspicions which no doubt caused you to take refuge from my ill-considered attempts at succour. But it was essential that I visit Kalgan . . ."

"Mr. Hao." I felt that at all costs I must interrupt him by some expression of appreciation. "It was kind of you: I never thought . . . You see . . . I . . ."

Then I realized how hopeless and inadequate any attempts at explanation would appear and I felt

gratified when, after a polite pause, he took up the threads again.

". . . it was essential that I visit Kalgan before I could proceed in my negotiations with *you.*"

"With *me!*"

As the tea bowls were being replenished I tried to think of any matter which he could possibly wish to negotiate with interests against which he had so successfully competed. Then, after loudly clearing his throat, Mr. Hao proceeded by degrees to enlighten me.

"On the occasion of your earlier visit, I addressed you and Mr. Kim in terms which I thought to be in keeping with the identity which you chose to adopt —for which courtesy I hope that you will now grant me pardon."

He paused, while we gracefully bowed in each other's direction, and then went on:

"But when I spoke about the poor quality of the German product, I trusted that you would take notice of the fact—if indeed you were not already aware of it."

"Aware of it!" I protested. "I am only aware of this—that the quality of the German product is identical with that of our own. We have an agreement concerning quality, as well as price, to which both sides faithfully adhere."

Mr. Hao regarded me gravely, as he had done earlier, over the tops of his lenses.

"You still do not know, then, that the German cargo has been deliberately and persistently adulterated?"

"Adulterated!" I exclaimed. "Who has been adulterating it?"

Mr. Hao did not answer; inscrutably, he continued to regard me over the rims of his spectacles.

It suddenly dawned on me that, for some reason, Mr. Hao had been under the impression that, even if we had no direct hand in it, my company must be aware that some nefarious influence had been at work to discredit the quality of the German product in Shansi. I was naturally eager to learn more.

"Where has this happened?" I persisted.

"At Kalgan," replied Mr. Hao. "My stocks come by way of Kalgan, where they are delayed until such time as I can arrange with the military to take delivery by rail at Tatungfu in the north of the Province. You see," he went on, "it is well arranged: adulteration has taken place after the goods have passed beyond German supervision but before I become accountable for them. It means, of course," he concluded, "that the Germans must accept responsibility."

"And what . . . what have you done about it?" I inquired.

"I have withdrawn all the remaining stocks throughout the Province," replied Mr. Hao, "and since the farmers have now lost confidence in your competitors' product, I have undertaken to replace each bag next spring with the British commodity."

I found it difficult to contain my excitement. "Mr. Hao, you must be aware that nothing," I repeated the word to lend it emphasis, "*nothing* could please me, or my company, better: it is unfortunate

only that no German agent is considered eligible to deal in the British product."

"It is unfortunate only, perhaps, for the Germans," replied the agent, "in that they must take the responsibility if the cargo of which I take delivery at Tatungfu is largely composed of sand and chalk. My monetary losses are of little account: consideration, though, of my face is paramount. I have accordingly notified the German principals that I am no longer able to act as their agent."

Ah! This was better, I thought. There only remained the consideration of our own agent in Yangchu whom I had not yet visited. Perhaps it would be possible to bring him and Mr. Hao together in partnership; that might be one solution at least.

"The question of our already established agent in the Provincial capital worries me," I said. "While he is by no means a man of your merit and distinction, I know of no wrong he has done such as might call for cancellation of his agreement with us."

"No," said Mr. Hao, sombrely, after a long pause.

Then he rose a little abruptly, signifying that our discussion was at an end, and in brighter tones begged that I be his guest, that I eat at his table and rest for two days in his house before he personally escorted me back to Tientsin, under military influences, by rail.

"The journey," he concluded, "should take no more than thirty-six hours."

"Hell's a poppin'," remarked Mr. Kim.

"Is it indeed!" I observed. "What have I done wrong now?"

"You go twice to Yangchu," replied Mr. Kim, "and never check up on our own agent."

"Well . . ." I glanced across my desk at the imperturbable figure of Mr. Hao gazing impassively out of the window at an assortment of native craft steadily plying the Pei-ho. I turned back to Mr. Kim.

"I did call. He was away. They told me he was in . . ." I stopped abruptly. Then, "What is the trouble, exactly?"

"The Huns are mad as hell," said Mr. Kim. "They've called on our directors about the adulteration of their stocks in Kalgan."

"But . . . but has that anything to do with our agent in Yangchu?"

Mr. Kim's reply was abrupt and to the point. "Seems like—everything."

"Everything!" It confirmed a suspicion that had only just dawned on me in the recollection that, when I had called upon him, they had said that our agent was still absent "on business" north of the Shansi border. And as the full significance of so much seeped in upon me, I glanced across once more at the inscrutable Mr. Hao.

With half-closed eyes he appeared to be following intently the smooth passage of a white sail which was moving majestically alongside the approaches to our godown.

"I was considering," he said presently, with a full

degree of deliberation, "that in the coming spring we should employ the clear canvases of many inland water craft to advertize, with due elegance, the supreme excellence of our mutual commodity."

Chapter 2

MAI YEO FA'TZE

Mai yeo ku'tze, mai yeo wa'tze,
Mai yeo chi'en—mai yeo fa'tze.
No trousers, no socks,
No money—no matter.
(Mandarin jingle)

———

I RECALL a question which was put to me by a young lady across a luncheon table in Mayfair, shortly after my return from China. In precise terms, it went like this:

"But *do* tell me: how on earth did you cope with those *frightfully* fantastic hieroglyphics which they scrawl backwards—or something? Without *actually* qualifying for certification, I mean—or *did* you?"

The way she put it took a bit of sorting out, but I considered it sufficient to reply briefly that I disdained to "cope," which was presumably why I was still permitted to roam at large! The same query, however, though perhaps couched in less enigmatic terms, has persisted down the years, which suggests that certain light reflections on the foreigner's ap-

proach to the calligraphy and conversation of the Manchus may possibly be of interest.

In actual fact, unless one was Diplomatic, Consular, Maritime Customs, or cursed with an insatiable thirst for unusual knowledge, one was wise to avoid assiduously any serious exploration into the limitless field of Chinese characters. That is, of course, apart from the more familiar ones which it paid to recognize on the face of Mah Jongg tiles and those which appeal to the cynically minded as particularly apt: such, for instance, as the one—beloved of Ben Travers—which depicts two women under one roof and means, quite simply, discord. No one knows exactly how many thousands of years ago it was that the ancient artists of China first started transcribing their thoughts into pictures, but who shall deny that their wisdom must be of like antiquity!

Neither, I believe, is it known exactly how many thousands of these intricate and carefully chosen signs exist, since I have always understood that not one among the great Celestial Scholars has ever acquired a knowledge of them all. The educated native man-of-business rubs along quite nicely on well under a thousand, whilst, I have been told, most official documents can be decoded with a recognition of no more than five hundred. During ten years in China *I* eventually succeeded in recognizing, all told, about twenty of them and with a masterly flourish of the brush could create a fair representation of less than a dozen: three of these comprised my name, three more the brief style of the company which

employed me (these six being invaluable for the purpose of obtaining native credit) and then my calligraphy tailed off into portraying the numerals one to three, which a sidelong glance would detect as being no more than their Roman counterparts assuming a horizontal attitude. A pretty poor performance on the whole, maybe, but richly compensated for by what I, at least, believe to be a continuing state of sanity: a condition possibly different from that of certain stark-eyed student interpreters whom I used to observe mouthing Manchu monosyllables and sketching strange signs in the air about the Legation quarter in Peking.

Unless, therefore, the necessity is paramount or the urge beyond control, to the Westerner who retains respect for the balance of his mind, yet aspires to read and write in Chinese, my advice is quite simple: let him be content to read this—it's far easier—and write the other ambition off!

But I would add that to understand, and particularly to talk, the spoken idiom of Mandarin is a glorious experience and well worth the minor effort its acquisition entails. It is fascinating study and a vastly different bowl of tea to any straw-in-the-hair excursions into hieroglyphics. It is a language which is lyrical and full of music; it is rich in charm and subtlety of expression; and being entirely devoid of grammar, its assimilation avoids recapturing, for many, what must have often been the despairing atmosphere of the Fourth Form room in an era of earlier struggle.

But of course there are pitfalls. The inevitable

one is immediate failure to appreciate the fact that there are four distinct tones employed in the enunciation of each syllable and that an incorrect intonation can introduce an unexpected and somewhat startling element into the most prosaic conversation. The sound *p'ing,* for instance, according to character and the intonation it is afforded, can give expression to matters so widely diverse as a block of ice, a military gentleman, or the distressing circumstances of *mal de mer.* Again, the word *mai* uttered in one tone can be interpreted as *to buy* and in another, only a shade different, it means *to sell;* whereby it may be seen that a knowledge of intonation cannot wholly be disregarded. But once over the fence, the going is dead easy, for one merely has to combine *to buy* and *to sell* in the word *mai-mai* and that means *business.* "Simple as poo-ding!" to use an expression once employed by my Chinese teacher.

From the earliest days of my arrival in North China, I was taught something of the four tones of Mandarin by a native professor of great antiquity whom I can best describe as a man of shapes. His figure was fashioned in the form of a question mark, his inch-long fingernails after the manner of talons, and his carpet-slippered feet stood permanently at a quarter to three. His voice reverberated like peals of thunder rolling across the Western Hills and he was known by succeeding generations of his pupils as "Roaring George." His knowledge of English never appeared to extend beyond such expressions as

"Wrong-tone," "Same-meaning," and "Again-pliss," supplemented by a few rather alarming phrases which I suspect were taught him in moments of levity by young Britons who had retained something of their school-boy exuberance.

His practice was to arrive at my house at eight o'clock in the morning, immediately proceeding upstairs to my bedroom where the lesson began. In due course he would follow me to the bathroom where he drooped over me, seemingly from a great height, as I performed my ablutions. He continued to bellow at me from all sides as I dressed and finished off by draping himself opposite me at breakfast, the conclusion of which coincided with that of the day's learning.

If, as more frequently was the case, I had been riding for an hour before "Roaring George's" stentorian tones greeted me from halfway upstairs, I was in a fairly receptive state of mind; if I had foregone my exercise I was only moderate; and if there had been a party lasting into the small hours, my four tones were apt to reflect the sluggish state of my liver. On one occasion—I think it must have coincided with a naval visit—I crept up to bed no more than a hundred minutes before the professor himself was due to mount the stairs, no doubt to regale me with his usual greeting of *Hao-pu-hao* (literally "good-no-good," meaning "Are you well or otherwise?"). But "Roaring George," bearing down upon me as I lay in oblivious slumber, had to choose that particular occasion to work off one of the phrases he had accepted from some poker-faced

young Englishman as a most solicitous inquiry into one's state of health.

"How . . ." he roared from directly above me, "how—is—your—Lordship's—belly—for—spots?"

Having delivered himself of this astounding utterance, "Roaring George" hovered about in the half-light like a genie emerging from the bottle, to float presently towards the window, where his talons clutched at the curtains. Even in my half-conscious state I sensed there was more of this nightmare to come, and come it did!

"Do I," he bawled, "now—uncork—the—daylight?"

"No!" I hurled back at him, "you do not! *K'weik k'wei t'so* (quick, quick, go) and chase your Aunt Fanny round the racecourse!"

I hardly thought he would succeed in memorizing that one, but it was sufficient to me for the moment that he was able to grasp its portent; he hurriedly disappeared out of my life until the next day when, I am glad to say, I was feeling more *hao* than *pu hao* and he, in turn, was content to confine his remarks once more to "Wrong-tone," "Same-meaning" and "Again-pliss."

Except for these expressions supplemented on rare occasions by the somewhat eccentric phrases which I have quoted (and a few others concerning which it would be better for me to maintain a discreet silence) "Roaring George" had no English vocabulary; neither did he favour the use of a dictionary. But he overcame what would otherwise have been an obvious handicap, particularly with raw recruits.

by truly remarkable displays of histrionic ability. He could cry like a child, crow like a rooster, contort himself into the shape of almost anything, and treat me to vivid impersonations of a steam engine at speed or a water buffalo bellowing to its mate. His act of illustrating what was meant by the Chinese word *to expire,* which he staged on the bed I had just vacated, with a wealth of diminishing groans and gurgles, followed by a long period of complete inertia, was so realistic that it was with considerable relief that I subsequently witnessed him arising from the dead.

Lovable though he was in many ways, I concluded that "Roaring George" was, for me at all events, rather more of an entertainer than an adept in pedagogy; but lacking the heart to replace him, I eventually decided that a prolonged tour of my district in the interior might do more for me than merely rectify a precarious financial condition.

With this thought I came to Paotingfu and simultaneously to the conclusion that, short of murder, it would be easier to run away from a devoted greyhound than to persuade the office interpreter to allow me to proceed on my travels without him. I had understood that we would part company at two earlier points on the journey; and on each occasion I had trekked confidently along on my own in a Peking cart fifty miles or so across the wastes to the next town or village, only to discover my companion patiently waiting for me in our agent's shop. I never found the courage to ask him how he had contrived to travel at such speed in a well-nigh trackless coun-

try, since I have always maintained a terror of the supernatural and would sooner stumble across an up-to-date dinosaur than be shown a carpet actually possessed of magic qualities. I could fathom it out no further than that. But at Paotingfu Providence served me better than it did my fast-moving interpreter. He fell into an open cesspool and broke his leg.

I stayed with him for a week and then, consigning him to the medical care of a Scottish missionary, I set out to make the widely scattered visits that lay ahead, accompanied only by a wall-eyed charioteer who was obviously less capable of expressing his sentiments than were the ill-bred brace of mules behind which we jogged and jostled together for days on end.

For the first week I must confess that I had some bitter regrets about my rashness, for I found that the going was truly tough; but it is remarkable how quickly one's senses can combine, *in extremis,* to frame an appropriate appeal for sustenance and shelter, and the right direction. After a fortnight I had doubled my Chinese vocabulary and, what was more, I felt instinctively that the timbre of my tones was improving as well. At the end of three weeks I discovered that I could sustain a conversation relating to business matters with my agents for a full minute with recourse to *Wo pu ming-pi* ("Me no savvy") every ten seconds.

So it was that I came to know, despite a wealth of differing local dialect, that the soft tones of Man-

darin will see the traveller successfully through all but the southernmost provinces, where they indulge in that comparatively tuneless tongue—so full of *kwoks* and *kwaks*—that is known as Cantonese.

But the two women under one roof, the peasant with a bundle of sticks, the small boy with the fishing line, the half-open gates, and the square pierced by a shaft of sun, which is the character of China itself: all these and the remaining multitude of mosaics in miniature are common throughout the length and breadth of a once-wide Empire ruled, down the dynasties, from the Dragon throne in Peking. Actually they extend further; for though through the centuries they have suffered a sea-change, the origin of the hieroglyphics adopted by the subjects of the Mikado, claiming direct descent from Divinity, can be clearly traced to Influences which sought no more than to be considered collectively Celestial.

In anticlimax, may I add that in a remote corner of the province now known as Hopei I once happened across a Bavarian who was trying to sell fire extinguishers solely on the basis of a practical demonstration backed up by a few phrases of pidgin English. With a proper degree of deference, I suggested to him that if, for reasons of his own, he was averse to the employment of a qualified interpreter, he might well limit his acts of petty arson, succeeded by expenditure of chemical squirt, by acquiring without undue difficulty a working knowledge of the tongue common to his wide market. In a sense,

I suppose, he answered for far too many miscellaneous commercial emigrants from every country in Europe and beyond, who regularly head towards the East and aspire to trade with the honest merchants of China.

"Ach!" he exclaimed. "Before to China coming, it is necessary only the English to learn."

Some years later, I relayed the portent of this exchange to a prominent official at the Ministry of Industry and Commerce in Nanking. It brought forth an impatient gesture accompanied by the expression *mai yeo fa'tze*. Literally it means "without fashion" and more often than not in the English idiom, it suggests "no matter," or "it is of little account." In other words, the official at the Ministry intended to convey that if such were the methods through which the foreigner sought to do business in China, he, personally, couldn't care less.

Then, again, an American, professing to have become bilingual within a fortnight, had his own interpretation of the same expression:

"What it means," he drawled, "is that it's kinda screwy."

So it will be seen, indeed, that all things are not necessarily alike to all men and, by the same token, I am well content to let this rest at—*Mai yeo fa'tze.*

Chapter 3

FACE

ALTHOUGH I spent comparatively brief periods travelling through the interior, it was on those occasions that I learnt almost as much as any Westerner can of the language and customs of the Chinese merchant. If this was so I claim no credit, for the most hopeless dullard could not have been the student and fellow traveller of Mr. Ho without becoming fascinated with his appreciation of the native outlook and the elegant approach of his philosophical mind to the intricacies of all occasions.

I seldom undertook any of my periodical trips into the interior of North China unless I could be accompanied by Jason Ho. He was never-failing as guide, philosopher and friend, and typical of so many millions of his fellow countrymen whose qualities are as rich in virtue as they are in complexity.

The correct English interpretation of his name was Ho Chai-sun; but Mr. Ho had, during some period of his remote youth, supplemented his still vague knowledge of the English language with readings from Greek mythology and had been much

impressed by the story of the Golden Fleece. It required only the slightest phonetic change to merge his supplementary name of Chai-sun into the style of Jason and so it was as Jason Ho that he signed himself.

In the summer of 1928 we travelled together two hundred miles up the Yalu River to Linkiang—a journey which to the best of my knowledge no Englishman had previously made.

The course of the Yalu forms the boundary between China and Korea. The river is about two miles wide where it flows into the Yellow Sea near the Chinese port of Antung, but in its middle and upper reaches it narrows down to never more than half a mile in width as it progresses precariously by gorges and rapids with the high mountains of Manchuria on the one side and the gentler slopes of Korea on the other.

Jason Ho and I were ferried across the river from Antung to Korea accompanied by a packing case full of tinned foods, a quantity of bedding which enfolded a change of clothes, a first-aid outfit, a camera, a portable typewriter, and—I never learnt where Jason Ho found it—a crate of bottled lager.

Immediately we set foot on their territory, in those days very much under Japanese domination, the authorities regarded us with the gravest suspicion and took possession of the camera. The customs officials obviously believed in doing their job thoroughly. They took most of my portable typewriter to pieces, displaying a childlike interest in its construction, and Mr. Ho's subsequent efforts to re-

assemble it occupied him at various intervals for six days. Their next outrage was to remove every cigarette from my case and rubberstamp each one of them individually with a large purple hieroglyphic. They confiscated the first-aid outfit but heeded little the provisions, the bedding and the beer. They were well aware that the exigencies of the voyage itself would separate us from these latter possessions, and indeed we never saw any trace of them again.

It seemed appropriate that the only English those Japanese officials appeared to know were the four words "Very sorry for you," which they repeated at frequent intervals. We had already begun to feel very sorry for ourselves, a state of mind which was in no way alleviated by the discovery of the craft that was to convey us to a remote part of Korea, whence we hoped to cross over to China again in search of Linkiang.

The boat was a somewhat elongated variety of sampan about thirty feet in length and maybe a third of that in width. It boasted a covered-wagon effect over what was destined to serve as passenger accommodation while in the stern sheet was a petrol engine designed to rotate a three-bladed aeroplane propeller. The accommodation might have been sufficient to house four persons, in cramped surroundings, but without undue discomfort, for a period not exceeding half an hour. It was therefore somewhat disconcerting to discover, with a week's journey ahead of us, that the "passenger list" included a mixture of some forty Chinese, Koreans,

and Japanese of both sexes and all ages. Eventually we were all battened down, with the canvas top reaching to a height of four feet above the ship's bottom, and it needed only the roar of the aeroplane propeller above us to complete my worst conception of purgatory.

On the sixth day we disembarked, with no feelings of regret, and sought out a ferry to take us across the river to Linkiang. But first of all there were preparations. Jason Ho insisted that I should assume the blue garb of a Chinese peasant. He intimated that by this means I should direct less attention to myself by appearing, as he put it, "less extraordinary."

In such manner we arrived in the Chinese town that was apparently hitherto unknown to the Westerner. There was nothing, however, to distinguish it from a score of native cities I had previously visited in the interior, and after several days we completed somewhat prolonged negotiations by appointing a certain Mr. Wang to be our agent.

It was altogether a rather tricky business, especially since Jason Ho felt it expedient to explain at great length to Mr. Wang that I was not the accredited representative of my company at all. I was introduced into the picture as a quite impecunious missionary from Antung who was acting as go-between in negotiating an arrangement of mutual benefit to both parties. My commission and only reward, in accordance with Chinese custom in such cases, would be five dollars from each side. Jason Ho in his usual flowery style told our prospective

agent this fabulous story in such a convincing manner that it seemed indeed Mr. Wang actually believed it. At any rate when the negotiations were complete and the *chops* applied to a document already prepared by Mr. Ho, I was handed my five dollars' commission with due ceremony. It subsequently took many months to credit the sum back to our agent through the accounts bit by bit in such a way that it might escape his attention.

We could have saved ourselves the trouble, for a year later Mr. Wang decided to discover the world that lay beyond a small stretch of the Yalu River and unexpectedly returned my call in the company's spacious premises in Dairen. There he caught the impecunious missionary from Antung sitting among the polished spittoons and other refinements of a district manager's office. Whether it was to save his own face or mine, or possibly both, he blandly acknowledged his receipt of the last instalment of the five dollars and added that, of course, our subterfuge had not for one moment deceived him. He was also generous in expressing his admiration for the cunning that had baffled Mr. Fu.

Mr. Fu, accompanied by two less prosperous-looking characters, had paid us a visit the night before we went down river again from Linkiang. He was a gentleman possessed of great courtesy but persistent curiosity. The discussion which we had together was carried on in an atmosphere of extreme politeness with a full measure of tea-drinking and age-old Chinese elegancies, but if Mr. Fu was suave he had nothing of the persuasion of Jason Ho. In

answer to certain rather urgent questions which were put to him concerning me, Jason at great length related that although I was indeed a missionary I had through some miscarriage of justice recently been unfrocked and disowned by my particular society. He declared with the utmost conviction that I was now a person quite devoid of background or associations and no longer of the slightest interest to my relatives or friends. In fact he contrived, with complete success, to present me as the world's biggest bum, and, dressed up as I was like a Chinese coolie with two weeks' uneven growth about my features, I was quite certain I must have looked it.

It was as well, for though his appearance and manner might suggest otherwise, we were left in no doubt whatsoever that in a country where there is refinement as well as honour among thieves, Mr. Fu was a bandit of more than local renown. Indeed, I have often reflected that only Jason Ho's ingenuity and powers of invention were responsible at that critical moment for saving me the indignity of having one of my ears placed on the board room table with a demand for a hundred thousand dollars before further portions of my anatomy were delivered for the contemplation of my directors.

Yes, as a mentor, Jason Ho was supreme, for one never tired of learning from him. As a business asset his worth was incalculable, though no spoken praise or material reward could ever persuade him to recognize the fact. He would not, for instance, accept the credit for one of his most impressive

achievements in collecting a debt of thirty-eight thousand dollars which one of our up-country agents —a certain Mr. Tsao—had owed my company for a very long time. Mr. Ho's generous loyalty almost convinced me that I had some share in the honours, but in actual fact I merely played to the best of my limited ability the minor role in which with inexhaustible patience he had previously rehearsed me.

The facts of the case are interesting for they serve as an example of the reactions of an honest Chinese, unimpressed by the manners of the West, to any approach that is not accompanied by the age-old courtesies which personal prestige or, more briefly, face demands. Two earlier visits by members of our English staff, unaccompanied by Mr. Ho, had completely failed to impress upon Mr. Tsao the urgency of a settlement. They reported a conviction that he was bankrupt. In the meantime business in the area of Hopeh Province under this agent's control was being sadly held up, and my object now was to make a last effort to collect the debt or, alternatively, take preliminary steps towards appointing a new representative. Thirty-eight thousand dollars, even in Chinese currency, was a lot of money in those days, but it was of less importance to us than maintaining and expanding British trade against threatening competition from other sources.

The long journey from Tientsin to Mr. Tsao's headquarters had, for the most part, been made by native cart, and during the four days and nights we had spent en route Mr. Ho had not only vastly improved my knowledge of his tongue by politely

ignoring any remarks which I passed to him in English, but had also contrived to create within me a state of mind more likely to be receptive to the atmosphere of the approaching exchanges.

Now the stage was set and the curtain had already risen on a dimly lit room which smelt strongly of kerosene and was overstocked with many crude and strangely assorted pieces of furniture. As I looked across the table, it was difficult to discern the blunt features of Mr. Tsao, but obviously he was giving polite ear to the rambling discourse of Mr. Ho. In the melodious, richly emphasized tones of the northern dialect, my companion held our host's attention by leading from one topic to another—all quite remote from the object of our visit, the real nature of which would be quite obvious to Mr. Tsao.

Occasionally one or other of us would take a sip from the bowl of tea before us. It was piping hot but seemed little more than water touched by some exotic flowerlike fragrance. At intervals the three bowls were replenished by a very small and earnest-faced young boy to whom it would appear that extravagant courtesies were no more than second nature. Mr. Ho, whose hands, like those of the agent, were firmly embedded within the sleeves of his gown, was now approaching the height of his eloquence, relying only on the intonation of his voice to impart colour where emphasis was demanded. Mr. Tsao's features became less impassive as he turned from the speaker to me and back again to indulge a childlike interest in a graphic description of the perils of Shanghai traffic on Nanking

Road. To a man of fifty or so who had never travelled beyond a ten-mile radius of his own compound, the sight of a motorcar would have been a complete novelty. It was doubtful if he had ever seen a bicycle. Long before Mr. Ho began to spellbind our host with further tales of modern invention, Mr. Tsao exclaimed, "Ai Ya! (Goodness me!) What will the foreign devils be up to next?" But if his terminology was ill-chosen, the remark was innocently and kindly meant.

Then, most unexpectedly, Mr. Tsao changed the whole nature of these pleasantries by introducing the subject of one of our chief products which had become an essential commodity to the local community.

"My stocks are exhausted. I shall require a further three thousand piculs before the rivers close," he observed nonchalantly. "What is the price, Mr. Ho Sien-seng?"

"But Tsao Sien-seng," protested Mr. Ho, "you are aware that it is our practice to send you this cargo on consignment terms. That means we do not expect you to pay for it until you, in turn, have sold it. Certainly it will be our duty and pleasure to dispatch you a further three thousand piculs and ask in immediate return no more than that you advance us the shipping charges as usual."

There was a prolonged silence, broken eventually by the slightly perplexed tones of Mr. Tsao.

"As usual?" he exclaimed. "Such a request I have never before heard. It would not be possible for me

to consider losing face to the extent of advancing shipping charges. What thing is this, Ho Sien-seng?"

Mr. Ho half-rose in his seat and bobbed his head at the pouting features of the agent.

"I humbly beg ten thousand pardons of you, Tsao Sien-seng, that we did not make you previously aware of this new regulation of our company. Let me explain that many hundred of li away, where our humble company has an agent far less illustrious than your honourable self, it happened that a considerable cargo was ordered and shipped at great cost when there was but little water within the riverbeds. After the waning of three moons, that considerable cargo returned at the expense of our quite unworthy company to the point from which its mighty journey had originally begun. Some devil, it seems, had entered the market of that obscure trader and devoured the buyers of our quite unworthy wares. Our humble taipans were extremely wroth and set forth the unhappy decree that all agents should henceforth be humiliated by advancing the charges for shipping. The lords of Fa Sien-seng and myself must feel themselves protected."

At the introduction of my name Mr. Tsao directed his now bewildered gaze towards me.

"Such a thing may be," he protested, "but you would not ask the humble yet honest Tsao . . ."

The rest of his sentence was lost as Mr. Ho quickly played his ace.

"Fa Sien-seng, no less than I and all our lords and taipans, knows but too well that you, the most honourable Tsao, should have been deemed the one and

everlasting exception to this degrading decree, but after much consultation we considered that were an exception made of our greatest and most worthy agent, he himself might come to take it amiss. Who knows but that such action might not be interpreted as a suggestion that it was a financial impossibility for him to meet this new obligation? Indeed it hurt us to contemplate the considerable face of which we might deprive the honourable Tsao were we to suggest excluding him from the arrangement."

Mr. Tsao considered this for a long time whilst on his normally expressionless features could just be distinguished the glow of face preserved.

"How much," he eventually asked with an air of resignation, "would the shipping charges be on three thousand piculs?"

Mr. Ho reached for an abacus from the table and with a few flourishes of the fingers made some rapid calculations. He then turned his imperturbable gaze to the smoking kerosene lamp and answered blandly, "Thirty-eight thousand, one hundred and twenty-three dollars and fifty cents."

"Ai Ya," exclaimed Mr. Tsao, in a somewhat stricken voice. "Ai Ya." Then his whole countenance lit up with a broad grin. The significance of it all had dawned on him and the humour of it pleased him, even though the joke was on himself. Then he assumed an air of mock seriousness.

"Thirty-eight thousand, one hundred and twenty-three dollars and *how* many cents?" he inquired.

"Fifty," replied Mr. Ho briskly, with a small bow.

Then the three of us joined together in uproarious laughter at the thought of such exactitude.

As the merriment died down, the entire subject was considered closed. Mr. Tsao entered into the most abject apologies for the rudeness of his humble surroundings and suggested that we might care to accompany him to an utterly unworthy restaurant in the neighbourhood where a few common dishes might be made available. There would be the added inducement of a sing-song girl to entertain us, though we should have to excuse him if we considered the whole meagre offering to be little more than fit for bandits.

Mr. Ho's reply to this display of extreme mediocrity was to bestow upon Mr. Tsao the titles of high degree, then relapse into ecstasies over the grandeur of his house and the obvious elegance of his ancestry. He rounded off this dissertation with a few remarks concerning the overgenerous hospitality Mr. Tsao was extending to two unworthy strangers whose presence could but lower their host's prestige in the district and cost him considerable face among his less exalted neighbours. This battle of wits to see how wide the social scale could be stretched between two students of the courtesies continued until we reached the restaurant. By that time Mr. Tsao had degraded himself to the rank of ignorant peasant presuming to walk in the company of a potentate. But a few minutes later Mr. Ho had assumed the role of disreputable beggar demurring to seat himself at the same table as a chief official and merchant prince combined. I felt this was another round in

favour of my companion and only hoped that when my turn came, as it inevitably would, I should do him justice.

The meal provided by Mr. Tsao was a veritable banquet—plates of sliced pork, delectable soup, eggs that were black from long burial, sweet puddings, beef balls, chopped liver, and much more besides with intermittent appearances of steaming towels to wipe the brow and hands. Throughout all this Mr. Tsao officiated with innumerable kettles of hot *samshu,* which served to warm one to a better appreciation of the proceedings.

By the time the bowls of rice arrived to indicate the termination of this orgy of eating, the discomfort of my stomach was hardly less than that of the fingers of my right hand, which were numb and cramped through two hours' continual association with chopsticks. These minor aches, however, were nothing compared with the periodic torment of the finer senses occasioned by the entertainment of the local *artistes.* In a corner of the room sat a very old and somewhat nonchalant musician who spasmodically drew forth from a two-stringed fiddle a series of nerve-shattering discords. From time to time his efforts were supplemented by the performance of two flashily dressed and rather frightened-looking little girls who warbled high-pitched and, to me, quite tuneless ditties. The lyrics in each case, appropriately enough, concerned themselves with sad tales of those who had languished long before finally expiring in excruciating agony. Perhaps Mr. Ho really did like it, but I fancy not quite to the extent

he praised the whole exhibition to Mr. Tsao for the benefit of all concerned.

Then we were joined by two of our agent's acquaintances, who were introduced to my companion and me with a great display of ceremony. After much bowing and shaking of one's own hands towards all and sundry and the formalities of exchanging cards, the new arrivals divested themselves of a quantity of clothing and settled down very much at their ease. One of them, Mr. Kwo, suggested that the party might shortly repair to his unworthy home and smoke a pipe or two of his inferior opium. But the other, Mr. Ouyang, was of the opinion that it would be better to call for the Mah Jongg tiles and play a game for mild stakes in the restaurant. This was eventually agreed upon, and after a considerable exhibition of politeness and much demur all round they eventually accepted from me what I hope was a courteous refusal to participate in the required four.

I sat and watched them awhile, and although hardly a word was exchanged it was obvious that a considerable amount of money was passing from the direction of Mr. Tsao. I realized with dismay what was obviously becoming of my company's dues but not without sorrow, for I found in this recalcitrant agent much that was easily lovable. Gradually I became less and less conscious of the rapid, monotonous click of the tiles and the impassive features of the four contestants, as utter weariness from long travel and much eating could no longer be denied.

It was after midnight when Mr. Ho woke me to

say that the game was at an end and then to add quietly, for obvious reasons in English, that Mr. Tsao had lost nearly two thousand dollars.

My immediate reaction was to exclaim, "Ai Ya!" As I gathered consciousness again, I saw that our visitors were preparing to depart and that our agent was in the act of producing from his person a further quantity of notes with which to settle the bill for dinner. He appeared in not the slightest degree perturbed by his reverses and on the way home chatted gaily to Mr. Ho about the possibilities of selling perhaps a further thousand piculs of the company's products over and above what he had previously estimated as his requirements for the next few months.

As the heavily barred doors to the agent's home were thrown open by a weary-eyed watchman, Mr. Tsao remarked indifferently, "The shipping charges are very high, of course." "But," replied the ever-ready Mr. Ho, "soon perhaps the long and eagerly awaited waters will flow through the riverbeds towards our undistinguished Treaty Port of Tientsin; and then . . ." He paused for a moment. "And then, Tsao Sien-seng, how much reduced those charges may be."

"Must the rivers be in full spate," inquired Mr. Tsao, "before the boats can bring my cargo up?"

"I think in full spate, Tsao Sien-seng."

We had settled ourselves once more in the dimly lit room with the smoking kerosene lamp above us when I was conscious that the agent was regarding

me closely and I knew that he was about to give me the cue to say my piece.

He addressed me in slow and distinct Mandarin. "Fa Sien-seng, you are an Englishman?"

"I am indeed an unworthy foreigner from England," I replied.

"But you speak the Chinese language very well indeed."

"You are generous and kind, Tsao Sien-seng, but it is true that I speak but a few words. I fear my ignorance is profound."

"Fa Sien-seng, you are not only a big man with strong arms, but I think you have a great and a good heart too."

I caught Mr. Ho's eye and he nodded approval. I gathered that in his view Mr. Tsao was not just flattering to deceive.

"We Chinese that are away from the Treaty Ports do not understand the language or the ways of the foreigner," continued the agent, "but we recognize those who appreciate the elegancies which it is our custom to observe. You are such a man, Fa Sien-seng, with a good heart, and it is deserving that you be given face. I will give you this face that may serve you well when you return to the great taipans who make such laws as their protection demands."

I did not fully comprehend the significance of this last address, for it was out of the context in which Mr. Ho had so patiently schooled me.

I hesitated for a moment and foundered. But Mr. Tsao continued on a different tack as though my confusion had quite escaped his attention.

"Fa Sien-seng, you are the third foreign man who has come to me from your distinguished Treaty Port this year. Those others, they understood neither the language nor the courtesies in which you excel. They spoke indifferently one sentence which was without the fundamental of refinement. It may be that your honourable lords who desire protection have suggested those same words to you. But I have not heard you utter them nor do I think that it will be so. Those others, they would not lodge in my humble house, nor partake of my poor offerings of common food. Neither would they accept one bowl of my poor-quality tea. They spoke only of money —though it is true that it is the money of your company. You are wiser than they, Fa Sien-seng, for you are not unmindful that face is the first courtesy and you have preserved an elegance that I would not lose even for the sake of immediately honouring a due obligation."

I thanked him in terms which employed the majority of the flowery expressions of courtesy which Mr. Ho had taught me, and I had succeeded in memorizing a great number of them. Not only did I feel that the occasion was appropriate, but I found myself giving tongue to them in all sincerity, though it is probable that much of my speech was lost on Mr. Tsao through my inability to lend proper distinction to the four varying tones of the northern dialect. The effort was obviously equally exhausting to the three of us, for it brought the curtain down on the proceedings for the night and we parted on terms of mutual and extraordinary admiration.

As I retired to bed I felt there was much that the Westerner might profitably learn from the people of a nation that was at the height of its civilization at the time of the Norman Conquest, and who, away from the influence of the foreigners, had changed but little in a thousand years. I wondered, too, if in a country where the factor of time is of such little account, our mission to Mr. Tsao was to end in success. I earnestly hoped it might for, though he would repudiate them, Mr. Ho was deserving of laurels.

Shortly after dawn we took our farewells from the agent, and Mr. Ho and I were firmly ensconced in a native cart surrounded by our various belongings. Through an aperture in the blue covering of the vehicle, Mr. Tsao, in the manner of an afterthought, was addressing some last words to us.

"My servant," he said, "has included in your luggage some quite unworthy porcelains of an old dynasty. Their value, as you may see, is but a few tens of dollars each, but your acceptance of them as tokens of my personal esteem will be worth five sons more to me than a draft for thirty-eight thousand dollars and some cents to cover your shipping charges. Fa Sien-seng, I give you thanks for honouring my humble house; Ho Sien-seng, I thank you and to you both safe journeys. The meagre draft is together with the unworthy porcelains."

The springless cart lurched suddenly forward as a gust blew from off the Gobi. So the blunt features and the bowing figure of Mr. Tsao were soon lost to view in a cloud of dust.

Chapter 4

DISTRICT MANAGER —MANCHURIA

ALTHOUGH my ten years' sojourn in North China embraced no more than a twenty months' assignment in Manchuria, that period, during which my commercial activities were based on the then Japanese-controlled port of Dairen, remains in retrospect the most colourful of my career.

Rich in its diversity of race and custom, my district represented a broad field about which I roamed more or less at will. From time to time I furnished my taipans with a trade report which, while couched in optimistic terms, was generously studded with the noncommittal "If" and I trusted it, probably more than they did, to justify my journeyings. I was thus enabled, less officially, to become an interested observer of quickening political developments in an environment aptly described by my friend Owen Lattimore as "Cradle of Conflict."

These reflections deal so largely with personalities that, now I have mentioned him, I cannot refrain

from a word or two more about Owen Lattimore, whose name, at least, must be known to millions of American people. Although I saw much of him in North China before he began his wanderings and delightfully informative writings about Asia, Owen was a figure who had first fascinated me several years before that. It happens that we were contemporaries at one among the more ancient of English schools during the years of the first World War; and as a patriotic gesture we spent part of one summer holiday together with a view to assisting with the harvest. Actually, being an English summer, it rained the entire time and the farmer armed each of us with a scythe and set us to the task of mowing down thistles instead of corn. This soon became tedious and, finding ourselves close to the Scottish border, we took every opportunity of laying down our weapons and searching for traces of Hadrian's historical wall. I cannot recall our finding any evidence of Roman remains, but one picture is indelibly imprinted on my mind. It is the sturdy school-boy figure of Owen, clad in little more than a sopping wet cape, taking refuge from the downpour in a disused, vermin-infested barn which smelt like a charnel house.

"I am of the opinion," said the serious-minded sixteen-year-old Owen Lattimore, as he fumbled within the folds of his garment, "I am of the opinion that the occasion merits a cigarette."

But to return to Manchuria, my journal records, for example, a Friday evening in 1928 when, in company with a few fellow members of English, American, Danish and German nationality, I lent casual

ear to one Yosuke Matsuoka, propounding some surprisingly pro-British views over the bar of the Dairen Club. In those days he was an official of the South Manchuria Railway, and I doubt if any among his cosmopolitan acquaintances of that period mistook Japan's subsequent Foreign Minister for a person possessed of much deep sincerity. Within a few years the world was to become witness to his worth.

The following afternoon found me, some distance beyond the borders of the Kwantung Leased Territory, dissipating my slender assets on the race course at Newchwang. Apart from the contrast between Japanese- and Chinese-controlled territory, the significance of the occasion lies in little more than the fact that my company included a young English girl, who, while exercising her pony on the same course a few months later, was kidnapped and held to ransom by Chinese bandits.* The subsequent story of her courage and resource in captivity did much more than merely hold the international headlines and stir public imagination for several weeks: her imperturbable bearing in the face of constant ordeals and threats restored much of dwindling British prestige to the impressionable minds of the Chinese. But in my journal for the day she, like the then equally unknown Matsuoka, figures as no more than a name; and the contrast has lost nothing of its significance in the passing of two decades. The one name creeps away into ignominious oblivion through

* "Tinko" Pawley, daughter of the Resident British doctor in Newchwang.

a sinister chapter of dark history, whilst the other will always survive among the brighter legends of youthful courage.

Turning the page, I find two lines recorded for the Sunday, sufficient in themselves to flood the mind with a torrent of oddly assorted memories, many of them now diffuse and intangible, but a few as fresh and as clearly defined as the happenings of a month ago. It appears that overnight I had travelled many miles further north and spent the day on the Mukden Golf Course with The Young Marshal.

Chang Hsueh Liang was thus known, the better to distinguish him from his father, Chang T'so Lin, who in turn was referred to as The Old Marshal. Normally, Chinese war lords are not among the characters whom one would have either the inclination or the opportunity to cultivate, but there was much that was exceptional in the personality of my golfing companion. I liked him because, in contrast to my foreign friends who took my unexpected descents upon them with somewhat weary forebearance, he, busier and overburdened by far greater responsibilities, always made a show of being genuinely delighted to see me.

The Young Marshal was, I believe on his own merits, a great soldier and an able administrator, but some of his shots to the green were inclined to be rather more than mildly erratic. I always imagined his golf had about it much the same limits of prowess as those manifest in his father's excursions into the game of poker.

I have no first-hand evidence of what went on when The Old Marshal sat down at the table with half a dozen of his army commanders and the hands were dealt out, but I gleaned a fairly authoritative picture from one of his generals who was shrewd enough in the first place to teach him the game. And his is a name that figures in my journal for the same day: what a wealth of reminiscence is conjured up through mention of "One Arm" Sutton—quite the most colourful Englishman I ever met! In one respect he was comparable with the immortal Vicar of Bray, in that whatsoever war lord was in power, Frank Sutton was still a general in the Chinese Army. Seemingly he could raise regiments from the Gobi dust and train them to a strange state of perfection: he found equipment, procured arms, negotiated anything or everything, dictated his own terms and invariably became indispensable to whoever could afford his services. At the end of each poker session The Old Marshal, who was invariably the big loser, handed I.O.U.'s for fabulous sums to the generals sitting round him, who politely accepted them in lieu of their winnings. If they valued their jobs, or more than likely, their heads, none of them would ever have the temerity to present their bits of paper at a later date; that is, none of them except "One Arm" Sutton, whose tokens were immediately honoured, without question. Then, from time to time, this true soldier of fortune would purchase for half their face value the I.O.U.'s handed to the other generals, which at a strategic opportunity he would present as his own to The Old Marshal, in return

receiving full measure. In those years Frank Sutton certainly rode the high places of North China.

I reflect now how The Old Marshal was strategically liquidated in a railway "accident" of distinctly Japanese design and how some years later The Young Marshal, with what I am convinced were motives more patriotic than personal, kidnapped his generalissimo, Chiang Kai Shek, for which indiscretion he was subsequently shorn of his rank and offices and banished into ignominy. I believe he was such a man as might have changed the present unhappy history of China. As for "One Arm" Sutton —perhaps his end was most tragic of all. I am told that he died in 1942 during internment at the hands of the Japanese in Stanley Camp, Hong Kong. He had, in his time, made and lost more than one fortune; and few men, I should say, were endowed with such a powerful zest for living as was this gay and gallant personality. But my informant, who was with him at the time, tells me that for some months before the end, Frank Sutton was a disillusioned, heart-broken man, forsaken by even the remotest desire to continue his existence. *Sic transit gloria . . .*

I observe that on the fourth night I lent my no doubt willing patronage to "The Fantasia" in Harbin, where one danced with a Russian countess for fifty cents in Mexican currency or with the younger of the Grand Duchesses, who might well demand the inclusion of a bottle of bogus champagne into the bargain. Who shall say that those were not the days! But I shudder to think in *these* what has become of those Tsarist refugees from the Bolshevik

terror, whose tales of escape, invariably culminating in a swim across the Sungari River into China, were always stirring and, more than likely in some cases, genuine too.

So much for the broad canvas. Certainly in that cradle of conflict there was the spice of variety in a district manager's life. But inevitably most of it had to be spent attending to routine in the less colourful environment of Dairen. The office staff consisted of a dozen Chinese clerks, all thoroughly loyal and impeccably honest, and one Japanese interpreter whose principal function was to translate the complicated decrees of his fellow countrymen, who unimaginatively administered the Kwantung Leased Territory and whose insatiable, childlike curiosity about our business affairs was inclined to impair one's patience.

My arrival in Dairen coincided with the necessity of recruiting to the office strength a new Japanese employee, preferably one guaranteed not to emulate the performance of his two immediate predecessors who, each in turn, had absconded with considerably more than his lawful share of my company's assets.

Though I never came to love the Japanese either as administrators or *en masse* it would be untrue and unjust not to admit that I developed quite a warm affection for several whom I met in Dairen. Thus I was grateful to Mr. Kasheda on two counts: first because, from the moment of his arrival, his serio-comic approach to the appointment afforded me much quiet amusement; secondly, because it was a full three months after I handed over to my successor and left for England on leave that Mr.

Kasheda decided to display his own remarkable exhibition of rascally craftsmanship and so, alas, followed his predecessors into the more restricted atmosphere of prison life. Any lesser sin he might have been forgiven, for "Kashie" was a character if ever one lived. On applying in person for the job, he announced himself to me in these terms: "I am very many different kinds of office clerk, also interpretations and typewriter."

He scored a bull's-eye with his first assignment, which was to accompany me to the Japanese Administrative Offices and assist me in obtaining a licence to drive a motorcycle and sidecar. The practical test was easy until my examiner, sitting in the sidecar on a precipitous slope, ordered me through the medium of Mr. Kasheda, who was clinging to me like a limpet from the pillion, to reverse the combination uphill. We passed that over when my interpreter, explaining that the vehicle was not geared for such a manoeuvre, suggested that we all dismount and push. In the written test he apologized to the examining official for his failure to understand the technicalities involved in the paper, only to extract from his fellow countryman the confession that he, too, found himself in a similar quandary. This led to a great deal of head-scratching and loud intakes of breath from the two of them, whilst I bent helplessly over a series of questions composed in what was to me the quite uncommunicative calligraphy of Japan. The hopeless situation was relieved by a sudden stroke of brilliant inspiration on the part of Mr. Kasheda. "Why not," he suggested in effect, "procure the list

of answers? Then I can inform the student what the questions mean." The suggestion was adopted, and oddly enough it seemed that neither examiner nor interpreter appeared to sense any touch of irregularity about the manner in which the difficulties were so successfully overcome.

The incident may seem incredible, but everyone who has lived in close association with the Japanese, apart from those who have suffered under them in prison camps, knows that they are a nation handicapped by an entire lack of any sense of the ridiculous, which largely explains why they are a race so rich in unconscious humour.

Perhaps a classic example of this was the colonel of the Imperial Japanese Army who shared a part of my journey to Linkiang with Jason Ho. In that overcrowded sampan, the colonel sat at ease, as it were, and by spreading out his heavily spurred extremities as far as they would reach, insured for himself four times his normal share of accommodation. Obviously a selfish and conceited man, his eventual departure was in a manner most pleasing to his fellow travellers.

His command, consisting of a battalion of infantry, complete with band, were drawn up waiting for him on some otherwise obscure stretch of the Korean bank. The craft drew in as near as possible to the river's edge and a gangplank was thrown ashore. Directly the colonel's head appeared from under the "covered wagon" the battalion presented arms and the band struck up what I presumed to be the Japanese equivalent of the general salute. The

colonel took one step forward on to the gangplank, and then one of his spurs became attached to an idle boathook and he was immediately catapulted into three feet of intervening water. It was an inspiring spectacle from every point of view; for not a muscle moved among his rigid troops ashore, nor was there even the suggestion of a gurgle in the heavier brasses of the band that was doing him honour. After the splash had subsided the colonel was observed dripping with slime, up to the waist in water, fishing for his cap. When he had retrieved this and emptied from it a pint of Yalu River he solemnly replaced it on his head and proceeded to return the salute of his command. I was undecided whether the incident was indicative of iron discipline or just an example of the natural reactions of a humourless, unimaginative breed. I did not know. But I do know that the swashbuckling little fellow, probably smelling to high heaven, had scrambled up the river bank and the craft had pushed off into the stream again before Jason Ho and I and the others dared laugh.

I recall also an incident which occurred along the Yamagata Dori in Dairen in 1928. The then young Chichibu, brother of the Emperor, was due to drive along the wide thoroughfare, flanked by its modern buildings, at noon. An hour earlier the Japanese police had removed every resident along the route from the height of their normal precincts to the level of the street. Even the half-step high of the pavement was debarred from the public, since intricate calculation could not make it certain that its eminence might not afford the tallest among the

populace the outrageous opportunity of looking down upon a passing prince.

As he emerged from our office on that cold morning, Mr. Kasheda unexpectedly bumped into Mr. Tanaka, who had simultaneously stepped out on the pavement from next door. I was subsequently to learn that the two of them had not met since they were schoolmates in some faraway prefecture of Southern Japan. Simultaneous faint cries of mutual recognition were followed by almost inexhaustible intakes of breath as, oblivious to the world about them, each paid homage to the other by assuming the attitude of a right angle, whilst poised slightly above the level of the multitude. The courtesies, which demanded that the privilege of rising first be granted to him of greater accomplishment, naturally prolonged these pleasantries; polite inquiries on the subject of current status being, perforce, through their extravagant postures, addressed less audibly to one another than to the unaiding surface of the pavement. Mr. Kasheda was dressed in a foreign suit and, out of deference to visiting royalty, had left his overcoat at home. Mr. Tanaka was garbed with a greater degree of glamour: he wore wooden sandals and a flowered kimona, while about his neck was draped a seedy-looking fox with a startled expression, the whole topped by a bowler hat.

This ludicrous scene was temporarily cut short by the descent of two police batons upon a pair of inviting posteriors, accompanied by a peremptory command that further deliberations must be carried on at a lower level. They obeyed the injunction in

precise terms and after shuffling sideways from the pavement, still inclined in each other's direction, proceeded to settle the issue in the gutter.

If I have appeared to labour this incident, it is for the reason that at the moment of its happening, I seemed to sense one thing for certain. Thinking of the quick humour of the London Cockney and the slow drollness of the Midwesterner, I knew instinctively that when war came, though we might suffer long at their hands, while God was in His Heaven, such a race would never get us down.

Chapter 5

THE ATTACHÉ CASE

IN THE spring of 1929 I had been in China a full five years, having served my company first in Tientsin, subsequently in the humidity of the Yangtze valley, and for the past twenty months or so as district manager in the more invigorating climate of South Manchuria. I was due for relief and a spell of leave in England, and on the eve of departure was paying a last round of calls on certain of our up-country agents.

I sat in the lavishly appointed observation car at the rear of the northbound express which always pulled out of Dairen station punctually at 9.30 each morning and adhered to a precise timetable over the whole of its route. The Japanese ran the South Manchuria Railway Company with its wide ramifications, hotels, hospitals, schools and half the industries of the Kwantung Leased Territory, like clock-work. Everything was ordered exactly in accordance with the rules, and a grim air of determined efficiency brooded over each venture of this vast political organization. The world knows now,

as many of us then surmised would be the case, how the railroad, running like a wedge through nearly the whole length of Manchuria with its concessional mile of Japanese Territory on either side, was no mean factor in Nippon's later conquest of the three eastern provinces subsequently known as Manchukuo.

Sitting opposite me, rather upright in his easy chair and dressed in the elegant blue gown of a less swashbuckling citizen, was a Chinese war lord. From time to time, with the aid of a miniature comb, he marshalled into less straggling array the thin, drooping ends of a pair of conventional whiskers. With a fair sense of positioning, in a somewhat intricate territorial situation, his two thinly disguised bodyguards stood, seldom out of view, in the corridor adjoining our coach. Beside the war lord, in contrast but also without his accoutrements, lounged a young assistant military attaché from the American Legation in Peking, who had immediately made himself known to me.

The fourth occupant of the observation car, who completed our purely chance and oddly assorted party, was no less a personage than the President of the Railway himself, literally monarch of all he surveyed and in those significant years the biggest political factor outside Tokyo. The President reclined a little distance away, immersed in official documents, but the persistent efforts of the young American to draw him into the conversation could not be long denied. With a somewhat deliberate air His Excellency stuffed his papers into a briefcase and

then proceeded to treat us in faultless English to an account of his youth and education abroad. He quoted both the classics and the Scriptures and was obviously no mean historian. He provided us with a great deal of no doubt accurate information concerning the existing trend of trade and politics in nearly every country of consequence except, significantly enough, his own. To me, at least, he emerged on that occasion as a man of great charm and culture and, since I never saw or indeed heard of him again, I like to retain the impression I formed of him that morning twenty years ago.

Our efforts with the war lord were less productive. He indicated that he spoke no English and afforded us only monosyllabic replies to remarks which the attaché and I passed to him in Chinese. I was aware that he had received his military training in Japan and twenty-five years earlier had actively assisted in routing the Russians from the Kwantung Peninsula, but no words passed between him and the President. One presumed that relations between China and Japan in Manchuria were, even then, stretched beyond a point that would enable either of them to utilize the other's tongue without considerable loss of face. The China Incident was only a year or two away.

The attaché and I left the train at Mukden, but before doing so the American insisted on exchanging cards with the President and would have carried out the same courtesy with the war lord had not the lat-

ter indicated with polite regret that he had not one readily available on his person.

I spent the remainder of the day with our Chinese agent in Mukden who, speaking no English himself, was surprised and delighted that I should call upon him unaccompanied by an interpreter. It was a somewhat conceited experiment on my part, which I thought might improve my knowledge of Mandarin sufficiently to enable me to qualify for the company's bonus before I went on leave. The agent observed the elegancies sufficiently to show no signs of strain during the somewhat halting course of our deliberations and we parted on the most amicable terms of mutual admiration. But I had found the first leg of my experiment a little exhausting and I was therefore relieved to have the somewhat easier companionship of the American attaché at dinner.

He became intensely interested when I told him that it was my intention to take the South Manchuria route on to Szepingkai the following day to spend the night there with my agent and then proceed by the less distinguished Chinese railway to Taonan, a city that stood on the borders of Outer Mongolia and at the very edge of the Gobi Desert. The assistant military attaché was less concerned with Taonan than he was with the features of the railroad that was to lead me there. It was just a question of routine Intelligence, and I told him that if he cared to dine with me in Dairen in a week's time, I felt I should be doing no one any disservice and saving him a lot of trouble by telling him then the very simple facts he was seeking.

He was thoughtful. "Perhaps I should look it over myself."

"As you will," I replied. "But from what you tell me you've a lot of other ground to cover in a limited time and I can save you a couple of days at least. Of course it's up to you."

We left it at that until the end of dinner, when I was taking my leave of him since I was due to make an early start on the morrow.

"It's been a pleasure to meet you," he remarked politely. "Will you take care of that little job for me? It would save me some valuable time." He fumbled in his notecase. "Here—take my card, and if I'm not in Dairen a week from tonight, drop me a line before you leave."

I had the card in my hand as I went upstairs to my room, and as I put it down on my dressing table I was surprised to find that he had apparently handed me two by mistake. The first was inscribed in English and Chinese with his name and rank, quoting his address as the United States Legation (it had not then become an embassy) in Peking. The second was printed in English and Japanese and bore the august name and status of His Excellency the President, who had handed it to my American friend that morning. I carefully preserved them both, hoping that I would remember to hand back the latter to the attaché when next we met.

Some fifteen hours later I arrived at Szepingkai by the South Manchuria Railway, spent the late afternoon rapidly improving my Chinese conversa-

tion at our agent's expense and put up for the night at a Japanese inn. By 7.30 the next morning I was back at Szepingkai station, but on an isolated platform boarding a train far less luxurious than those on which I had travelled during the past two days. It started an hour late with a lurch that threw me across the narrow compartment and then came to such an abrupt halt that I was immediately rocketed back into my seat again. This performance was repeated with sickening regularity throughout the long, slow journey towards Taonan.

We stopped for seemingly interminable periods at an endless succession of wayside stations, with the sole object, apparently, of aiding the business of the local food vendors. We halted in between stations for no imaginable reason whatsoever. At one stopping-place we entrained what seemed to amount to a complete army corps. They crowded out every inch of the compartments and corridors, massed themselves about the coach tops and clung like limpets to the running boards and even the buffers. They travelled with us for not more than ten miles and then spilled out in a seething grey mass onto a wayside platform, slowly sorting out themselves, their rifles and somewhat sparse equipment. I learnt that they had accompanied us as escorts through a notoriously infested bandit area and subsequently calculated that there must have been at least fifty troops for the protection of each individual passenger. In the early afternoon we spent a particularly long interlude at rest on what I noted to be one of the very few stretches of double track. This was in

order to allow the daily southbound train to pass on its way, and as it went by I observed that it would have to take a chance with the bandits as the passengers were already overcrowding it, including the roofs, almost beyond belief. As we jerked and jolted forward again I thought it was remarkable that we were a mere handful of passengers compared with what appeared to be a general exodus from the direction in which we were moving. What was happening in Taonan, I wondered. Was it civil war or famine or drought? Any of these things could happen unexpectedly in the remoter parts of China without any forewarning to intending travellers. But the desire for sleep battled successfully with a curiosity which was more than mildly tinged with apprehension.

I awoke abruptly in the midst of a seething, shouting tumult of Chinese besieging the train on both sides. It was nightfall and I realized we must be drawing into Taonan station. But what of the clamouring multitude, I thought. This is the end of the journey. Then it slowly dawned on me that the train returned south next morning and several thousand inhabitants of Taonan were desperately anxious to travel with it. I made to step out into the maelstrom that covered every inch of both platforms, but there was sheer panic abroad and the great mass surged forward and hemmed me in from each side. I resumed a bare six inches of what had been my seat and thought that in time the crowd might settle and enable me to emerge and go about my lawful business. But there was a babbling, ex-

cited, half-frightened score of men and women, children of all ages and very old people, now jammed so tight around me that to move was an utter impossibility. Presently above the sounds of commotion I heard the unmistakable tones of an Englishman talking in Chinese from the platform. He managed to squeeze his head in through the window.

"Room for an expectant mother?" he urged in the straightforward manner of the native dialect. "Room for an expectant mother?"

"Thank Heavens for that," I said in English, much to his astonishment. "Here, let me out, just enough room for her here."

I had to employ Rugby tactics to force myself to the carriage door and onto the still crowded platform. But the way was kept clear for the young woman until she had gained my seat.

"That was a very noble gesture," said the Englishman, "but I think you'll be better off on the roof anyway, if we can . . ."

"But look here," I explained, "I've been trying to get *out* of the train. I'm *arriving* you see, not departing."

"Arriving!" He stopped and looked at me. "What for? Are you a doctor?"

"No, I'm not, I'm . . ."

"Then you're a fool to come here at all. You must be crazy. Go on, hop up there and squeeze yourself amongst that mass on the roof—there's just room. You'll be there all night and probably fall

off when the train starts tomorrow," he added cheerfully, "but it's safer than coming into the city."

"But what is it?" I asked. "Fire, or flood or . . ."

"Fire or flood! Good God, man, don't you *know?* It's *plague.* They're dying like flies until we can get it under control. Now clamber up quick while you've still a chance."

I flung myself off the platform onto a buffer and began to hoist my body upwards.

"But what about you?" I asked, as I noticed him threading his way back through the crowd.

"No, my job's in the city," he shouted back. "I'm a medical missionary."

Through that long chilly night and the longer journey back, I endured discomforts and alarms on the roof of that train which I can never recall without a shudder. I realized that we Westerners are far less inured to hardship and suffering than the great masses of Chinese, whose very existence hangs by such a slender thread. But I hung on, feeling inordinately humble in the thought that they, like me, were running away, while an unknown Englishman stayed behind with cheerful courage to stem the tide of pestilence and death.

In the early afternoon of the following day we slid past the stationary northbound train. From my precarious perch it was impossible to observe if it carried any passengers, but by that time I was beyond caring and only desired most earnestly to return as speedily as possible to the sanctuary and solid comforts of Dairen. But when the train eventually

pulled into Szepingkai I immediately realized that unless I could achieve something drastic, my escape from seething infection to personal security would still be considerably delayed. As I and over a thousand of my fellow passengers poured off every conceivable portion of the train, we were hemmed in by a strong cordon of Japanese police, all of whom wore protective masks over the lower part of their faces. We were then herded into a roped-in enclosure some distance away, where there were already a considerable number of the previous day's travellers still awaiting medical examination by the Japanese authorities before being permitted within the territorial precincts of the South Manchuria Railway. It was a natural and quite reasonable precaution, but in my frustrated state of mind I regarded the whole affair as an outrageous assault on such dignity as was left to me.

The prospect of spending a further night and probably several hours of the next day exposed to both the elements and possible infection from so many inhabitants of plague-infested Taonan closely packed around me, was more than I was prepared to face. I sought out a policeman who in turn passed me on to someone in higher authority. Eventually I was escorted into a wooden hut where two Japanese doctors were engaged in scrutinizing a long patient line of the previous day's passengers. I was regarded impassively but with certain signs of impatience. One of the doctors lowered his protective mask.

"You come," he asked, "from where?"

"I haven't *been* in the city of Taonan," I shouted impatiently. "I stayed in the train. I never went into Taonan."

"Ah, Taonan." He made that noise peculiar to the Japanese that is an audible drawing-in of a deep breath through clenched teeth. "You must wait—have medical examinations."

I was about to remonstrate further when a more cultured, but no kinder-looking, official approached me.

"I am Doctor Tsuda of the South Manchuria Railway," he said politely. "If you have come in the train from Taonan you must wait your turn for medical examinations. I am very sorry."

I was vexed and overwrought.

"I shall complain bitterly about this," I protested, "unless you make an exception of me or examine me immediately."

He regarded me closely for a moment. Then a sudden thought seemed to strike him. "You are an American?" he asked.

"I . . ." My tired mind was just able to focus on the possible significance of his question before committing myself either way, when he spoke again.

"You are assistant American military attaché? I have notifications about him. If you have your card, please."

I was past endeavouring to account for this amazing turn of events. How did he know about my friend? Who had notified him? Perhaps the attaché had heard what was going on in Taonan and had done some quiet work for me in the background,

knowing that the card which he had given me would extend diplomatic privileges which my own could not achieve. I satisfied my conscience by presuming that the young American was working on the basis of one good turn deserving another, and sorting his card out from that of the President, which he had erroneously given me at the same time, I passed it over without further comment to Dr. Tsuda. He glanced at it, inhaled loudly through his teeth, inclined his body gracefully from the waist and said, "Very sorry. Please."

He led me out of a door behind the examining doctors, called two policemen and gave them certain instructions. I was still mildly apprehensive until I fully realized that they were escorting me back to Szepingkai station and onto the platform from which the South Manchuria Railway express was due to leave for Dairen in a few minutes. They stood rigidly by while I boarded the train, and only after it started pulling effortlessly out did they incline themselves slightly forward, salute, then turn on their heels like a pair of automata.

I fingered the card in my pocket that bore the name of the President of this gigantic and coldly efficient organization, then examined it closely before tucking it safely away in my notecase. What a story I should have to relate to my attaché friend when I restored that card to him in Dairen within the next few days, and how grateful I felt to him for what I fondly imagined to be the subtle arrangements he had made on my behalf!

On the evening prior to the date of my departure from Dairen I gave a small dinner party at the Yamato Hotel. It was arranged in order to say farewell to my particular friends amongst the British and American community and introduce them to my successor and his wife. It was a friendly, cheerful gathering, about a dozen all told. That, added to the prospect of a lazy, carefree five weeks at sea in a new P & O liner, with England after a five years' absence at the end of the voyage, served to dispel from my mind the nightmare of my recent trip to Taonan. My one regret was that the young American military attaché had not shown up at the Dairen Club the previous evening in accordance with the arrangement we had made a week earlier in Mukden. I presumed that his travels must have delayed him, and it was my intention at all costs to make a point of dropping him a line before I went to bed, enclosing the brief report I had prepared for him on the subject of the Taonan railway and, of course, restoring to him the card of His Excellency the President.

Towards the end of dinner, my successor's wife, a bride recently arrived from home, drew my attention to the Japanese orchestra up in the balcony which was playing "Rose Marie" even less tunefully than usual, and inquired why it carried on its activities behind a protective barricade of wire netting. I related how, when I first came to Dairen, I had asked the hotel manager the same question, and, regarding me impassively, he had supplied me with

a straightforward answer. "Englishmens sometime make silly asses of violin."

"The Japs—which, incidentally, you mustn't call them," I explained to her, "are a severely practical breed of little men, essentially efficient, but possessed of about as much sense of humour as a coffin lid."

"You said it!"

I turned round quickly, for it was the unmistakable voice of the attaché, who was standing behind me.

"You said it!" he repeated, with a strange, half-quizzical look on his boyish face.

"This is an unexpected pleasure for all of us," I said, as I greeted him and suggested he should join the party. "You're only about twenty-seven hours late."

He opened his mouth to speak, but it appeared that he was quite lost for words, and I immediately started introducing him all round. He repeated each name in turn so as to implant them upon his memory and then proceeded, with a charm which matched his looks, to make himself thoroughly agreeable to everybody. I was aware that he cast occasional glances in my direction in the manner of a man who has a tale to unfold when opportunity offers, but in the meantime he would allow nothing to mar the spirit of the party. After a time he unexpectedly rose and proposed my health.

"To those who travel," he announced briefly, raising his glass and fixing me with a somewhat satirical look. My friends joined him with gay acclamation

and then I rose and, looking straight towards the attaché, I uttered the counter toast, "To those who don't."

His face wore a sardonic smile for several moments, then someone next to him claimed his attention. There was something in his expression that caused a sudden doubt to spring into my mind. With a certain apprehension I began to wonder. Later on I had a brief opportunity of a word with him across the table. I took out my notecase and, amongst a mass of sailing tickets, emigration passes, medical certificates and the like, started searching for the President's card.

"There's something here I have to give you. You remember at Mukden you . . ."

"If you're talking about what I asked you to do for me in Mukden," he broke in, "forget it."

"Well, it's not quite that . . ." I started, but he had turned to the lady who sat on his left, and I put my case back in my pocket and continued my discourse on the idiosyncrasies of the Oriental to the bride from England.

When the ladies left us, the oldest and most respected British resident of Dairen turned to the man I had met on my recent travels.

"Tell me," he asked, "just what does an assistant military attaché have to do?"

The American removed the cigar from his mouth. "If that assistant military attaché is me," he said, "he has to do some damfool things."

We waited expectantly while he took another draw at his cigar.

"I met an English guy once—a generous kind of fellow," he recounted, avoiding my eye, "who offered to do a little job for me looking over a railroad in the north. Maybe he did it, and maybe he had more sense than to go, if he knew any better than I just what was cooking up there. I was still in the dark when I figured later on that I'd better go up and give that railroad the once-over myself. Boy, did I find plenty of trouble there. Thirty-six hours I spent at that railroad terminus and then came back on the coaltender of a locomotive. I'm not telling you why—maybe it might scare you. That was trouble enough, but when I got back among the Japs there was plenty more."

My throat felt suddenly parched and I finished my glass of whisky in a single gulp.

"You see," went on the attaché, "there was a reason why they had to hold on to everyone who'd travelled that route, for a while anyway, and I figured there would be close on five thousand of us milling about in a short time—four thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine Chinese, lousy, if not worse, and me, just a stranger."

"But," broke in the oldest British resident, "as a member of the Legation surely you would only have to identify yourself—your card or something?"

"That's what I thought," the attaché replied. "So I gave them a card, and I yelled, Let me out of here quick!"

"Then what happened?" asked my successor.

"What happened! Well, I'll tell you what happened. It was dark and they took it away and went

into a huddle over it under a lamp. Then they came back and said, 'You try make one big fool of Japanese policemens,' and for that they kept me corralled with that mob of soiled Celestials for two days and a night."

"But didn't you make a protest?" someone asked. "It's outrageous."

"That's what I thought, especially since the American Consul discovered what was cooking after I'd left and officially requested that when I got back I should certainly not be detained."

"You told the Consul about it, of course?" said the oldest British resident.

"No, *sir,*" replied the attaché.

"No?"

The American chuckled to himself for a few moments, then, "That's the pay-off," he said. "Just too late I realized they were sore at me for trying to pass myself off as—who do you think?—His Excellency the President of the South Manchuria Railway."

"As *who?*" asked everyone except me.

"It was the only way I could figure it," he explained. "I had the old Nip's card among my own: he gave it to me when I met him a day or two earlier. I *must* have handed it out to them in the dark since it was missing when I looked for it next morning. They had a perfect right to get mad at me for trying to pass myself off as the railroad president. It was sure 'making one big fool of Japanese policemens.' "

He turned to his original questioner. "So now, sir, you see the damfool things an assistant military attaché has to do."

There was a clearing of throats and a general murmur of comment all round. I felt that it was imperative that I should speak up, but for the life of me I just couldn't think how to begin. My mind was in a state of complete emotional jumble where embarrassment, guilt, the urge for confession and a natural desire to preserve face particularly before my friends, all struggled in turn for ascendancy. Yet say *something* I must.

"I . . . I say . . ." I began, then dried up.

Nobody paid any attention, least of all the attaché.

"I say . . ." I tried again in a louder voice. "Look here, I must tell you this. It . . . it wasn't . . . you know . . . I . . ." That was all I had managed before my American friend had risen from his seat and come over to me. He placed his left hand on my shoulder as though to prevent me from rising while his right gripped mine and shook it warmly. Then with the friendliest smile he took swift and silent leave of me, bowed to the others and was immediately gone.

I never saw him again. Yet, while two decades have passed, I have often wondered about him. For some reason he always figured most prominently in my mind when I read of Corregidor or Okinawa, of the swift advance through Sicily or the heroic defence of Bastogne. Certainly, it seemed, he would be thereabouts: maybe in those undying feats of American arms he died himself. Perhaps, more happily, he is a one- or two-star general to-day and I sincerely hope that may be so. I have thought of him also in relation to the incident which I have

narrated, the title for which has been deliberately chosen. Hidden away somewhere in The Attaché Case is the solution to a problem which has vexed me for twenty years. Time and again I have rummaged through it, never being quite certain if I found the right answer or not. Was that charming fellow simply sincere? Or was he supremely subtle? Was it that he intended his revelation at the dinner party to serve as a cunning guarantee that I should never forget that misguided impersonation? Or was it . . . ? But it's anybody's guess and I shall never know.

Chapter 6

AH FAT

BORNE, a light burden, on wings from ten thousand miles away, there came back to me the other day the echo of an era that ended fifteen years ago.

It was a letter from Ah Fat.

There was little enough in it that mattered: nothing at any rate to compare with the knowledge that my old Chinese houseboy still survived, and the gratification it afforded me to be remembered particularly as "Deer Masta," from which I sensed that, in his changing world, he at least had not absorbed the new ideologies.

But then, of course, Ah Fat never absorbed anything. From the evening in 1927 when I came home and found that he had taken possession of my bungalow at Hoshigaura until I bade farewell to him on the Shanghai Bund in 1934, he steadfastly remained the jealous guardian of an unalterable law that was utterly his own. He was quite impassive, philosophical even in the face of nigh-catastrophic emergency, resourceful beyond the degree of genius, and capable of experiencing no insult save one, the

outrage of inference that his rather tawdry timepiece was somewhat out of true. Only once, save when I was on the point of departure, did I suggest that his cherished watch was wrong, and never again considered such comment good token for the several unaccountable little "accidents" that followed.

His letter, arriving in austerity England where there are but few survivals among those who more than disdainfully "oblige," served to recapture what was for me an atmosphere of essentially spacious days.

I had brought my own boy to Dairen when I was transferred to Manchuria from Hankow in 1927; but he was never happy, being obviously ill at ease in the leased territory under Japanese jurisdiction and homesick for his native province of Hunan and the sultry clime of the Yangtze valley. So I wired my predecessor, and he in turn dispatched an urgent missive to his former retainer, who had retired from service to eke out a sufficiency of well-won wage and supplementary squeeze in that elastic and indefinable district known as "Ningpo-more-far." That was all I knew, until the evening on which, accompanied by two friends, I returned from Dairen to my bungalow at Hoshigaura seven miles away and found the then quite unfamiliar features of Ah Fat expanding over an immaculate white gown, from the nether end of which protruded a pair of neatly bound trouser bottoms over the conventional carpet slippers. He was assuming an attitude on the doorstep that was at once expectant and imperial.

"Where's Fong?" I asked, referring to my boy from Hankow.

"Have go, Masta," came the immediate reply. "Coolie have go too. Tomorrow me find new coolie."

"But . . ."

"Me have pay month's wages. Me fix all ploper fashion. Me b'long Ah Fat. Me . . ."

"So you're Ah Fat! Before you work for Mr. . . ."

"Yes, Masta. Masta, me have fix chow—three men. Just now me take cock-a-tail, shake plenty much, from icebox."

My friends and I relaxed on the verandah and presently found ourselves imbibing the most delectable martinis, accompanied by a wide variety of "small eats." Both of them were birds of passage, having travelled from Europe on the Trans-Siberian Railway and unexpectedly walked into my office less than two hours earlier; yet it seemed that Ah Fat not only knew they would arrive with me at the bungalow, but moreover appeared to be fully conversant with all our particular tastes. As he waited on us at table, with an air of quiet and utterly unobtrusive efficiency, Maynard's glass was filled and replenished with whisky, Harcourt's with orange squash, and mine with a special brand of lager beer. There was no questioning as to which or any of us took our coffee black or otherwise; it was all exactly right and at ten, precisely, there was a motorcar at the door to drive us to a Russian cabaret called "The Babylon," where a table had been booked so that we might indulge our fancies for an hour before my

friends caught their boat to Shanghai. It is no use endeavouring to fathom how such a knowledge of one's habits or inclinations gets abroad in China; it just remains one of those unsolved mysteries of the East into which it is frequently as well not to inquire.

During my spell in Manchuria and later, Ah Fat was ever immaculate, always there at all hours with limitless meals and a sufficiency of drinks to suit all tastes. On no occasion was he either obtrusive or, indeed, even mildly apparent. He had what might be termed his idiosyncrasies, but few of them were uncommon to the recognized procedure and the perquisites of his calling, the order of which he had, during his many years of experience in service to the Englishman, perfected to a fine art. We had the usual understanding, for instance, about the bill for soup meat, which was invariably paid without creating loss of face through any insistence concerning its inspection: the soup meat was just something which never materialized, except, possibly, in the strange shape of some native delicacy which Ah Fat and his assistant found particularly succulent. Then there was the ten per cent discount for cash monthly on the comprador's account, which that rascally vendor of foreign provisions apparently never honoured in accordance with his published terms. One refrained from asking about that either, since one was well aware that its allotment had also become an established precedent. It was likely, however, to be mildly irritating if one invited the native tailor, the shirt-cutter or the shoemaker to call in his profes-

sional capacity on one's own premises, should he feel disinclined to pay the toll for admittance or the recognized amount of levy on subsequent delivery of the finished article. If questions were asked, Ah Fat was ever ready with a wide variety of valid reasons as to why, for my own protection and the preservation of my face, I should honour a rival establishment with my patronage.

One bitter wintry afternoon, such as I have experienced nowhere but in Manchuria, Ah Fat rang me up at the office and suggested I should secure a room at the Yamato Hotel for the night as the central heating at the bungalow had "broke down." The cost of my dinner and room was the price I had to pay for an insistence that a trial consignment of Japanese anthracite which I had ordered would be better suited to the furnace than the cheaper type of Chinese fuel organized by Ah Fat. I had, as it were, invited the imposition; but the affair of the "rain water" seeping into the petrol tank of my motorcycle was a penance in no way deserved.

High-spirited as I was, it would have been unjust of Ah Fat to imagine that I deliberately contrived to detach from its moorings the sidecar in which he sat dozing over his shopping baskets while our high-powered combination was speeding round a slight curve in the highway. The nodding Ah Fat had proceeded on his solo expedition with only gradual loss of momentum for some distance along the road before the unleashed connecting rod hit the surface with a metallic screech, spun the sidecar round in a series of revolutions as remarkable as the pirouettes

of an ice ballerina, then shot it up a bank where it turned turtle and came to rest in the middle of some trolley lines. Ah Fat was wide-awake by the time I rejoined him and only slightly shaken. But in one of his baskets had been two dozen eggs and a flimsy bag of flour, and as I helped him to his feet he presented such an awe-inspiring spectacle that I was quite unable to restrain a rich and rude guffaw. Maybe it was that laugh that subsequently let the waters of heaven mingle with the spirits in my tank.

I think my old retainer was really at his best when he rejoined me in Tientsin after I had been on leave in England and subsequently when he came with me to Shanghai. The wider variety of social life in the larger ports allowed a greater degree of scope for his talents.

In actual fact when I left Dairen I had said goodbye to him, given him a generous *cumsha* and imagined that he would then disappear for ever within the fastness of his sanctuary at "Ningpo-more-far." But I had a five-year further blessing. Returning to China from England at the end of 1929 I was booked to travel P & O, but at the last minute decided to cancel my passage, travel to New York and from there to Los Angeles, where I stayed several days with friends, before catching a cargo boat across the Pacific. I made no advance bookings, gambling more or less on good fortune enabling me to report back at my head office in Shanghai on or about the date my leave expired. They were surprised to find in actual fact that I had returned a week early, fully expecting me to be on the P & O which had hardly

yet arrived in Hong Kong. But Ah Fat was on the landing stage to greet me and impart the information that within two days "we" were being posted to Tientsin. It didn't surprise me: long since had I given up any idea of probing into Ah Fat's particular model of "bush-radio." He seemed to know things which I didn't even know myself or to the best of my knowledge any one else was aware of either. I was delighted at the reunion, however, certain that henceforth all arrangements for my personal comfort, which I had been obliged to take thought of myself in England and America, would now be adequately catered for. My life would resume its well-organized supervision—all ploper fashion!

In Tientsin I shared a mess with three other somewhat carefree young men: one was an American employed in oil, while the other two belonged to British concerns. In common with the great majority of foreigners working with prominent business interests in those days we all lived like fighting cocks, joined all the clubs, ran cars, kept ponies, favoured the gay life, and now and then paid a few bills. We also each had our individual boys; but by mutual and simultaneous agreement on both sides, as it were, of the green baize door, Ah Fat became the undisputed majordomo and answerable to us all for the manifold sins and omissions of the others. We learnt to respect his astuteness the hard way, particularly, for instance, in the matter of the rapidly disappearing sherry—a lesson in itself to us all.

Matt, the American, was the one responsible for

saying he'd stop "those so-and-so's from helping themselves to the Bristol Milk"; and, taking the half-empty bottle, he poured us out one each, then filled it up again to its previous level with a carefully prepared liquid he had brought with him from the office, replaced the cork firmly and let matters rest for three days.

"I hope it isn't poison," somebody had said at the time.

"It won't quite kill 'em," was the reply, "but it'll give 'em a darned uncomfortable twenty-four hours."

I was then suddenly called up to Peking and, when I returned to the mess two days later, was surprised to find all my three companions apparently suffering from what was known colloquially as "Tientsin Tummy." Instinctively I looked in the cupboard for the sherry bottle, found that its contents had shrunk to the level of the dregs and summoned Ah Fat. I had never seen him look so well, nor for a man of his years more sprightly—a circumstance which prompted me to inquire into the immediate health of the other servants, only to learn that they were all equally robust and hearty.

"Only other Mastas little bit ill," he said with a faint expression of concern.

"Ah Fat," I inquired, "which man drink sherry last two days?"

"Dlink shelley!" exclaimed Ah Fat. "No man dlink shelley three days more: dlink gin."

I waved the well-nigh empty bottle at him. "How

come then no man drink sherry, this before-time half-full, now finish?"

Ah Fat's features bore no trace of emotion as he blandly replied, "Soup meat not easy, Masta—every night must put lit' shelley in Masta's soup. Suppose not put shelley . . ."

"That's all right, Ah Fat," I concluded hurriedly. "Go topside, take other three master hot rice pudding, then bring me whisky-soda—big fashion."

"Lice pudding," beamed Ah Fat, and shimmered out.

It was our practice to invite some of the junior officers from the British and American garrisons stationed in Tientsin, as well as a number of the younger foreign business element, to dine in our mess about once a month. It never seemed to perturb Ah Fat and his satellites if we asked half a dozen guests and, as frequently happened, about fifteen turned up. The food and drink was invariably adequate, since well-trained Chinese houseboys are always prepared for such emergencies. And Ah Fat, in common with others of his calibre, had evolved a simple expedient for overcoming a sudden and embarrassing shortage in plates and cutlery: he took a note of those present and delayed dinner until he had communicated with their respective establishments and made arrangements for the guests' own utensils to be sent over. There was, of course, the unforgettable evening when a newly arrived and rather stuffy British major mistook our address for that of a very distinguished resident and drifted into the household just as one of our more hilarious and

overcrowded parties was getting under way. Somebody gave him a drink and one can only presume that somebody else—probably one of the guests—suggested he should stay to dinner. At any rate his presence was otherwise quite overlooked until the middle of the meal when he was observed closely examining his bread plate through an eyeglass.

"I say—dammit," he exclaimed, "this is mess stuff. How the . . ."

But no one paid the slightest attention, least of all Ah Fat, who with utterly immobile features was busy officiating with the claret. It was considered bad form to notice, let alone comment on, the means by which an overflow of guests were catered for: so far as Ah Fat was concerned the all-important consideration of face was involved. Later, during a very temporary lull in the conversation, the same tones became audible in even more startled protest.

"I say—it's highly irregular, y'know: this spoon bears the regimental crest . . ."

His further comments were quickly drowned in an immediate crescendo of talk from all sides. But it was not until the end of the meal when the major rolled up his table napkin and found himself inserting it into a silver ring on which were engraved his own initials and the date of his christening 'way back in the dim eighties, that his eyeglass fell out altogether and he left the party rather hurriedly in a mood of bewildered mutterings.

Following a short period of relaxation after dinner on these occasions, we frequently indulged in a thoroughly destructive, but invariably hilarious

game which was known as "Fanning the Disc." There was a certain amount of ritual about the preliminaries, rather like the prologue to a bullfight: first a procession of house coolies came into our wide lounge, solemnly moved all the chairs and sofas close to the walls, and turned all the tables on their sides and piled them up in front of the window. Lots would then ceremoniously be drawn for places behind the various barricades of furniture, leaving one unfortunate, known as "The Tosser," high and dry in the middle of the room. Presently Ah Fat would make his entrance, clutching to his stomach a vast pile of sing-song-girl gramophone records which it was his duty to purchase in the native city at the equivalent cost of about threepence a piece. These he placed in the centre of the floor, bobbed his head three times at "The Tosser," retreated and, while making his dignified exit through the door, moved over the switch which turned on the large four-bladed ceiling-fan to full. The rest of the proceedings hardly require description, except to say they were based on the principle of musical chairs. When "The Tosser" shouted "hup" and lobbed a record neatly into the whirling tornado above, those behind the barricades had to scramble one place to the right and he, in turn, dived for one of the covers before the next man got there. Apart from the discs which naturally finished in smithereens, quite a lot of other things used to get broken as well, but oddly enough there were never any serious casualties amongst personnel. One boisterous and evergreen naval captain thought it

was the greatest fun he had experienced since his gunroom days, until it came to his turn to stand under the fan armed with a disc and shout "hup": he then made one leap for the door and, flinging himself through it, collapsed in a heap on the top of Ah Fat, who, having acquired a baseball catcher's headpiece, had been witnessing the proceedings through one of the glass panels.

Perhaps it is as well in some ways, but it is still none the less an unhappy thought that there is probably nowhere in the world to-day where the natural, harmless exuberance of youth can be allowed so loose a rein. At least I hope that in certain regimental messes all the young officers of this era are not too serious-minded to let off a bit of steam after dinner on guest nights. It is good, in the days when one settles down, especially in an atmosphere of essential austerity charged with so many uneasy doubts, to feel, as perhaps the rising generation never will feel, that at least one has had one's measure of fun out of life. I wonder: Are visiting majors still likely to be de-bagged without their dignity diminishing the fun . . . ? But I'm digressing. I just had in mind to relate an occasion when in a certain army mess in North China we indulged in a series of set scrums, with a strangely unsuitable article to serve as a ball, before proceeding to an even more vigorous and discomforting pastime known as "high-cockalorum." I know it sufficed to split my boiled shirt round the neck and that some cheerful idiot immediately saw fit to insert his finger into the aperture and transform the split into a formidable rent.

After that my shirt was anybody's. Indeed I think everyone claimed his fair portion of it. The matter was not only one of distress, but obvious concern, to Ah Fat who, shortly before seven the next morning, followed me out to the *mafoo* who was pacifying my rather impatient pony by the gate and remarked, "Masta—me no savvy at all, at all."

"What thing, Ah Fat?" I asked abruptly, suppressing some tendency towards a liver.

"Me no savvy," he insisted in perplexed tones, "Masta come home last ni'. Collar and the tie b'long all ploper—same time Masta no have shirt . . ."

Shortly I was jumping the narrow creeks and galloping round the grave mounds in the open country. My liver was restored and I could put my head back and laugh in the crisp air and the early red sun. This was a *great* life and indeed it was worth the living.

Ah Fat was a servant who, though he could never fathom what it was all about, came none the less to adapt himself in a full-hearted manner to the many and varied peculiarities and pastimes of the foreigner. He was there, and indeed obviously happy to be there, with the sole object of rendering never-questioning fealty in all circumstances and conditions. At the same time, even if his very presence had not demanded it, his dignity was always our most essential consideration and the preservation of his face, which to him was paramount, was never absent from the thoughts of those who were privileged to come into touch with him. I paid him the equivalent of thirty-six pounds a year, which, added

to his recognized perquisites and the fact that he lived on "soup meat," made him a positive Croesus in his native environment. Even he, with rather more fervour than that demanded by the elegancies, frequently protested that he was overpaid.

Overpaid! Compare the picture of average present-day England with the one typical example of a dozen cosmopolitans, after several sets of tennis, seated round a table on the verandah of the famous Circle Sportif Francais in Shanghai, playing liar dice for the distinction of signing the chit for the next drink. At, say, nine o'clock one generously suggests they all come home and dine; whereupon the head club boy is called and the information is relayed on the telephone to Ah Fat to the effect that twelve guests will be arriving for dinner in half an hour's time. Ah Fat knows the form, weighs up his immediate stock of food and cutlery against requirements, and then inquires who his master's immediate companions at the French Club may be. On being informed, he puts through a series of swift calls on his own account and by the time the guests have arrived and partaken of a "cock-a-tail" the banquet is served. Familiar plate, though it be not one's own; a recognition of some delicacy which could only have emerged from the refrigerator of Mrs. S., who is sitting next to you; a vice consul's own boy, pushing in an unfamiliar chair for him: all these things were more than likely to happen, and though they were noticed, no mention was ever made concerning them. They were accepted as being inevitable in a community which lived freely and where highly

trained service was considered, by those who undertook it, to be both an honourable and an enviable profession to follow.

I shall not easily forget one final episode which may justify revival here. It happened shortly after I was married and I think my wife has in more recent years frequently been fortified, if not encouraged, by the recollection of it as she stands over the sink peeling the potatoes and, devoid of much hope, ponders over the possibilities of their eventual accompaniment on the table being mildly palatable, or even existent. We had asked six people to tiffin on a Sunday to eat the snipe I had shot a few days earlier; I arrived very late from the golf course unexpectedly accompanied by my opponent, who made nine of us in all. My wife, quite new to such irregularities, took the earliest opportunity to express considerable concern in a somewhat agitated undertone.

"Darling, you've made it nine. What shall we do?"

"About what?"

"Well, darling—you were only clever enough to shoot eight snipe . . ."

"Oh, that's all right," I reassured her, feeling slightly self-conscious. "Does Ah Fat know?"

Ah Fat knew all right, and in due course he delicately offered round nine perfect-looking snipe on a large platter to each in turn, coming to me last. He must have juggled that platter about with no mean dexterity to make certain that no one among the others helped themselves to the bird which was

intended for me. I think he must have hewn it out of buffalo hide with a chisel, but the *pièce de resistance* about it was the beak, which had been carved out of a wooden skewer and tinted with soya-bean oil. But nobody else knew the difference.

One of the amazing things about Ah Fat was the fact that I never knew him to suffer a day's illness. Also, I suppose because in common with the majority of his fellow countrymen he could sleep at all times wherever or whenever opportunity offered, he was never the slightest bit dismayed at being summoned to cook bacon and eggs at the most unearthly hours. It was a thoroughly unequal struggle to try and persuade him to take a holiday and visit his children and grandchildren in "Ningpo-more-far" at that native festival of reunion, the Chinese New Year. "Make plenty trouble" was his invariable rejoinder to the suggestion. He insisted only on two hours off once a fortnight to keep his appointment at the establishment he termed "the wash-body shop," and I can only presume it was no subterfuge, for he was in every sense always immaculately clean.

He was there in the crowd on the landing stage against the Shanghai Bund that saw the passengers, my wife and I among them, embark on the tender which was to sever my own happy ten-year-long sojourn in his country. I was more moved by that personal parting than by saying good-bye to any of the Europeans or Americans who formed the more disinterested pattern of one's business and social life. They were grand people, but in their cosmopolitan atmosphere of gaiety we should soon be

forgotten, and none of them possessed that true genius for friendship and affection which I knew was deeply embedded in the heart of Ah Fat. As the tender slipped her moorings and he stood there immobile and impervious to the milling crowd that jostled about him, I observed for the first and only time in our long association that he was capable of visible emotion. And it touched me to the extent of hopelessly wishing I could leap ashore and thank him all over again. Instead, I thought I must make perhaps no more than a vain effort to comfort and distract him. Cupping my hands to my mouth I bawled to him across the widening water, "Ah Fat!"

He looked up and I saw that his lips were just capable of framing the inevitable "Yes, Masta."

"Look-see customs clock. Ah Fat's timepiece no right!" I hoped it might serve to lighten a situation that was mutually tense.

He fumbled under his gown and I saw him produce his infallible token of reliability; he glanced at it, then up to the customs tower, put the watch to his ear, and, ripping it from its strap, hurled it over the heads of the crowd into the swirling wash of the Whang-po River. Then his face lit up again and his features were restored to a broad grin. It was a magnificent gesture since he undoubtedly knew, as I did, that the customs clock was invariably eight minutes fast. But I sent him a much better watch from London—a self-winding affair—to wear on his wrist.

His letter concludes, "Timepiece plenty long day go now—no savvy how to stop—s'pose no stop. Ah Fat die too soon—what thing?" So now that I am no

more than a memory to him it seems that he has centred his destinies at the dictates of my gift. He remains rich in a sublime and simple faith of which I well might wish to have been more deserving.

Chapter 7

"TALLY-HO"

SOME time ago I visited a large industrial works in the north of England where I was shown something of the production, packing and dispatch for export of a crude chemical which as an essential raw material is sold in profusion all over the world.

I watched the gunny bags being machine-marked, then saw them automatically filled and stitched before they passed along a moving platform to be mechanically tallied into a barge. The craft, with three others like it, would shortly be making passage along two rivers and a canal; and then another consignment of a thousand tons would be ready for trans-shipment into an ocean-going vessel in Liverpool docks.

"I hear they *eat* this stuff in China," remarked the foreman. "What d'you know about that?"

"Precious little," I replied, "though I believe the Cantonese do use it in certain types of native confectionery. Myself, I'm better acquainted with the customs of the North," I went on. "They don't actually *eat* it there—not at any rate in its present

form—but they certainly consume it in a wide variety of other ways."

The foreman looked slightly disillusioned, as though a good story he had been telling for years had suddenly come a trifle unstuck. He proceeded on a different tack.

"I s'pose without any of this modern equipment—devices and such-like as we've got here—your old Chinaman would take maybe a week to discharge this lot."

"A week!" I laughed. "A mere thousand tons . . ."

My mind slipped back through the years and I found myself reflecting on the vivid atmosphere of that festival in North China known as "Cargo-come" day.

Mr. Ho—nearly six feet and over seventeen stone of him—stood framed in the open doorway of the district manager's office in Tientsin. He was head custodian of the company's extensive godowns on the south bank of the Pei-ho, and, since he professed to speak no English, I was doing my best to explain to him in his own tongue that I would be on parade at 6.30 hours the following morning to witness the discharge of a thousand tons of *Yung Gi-en* (literally, "foreign powder") from lighters to store. Mr. Ho understood: that wise and loyal old character understood a lot of things about which he said but little.

At the appointed hour next day, I find that the hatch covers have been removed from three lighters moored alongside our property and several gangs,

comprising about a hundred coolies in all, are standing by. Mr. Ho, surrounded by stacks of bamboo sticks and with parcels of coppers and small silver spread out on a table before him, sits in his accustomed place by the open godown door. The stage is all set for the performance of an arduous task made lighter with the fun of a fair.

Soon two long processions of scantily clad coolies, each with a two-hundredweight bag perched across his shoulders, are moving along the gangplanks, then over the dusty pathway to converge at the warehouse entrance, where, as they pass, each receives from the hand of Mr. Ho a plain foot-long bamboo stick. These toilers are the "individualists" who, on the completion of five such journeys and the acquisition of the same number of plain bamboos, exchange them for a single one of slightly larger dimensions, decorated with a red band. As soon as twenty-five individual journeys have been completed and five of the larger embellished sticks acquired, Mr. Ho then recovers them in exchange for the agreed rate of piecework hire; and the recipient, with a bit of "the ready" tucked away in his waistband, can now afford to take a well-earned breather.

At the same time a third procession of a somewhat different order is emanating from the remaining lighter and also converging at the godown entrance to claim the attentions of Mr. Ho. It is composed of the more sporting, get-rich-quick element who operate in prearranged pairs and, with the aid of a pole and a sling, carry between them three bags at a time, to the accompaniment of the appropriate sing-song

chant. Though he must accept them (like foreigners and death) as being inevitable, Mr. Ho is wont to take a dim view of these duet-performers since, wise though he may be, he has never succeeded in discovering how to divide three into five and remains strongly averse to the necessity of adjusting his system to meet special arrangements. He is also somewhat of a rarity in that he is a Chinese born without a natural instinct to gamble; and holds but small regard for chanting teammates in general, who subsequently draw lots to decide which of them becomes entitled to cash in the collectively earned sticks and retain the more legal form of tender. In particular, he is possessed of still less sympathy towards the unfortunate who, having sweated and strained an hour or so to no more than his friend's advantage, is now obliged to start afresh among the "individualists."

With a nice sense of timing—that is, when it may be calculated that Mr. Ho has recovered sufficient length of bamboo to have been fairly active with the disbursements—the scene becomes enlivened by the arrival of a succession of one-man portable establishments. These are broken down to enable them to be borne in two nicely balanced sections dangling from either end of a long pole slung across the shoulders. Presently they are set up on some convenient pitch in the shape of general emporium, chow shop and kitchen combined, and, of course, the complete tonsorial parlour. They comprise the more honest traders; but inevitably appearing in their wake, and bent on getting amongst the money, come those of

lesser repute: the letter-writers, the magicians, the story-tellers, the jugglers, the handspring artistes, and several others representative of the native element among spivs and opportunists. Consequently as the morning wears on, the scene of activity in front of our godown becomes more and more diverse.

But far from troubling him, the fairground atmosphere surrounding his coolie-hire is welcomed by Mr. Ho. He knows that Chinese casual labour becomes as the lilies of the field, in that it toils not when it has a few coppers to spin. The cavalcade about us serves the purpose of attracting a large portion of up-to-date earnings, thereby necessitating an immediate resumption of work by those who otherwise would be too inclined to classify themselves as the idle rich. So it all aids towards the discharge being completed with sufficient dispatch to avoid payment of demurrage on the lighters; and this consideration, coupled with minor concern over the accuracy of his tally, represents the sum total of Mr. Ho's worries.

The chow-vendor has staked out a claim, and already his soup and rice pans are bubbling and steaming away behind him, while his bowls and other utensils are laid out for hire, as required, before him. Meanwhile, in the manner of a rumba musician, he is engaged in shaking ten chopsticks up and down in a wooden cylinder. This not only serves to draw the attentions of the multitude to the appetizing aromas of his kitchen, but affords the hungry an opportunity of extracting the stick which

has a well-defined chip about its unseen end, and which allows the lucky ones the privilege of eating on the house.

Some distance away a sartorially elegant clothier is beating a tattoo, then giving voice concerning his display of coolie cloth, and drawing attention to the nimble skill of his cut. A white-bearded patriarch has erected two poles from which hang a score of bird-cages housing a complete aviary of songsters in all sizes and dressed in a wide variety of plumage, all of which appear to be contributing a fair share to the general cacophony. Further along, a more lugubrious-looking type is sounding a funeral gong and accepting first premiums on insurance against the inevitable expense of one's obsequies. There, in oddly assorted array, stand the peanut seller, the fruit merchant, the black-egg specialist, and the professor with the patent medicines. Business is brisk all round, and the brisker it becomes so much more speedily does the main operation proceed and so much better pleased is Mr. Ho.

The barber, traditionally recognized among the Chinese as belonging to the lowest caste of all, has, appropriately enough, opened up his salon adjacent to the temporarily erected latrines and is now engaged upon the task of shaving heads at the rate of half a dozen an hour. Now and again his chair is occupied by a customer who requires a little additional attention, such as a pummelling of the back, a little massage on the stomach, or perhaps just a touch of chiropody. For, despite his low status in the social order, the Chinese barber serves a versatile

apprenticeship and furthermore adheres to a fixed tariff, with none of your tossing for double or nothing, as practised in the other professions. Maybe he finds it too risky when he never knows beforehand what he may be called upon to deal with next.

We move about in an animated, not uncolourful atmosphere amid sounds of clamour and song and an overall spirit, carefree in luck and philosophical in misfortune, that on the whole seems to breathe an air of happiness. We are amongst those, the great majority of whom are indeed content to live for the day and very much hand-to-mouth. They are disinterested in political crises and oblivious to changing ideologies; they are not bothered by union regulations and have never been introduced to a shop steward. They live without responsibilities and eventually they die without any knowledge of the fear of death: all of which would appear to breed a strange contentment. There are the unpleasantries in season, of course, such as hunger and cold; but usually, not far distant, there's sufficient "humping" to be found that will ward off both discomforts. Sickness—well, if you're too sick to work and there's no copper-cash in the kitty, then, logically, you're much better off if you're dead.

In the fullness of time the reformers will change all this—one must hope they will; but it is a simple philosophy that dies hard, and deprived of it, with a host of "rights" in substitution, the lovable character that is the carefree coolie will still, one earnestly hopes, continue to reap his reward of contentment.

Let us take a glance at Fu Sung as an example of

his kind and calling: he is happy indeed, for this has been a day of days for him—so far. From being penniless at dawn, he has since cashed in the ringed bamboos at the expense of teammate Wang Er, and has added to this success by selecting the chopstick with the chipped end. He has received double pay for no more than an hour's work, filled his belly free of charge, had his head shaved and a corn cut out of his toe, slept peacefully for an hour, and is still some thirty cents and a few copper-cash in hand. Furthermore he has just supplemented his earnings by joining a school of squatters near the water's edge and winning two hands of fan-tan. But if, as one strongly suspects will be the case, he allows himself shortly to be drawn towards battling his wits against those of the travelling "catchee-lady" trickster (with the inevitable result) he will philosophically adopt the adage of Kipling and, not breathing a word about his loss, start again at his beginnings: in other words he'll get down to a bit more "humping" as an "individualist."

We find by mid-afternoon that former teammate and co-chanter, Wang Er, has atoned for his luckless start and, having eaten, is now sleeping peacefully in a spot of shade. He has also discharged an obligation, in that for the sum of five copper-cash he has dictated a letter to the travelling scribe which will serve to notify his aged mother in faraway Hunan that, although he has indeed recently been appointed a partner in the transport and haulage business, he finds himself in no immediate position to subscribe towards her coffin fund. Wang Er's prevailing weak-

ness for face-building is invariably landing him in jams of this sort with his somewhat gullible and ever-opportunist parent. Then, as he awakens, his conscience no doubt stirs him into an immediate resumption of "humping"; at least he should carry a sufficient number of bags to supply his letter with a postage stamp and so spare his mother the expense of delivery fees in addition to the necessity to finance the doubtful satisfaction of having her son's communication read to her. Also he is possessed of a purely transitory fancy that he might start saving something up . . .

Well, we've stolen glances at Fu Sung and Wang Er: there's not much that differs in character or feature among the other ninety-eight who work and idle in rotation, at the dictates of fancy or sheer necessity. Time is getting on now and it will be worthwhile seeing how Mr. Ho is faring in his battle against it.

I put the question to him and while he continues to juggle his bamboos with his right hand, the fingers of his left perform a startling operation on the abacus. Mr. Ho then transfers his glance from some Chinese heiroglyphics scrawled on a scrap of paper before him and casts his eyes towards the sun.

"Another one thousand four hundred and thirty-odd bags to discharge in two hours and ten minutes," he announces with assured exactitude. There is no need for me to ask him whether or when he intends to introduce a "hit or miss" session, or whether it might be more economical to pay a limited amount of demurrage on the lighters. By his

own peculiar methods he will have the respective merits of every alternative already weighed up, and at five o'clock, with an hour and a half in hand, he will take the course guaranteed to serve the best interests of all.

"Hit or miss" tactics, when employed, are much akin to a sporting declaration in cricket, where the opposing side is given a limited time in which to go for the runs or lose the match. Mr. Ho would loudly proclaim for the benefit of all and sundry at the appropriate moment that there were yet nine hundred and sixty-eight bags to discharge and seventy-four minutes within which to complete the job: bamboo sticks worth double if accomplished—otherwise quite valueless.

The effect of this pronouncement is electrifying. Recumbent bodies spring into life from all over the place; the stalls and sideshows become suddenly deserted and games of chance are hastily abandoned. This is the best gamble of the day, and the challenge is invariably accepted with joyous acclamation.

The scene rapidly assumes the effect of a film which is being projected on the screen at twice its normal speed. Long lines of laughing, shouting, good-humoured coolies jostle each other as they double under their burdens and then speed back for more. Mr. Ho, with a box of bamboos between his knees, is handing out the sticks so fast that he takes on the appearance of a normally sedate cello player who has suddenly gone berserk. Only his assistants, perched on high within and hard-pressed to main-

tain the uniformity of the stacks under such rapid fire from below, are reluctant participators in this win or burst effort. The lighter hands don't care much about it either: they are feeding the remaining bags onto a long queue of impatient backs with such dexterity that from the middle distance they appear as a well-drilled squad performing physical jerks at lightning speed. But Mr. Ho will see that full recompense is paid to all: before instituting "hit or miss" sessions he is invariably aware that the balance is weighed heavily in favour of double rates, but only over a period calculated to cost less than the price of delay to the lighters. As I remarked earlier, Mr. Ho is not a betting man and only indulges these practices in the interests of sound economy and also because everyone is happy in the end —everyone except perhaps the salesmen and spivs who, like a travelling circus, strike camp at the first cry of "hit or miss" and waddle away towards fresh fields. Mr. Ho is sure they have done well enough—a view that is shared, though rapidly forgotten, by a vast multitude of others.

Then finally, when the shouting and the tumult has died and all except Mr. Ho have departed, I approach him as he remains there in the cool of the evening, gently perspiring but quite undefeated as he neatly stacks away his bamboos in readiness for some future festival of "cargo-come."

"*Hao fa-tze,*" I announce, meaning in the English idiom, "good show," then add with only mild apprehension, "How does it all work out?"

Mr. Ho seems slightly perplexed.

"Only nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-eight bags, including five that broke in the lighters," he proclaims sorrowfully. "There must be two more somewhere."

I suppress my utter amazement at this miracle of tallying which Mr. Ho invariably accomplishes with accuracy, aided by no more than two sets of sticks, the beads of his abacus and an amount of money left over in odd bits of newspaper which serve as his till.

"Two whole bags missing!" I observe in mock horror. "The trouble with you, Mr. Ho," I add in effect, "is that your ideas of making a tally are hopelessly out of date. I hear they have a machine at the works in England—they call it 'the magic eye.' We'll have to see about getting one sent out. We just can't afford to go on losing two bags out of every ten thousand, you know. It's not good enough."

Mr. Ho, whose sense of humour is far more subtle than mine, undoubtedly catches the look in my eye, but he does not yet know that I have his ace tucked away in my pocket. So I allow him to express himself volubly and at considerable length on the subject of all "devil" machines, which in his view not only are thoroughly unreliable, but are created in the West with the sole purpose of maliciously discrediting the far more elegant and accurate methods of the East. "Those two bags," he concludes, "could never have come up the river."

"You are perfectly right, as usual," I assure him quietly. "To a humble Westerner like myself the thing is quite uncanny. This piece of paper here comes from the stevedore in charge of trans-ship-

ment into lighters at Taku and says 'Two bags jump out of sling into bar—get drowned!' "

Mr. Ho does not smile. Indeed no one has ever yet observed him to do so. But across the whole of his countenance can be detected the rich and unmistakable glow of face preserved.

"A week!" I repeated to the foreman. "A mere thousand tons—or ten thousand bags if you like. Good Heavens! In less than a day they . . . why, they'd eat it!"

Chapter 8

TRAVEL-AMAH

MARIE, who travelled more than twenty thousand miles with us, was a part of our lives for no more than six months. But during that comparatively brief period she established herself as a vital, though often somewhat unpredictable, factor. The boys recall many clear-cut impressions of their travel-amah, whilst the memory of later and less transient custodians of their childhood has faded beyond even faint recollection. And for my part, I shall always remember Marie as a brave doyen among Chinese nurses and something of a character as well.

Rather out of a blue sky I found myself called upon to spend three months in England in between my normal periods of home leave from China; whereupon the company insisted that my wife and our three-year-old twin sons accompany me and, far more importantly, made this financially possible. The travel-amah was, however, my personal liability, though I considered the outlay for her passage and wages an investment likely to pay my wife and me large dividends in freedom and leisure.

So it was that in answer to an advertisement in the vernacular press, a lacquer-glossed private rickshaw rolled up to our house in Shanghai, a week before we were to sail via Suez. It contained Marie, who presumably paid the requisite toll to the house boy, addressed a few well-chosen ancestral elegancies to the resident amah, and was at length permitted entry to the presence of the Master and Missy. She was launched upon us as my wife and I were relaxing over martinis and—such was the life in Shanghai in those days—thinking that many evenings had elapsed since we had been permitted to dine at home *à deux.*

"Me come: look-see: by-n-by maybe go."

It was a statement much like Julius Caesar's upon the successful conclusion of his Pontic campaign and as all-embracing. In Marie's case it was accompanied by intermittent flashes of gold teeth and the tintinnabulation of a score of thin silver bangles. The bun of her hair was adorned by a single white bloom, and the lobes of her ears were hung with jade. And she wore a flowered silk gown, modelled in the Chinese style, which as though in compensation for the high severity of the neckline, was slit—à la mode—from ankle to knee.

My wife later confessed to a first impression that our visitor was one of the elder sisters in that somewhat elastic order, the sing-song sorority! Of course, nothing could have been further from the truth. Though Marie bedecked herself flashily in her own circle, there was no adornment to lend relief to the white linen tunic and wide black trousers that hence-

forward became, on board and in England, the invariable rig of her working hours. She had, moreover, a sense of propriety as supreme as her standards of duty and loyal affection.

We were not devoid of doubts, however, as we led her upstairs to show her the twins that first evening. But they sat up abruptly in their beds, overjoyed with the opportunity of postponing their obligations to Morpheus; and it soon became obvious that all three had discovered an instantaneous and mutual delight in each other.

"Ai Ya!" exclaimed Marie. "Two piece allive all-same-time!"

The boys jumped on their beds and treated her to a display of their acrobatic repertoire, interlaced with a few competitive feats of contortion, the whole accompanied by wild whoops of delight. Their mother and I vainly attempted to still them, but Marie had the master touch. Within moments she had them both restored within the sheets, listening in drowsy fascination to her soft rendering of *"Shake lo-tai—Shang-ke lo tai—Tung chi ma-mah Fa cha lai,"* and presently they fell asleep to this crooning of an old Chinese cradle song which, to the bewilderment of their friends, the twins are likely to render, in more raucous tones, to this day.

It put the matter beyond any further doubt in all our minds: Marie must accompany us to England. We fixed it there and then and, one more problem having solved itself, descended the stairs to another martini.

As we ploughed our way through the Yellow Sea a week later, with little more than a gentle pitch of the bows and a scarcely discernible thinning of attendance in the saloon at dinner, we discovered that Marie was flying the distress signal of *mal de mer*. It reluctantly forced the conclusion upon us that, if we were to experience anything less than a flat calm over the next five weeks, there would be little opportunity for my wife and me to combine forces in all, or any, of the fun and games being offered aboard. But we were quite wrong there as well: Marie could exert mind over matter in a most meritable way. Indeed, since no milder means of persuasion could accomplish it, when she was obviously in need of rest, a gentle order became necessary to separate her from her charges. Even that was of little avail, for we were eventually to discover that on such occasions she did no more than conceal herself close by, where she could still watch them without being seen.

As things turned out, if we had come aboard unequipped with a travel-amah, we should probably not have suffered much lack of respite from nursemaid routine. I record this with every appreciation for Marie's never-failing fealty and quite doglike devotion, adding that even had she allowed herself to be *hors de combat* for every day of the voyage it would still have been a rare privilege to have such a woman with us. But we were also privileged by the company, as fellow passengers, of a number of British naval officers from the China Station. Two of them I must mention in particular, for they were both lovable and unforgettable characters whose

close friendship we were to retain and whose subsequent careers we assiduously followed, often by devious means, during the war, right up to their ending.

One, then a post captain, whose name was a household word in the Navy, was destined to die as a rear-admiral and the Commodore of Convoys on the hazardous route to North Russia. The other, much younger, having brought fresh lustre to an honourable name, went down with the *Barham* in November 1941. My wife and I can do no more in salute to their memory in these days than to reflect with pride that we knew them; and recall how lost in admiration and gratitude we were for their inventive genius in bringing joy and ever-fresh entertainment to our sons. It was amazing, in fact, to witness the variety of contrivance which a post captain and a two-striper, vying with each other, could conjure up for the amusement of those three-year-olds. Yet the ever-watchful Marie was always unobtrusively in the background.

It is impossible to forget a very rough day off the Gulf of Aden when the ship in which we were travelling was pitching deep and rolling heavily with a kind of corkscrew twist that jarred her aging timbers. It was no day for contrivances; but undaunted by the somewhat violent motion, one twin was swinging high on a nautical leg whilst the other, clinging unsteadily to a stationary trouser bottom, was impatiently giving tongue to imploring pleas of "Me too!" Then a sudden lurch of the ship threw the precariously balanced two-striper off his station-

ary foot and the boy, then poised in forward flight, let slip his moorings and went hurtling towards the scuppers. Panic-stricken, we instinctively moved forward, fervently praying in that awful second that the rails might save him, just as Marie, materializing from nowhere with a complexion the shade of cigar ash, neatly fielded him with such delicate technique that he immediately came back for more. I imagine she may well have anticipated just such a happening and, regardless of the physical discomfort she was suffering, have poised herself in readiness behind an adjacent vent-shaft.

In retrospect, I have found myself reflecting upon the incident in terms of light and shade: the darker aspect concerns what might have happened if Marie just hadn't been there; the lighter, that were such a thing practicable, she would have qualified for a county cricket trial any day.

Marie confessed, on arrival at Tilbury, that she had never seen England before. But after accepting a few preliminary differences, such as the spectacle of white men catching ropes and handling baggage, she appeared quite unmoved by any aspect of her strange surroundings. Evidently she was adopting the attitude of Kipling's cat to whom all places were alike.

Her wide trousers, flanked on either side by a fair-headed twin, caused little stir along Piccadilly or in Hyde Park, where many strange figures are seen at all hours of every day; but when I motored the family north, eventually arriving at a small re-

sort on the English side of the Solway Firth, the locals really sat up and took notice.

My parents had taken a house for the summer near the mouth of the Firth so that they might share the company of their first grandchildren in the healthy atmosphere of the seaside. Every morning, it seemed, Marie was quite unable to avoid a following as she ambled out with the boys along by the gorse bushes and eventually down to the beach. There the three of them would doodle about the sands, conversing unconcernedly together in Chinese, whilst forming the centrepiece in a conjecturing crowd of Cumbrians. But though Marie with her peculiar dignity was indifferent to any amount of unfamiliar nods and whispers, this was by no means true of my mother when certain implications were borne back to her via tradespeople and such. Having lived all her life in Cumberland, apart from temporary sojourns in warmer climates, with the natural consequence that not only she herself but almost everything that has to do with her is widely known in the county, she found it a little perplexing to be met by a growing succession of sympathetic glances from the inhabitants and downright disturbing to learn the portent of them from one of her closest friends.

"They think Ronald," her friend explained between spasms of ill-concealed mirth, "has come home with a Chinese wife." Then, as if to cheer things up a bit she added, "And they are only consoled because happily the children don't look like her."

It failed to improve matters when, during the

days that were left to me before I got down to work, I decided I had perhaps better forsake the golfcourse and be seen in the company of the twins and their real mother. But wherever we went together, the ever-faithful Marie insisted on accompanying us, walking, with that traditional deference of the native servant, a few paces to the rear, laden down with boats and buckets, extra clothes and, more often than not, a tame and seldom protesting duck called Hunloke, who had come to share with her the boys inseparable companionship. The sight of this rather startling procession, aided by the fact that to local ears there was no distinction between the twins' alternating addresses to "Amah" and "Mama," gave rise to the assumption that I had become thoroughly steeped in the customs of Old Cathay and taken unto myself no less than two wives. But it was not until char-a-banc parties from the industrial towns of West Cumberland began pulling up at the front gate, with well-mannered demands to view "the black woman with the white children," that my mother's usual good humour showed definite signs of deterioration.

We sent for the local police sergeant, who arrived on his bicycle, bearing with him a somewhat faded yellow form for completion in respect of aliens, with which during his thirty-odd years in the force he had never previously been called upon to familiarize himself.

The three of us—Marie, the sergeant and I—sat round the dining room table with the questionnaire before us. The sergeant produced, then moistened

with his tongue a stub of indelible pencil, looked across at Marie and started, "Now, this 'ere . . ." but he made little progress further since it was soon evident that Marie was quite incapable of understanding a solitary word of his dialect. While he removed his helmet and mopped his brow, I picked up the blank to see if I could improve matters. Presently I was engaged in explaining the gist of the thing to Marie in her own tongue. As she answered me in the melodious tones of Mandarin, I caught the look in that Cumberland policeman's eye. He was leaning back in a daze, wondering where on earth his pursuit of the law had now landed him. " 'eathen proceedin's reet enuff an' all" was what I felt he was longing to remark; but he satisfied himself by drawing the back of his hand across a walrus moustache and directing his attention to a bottle of beer on the sideboard.

Four bottles later we had, between us, completed the form except for the important formality of Marie's signature. I indicated that she should inscribe it in Chinese, and with interest I observed her pencil in the two characters for which the phonetic English spelling would be "Ma" and "Lee." I then realized for the first time that through the accepted tendency of the Chinese to substitute an *l* for an *r* (as in "allive" for "arrive") I had been quite mistaken in ever supposing her name to be Marie, though, of course, to us she always continued to remain so.

The sergeant, now somewhat redder in the face, regarded the Chinese characters with grave misgiv-

ings, a state of affairs apparently not improved by his studying them upside down and subsequently from all angles and various distances. "T' inspector won't 'ave this," he announced solemnly. "Like, it seems to . . . well too . . ."

"Too heathenlike?" I suggested.

"Aye—that's reet enuff, Mister!" he agreed, bringing his fist down on the polished mahogany. "Too 'eathenlike."

Only after we had smeared the ball of Marie's right thumb with boot polish and impinged its impression upon the base of the form, would he be satisfied. Then the guardian of the law mounted his bicycle, a little unsteadily, from behind and, with intermittent shakings of the head, had sedately cycled some distance down the road before I realized that I had quite forgotten to ask him to do something about the char-a-banc parties.

During my absence on the business which I had come home to perform, one notable minor incident occurred. That was the occasion on which my mother discovered Marie in the act of giving decent burial to a clutch of eggs in a remote corner of the garden.

"By-n-by plenty velly good," she explained. "Me think after li'l boys b'long big men they velly much likee."

Which reminds me: on the next occasion I visit the Solway Firth, I must remember to have a look and see if they are still there. If so, they should be fairly fruity by this time!

There is much more that I could recount concerning Marie; but I will be content to relate, as a final incident, something to establish beyond doubt the calibre of woman that she was.

On our return voyage East, as we were approaching the China Sea, we were unfortunate enough to strike the full force of a typhoon. I imagine that even to the most hardened sailors in sizable ships, the fury of the typhoon must be a terrifying thing. It certainly was to me and to the handful of others aboard who still remained in a state capable of betraying any emotions at all. For two days and nights, despite battening down and lashing up, one was still conscious of the intermittent thud of heavy objects breaking loose above and below decks and the almost continual crash of crockery from the galleys and pantries. It seemed indeed that all hell had broken loose as the gale howled and screamed relentlessly about us: great seas thundered over the bows as the vessel heeled over so steeply, first to port and then to starboard, that at times one despaired of her ever regaining an even keel.

My wife, a seasoned traveller and normally oblivious to high seas, was completely out. I could do no more for her than to wedge her into her bunk so that she might avoid being flung across the cabin. What Marie must have suffered is impossible even to imagine; yet no amount of coaxing, bribery, or harsh words would persuade her to give up her charges and be left to her agony alone. With pillows and mattresses and everything else soft that she could lay hands on, she barricaded the boys securely in the

bunk where they lay end to end. Clinging to their bed rail and looking sicker than anyone I have ever seen, she sought to overcome their occasional whimpers and soothe their fears. Nothing could defeat that woman.

Employing the only safe means of locomotion, I crawled back along the corridor on all fours to our own cabin. Just as I managed to enter it, the ship broke suddenly from a deep roll to port and, with a cracking wrench of timbers, heaved violently over to starboard. I thought that surely no ship could ride out such a storm as this. The wedges I had placed about my wife fell adrift, and I was just able to prevent her prostrate form being precipitated heavily across the floor. I packed her in again, a little more securely, reassured her concerning Marie and the twins and presently crawled back along the corridor to the others.

I found that Marie was lying down now behind her barricades, with a boy securely held within the crook of either arm. Her face was a ghastly colour and seemed distorted with pain while tears, which she had no hand free to check, rolled down her cheeks.

"Marie!" I implored her, but nothing on land or at sea would either shift her or cause her to utter a word of her woes. Clinging onto the bunk opposite, feeling frightened and far from well myself, I watched her at intervals through that night. Despite her intense anguish, she still contrived to hush the children with the whispered measure of *"Sha-ke lo tai—Shang-ke lo tai . . ."*

We were clear of the storm by daylight; and it was only after I had summoned the harassed and overworked ship's doctor that I discovered that the violent lurch which so nearly dislodged my wife had taken heavy toll of Marie. How she crawled back to the twins is a mystery; and how, without so much as betraying a hint of what had happened, she was able to withstand the terrible buffeting that followed, is little less than a miracle. Few others on this earth could have managed to do it—with a fractured leg.

But then Marie was no ordinary person!

Chapter 9

THE HILL

THE Traveller paused in his climb, looked steadfastly ahead for a moment as though to judge his distance, and then continued on towards the ancient temple which crested the rise and stood guardian over the wide valley that lay beyond.

The old Chinese pedlar with whom he had conversed the previous day at Tsunwha had had a strange tale to relate concerning this temple that held watch over the Eastern Tombs. But he had heard more, and from many, of the grandeur which it surveyed, and his desire for a brief sharing of such splendour had brought the Traveller a full day's journey under the south shelter of the Great Wall to the halting inn at Malanyu. It was from there, just before sunset, that he had begun to climb the hill.

Now he was at the summit, rather breathlessly crossing the outer precincts of the temple, which seemed uncared for and strangely deserted. He passed through the further courtyards and presently into the open again where, beneath a solitary pine,

he came to rest. Then, gradually at first, but with increasing significance, an awareness of some new wonder transfixed him as his eyes absorbed the wide panorama that stretched below.

"To look down upon the Eastern Tombs from the hill above Malanyu when the sun is in the far west is among memories immortal," they had told him. Yet to the Traveller such praise seemed strangely insufficient to this setting. The last rays of sun glinting from the imperial yellow tiles that adorned a score or more of scattered mausoleums, the dignified magnificence of the tombs themselves—the ultimate domains of once dragon-throned Emperors; such impressions of material grace were in themselves sufficient for eulogy, but, surpassing the bounds of normal comprehension, there brooded about the scene an atmosphere of spiritual quietude, a profound sense of peace that held the valley immune from the wild wretchedness of the world that lay beyond it.

The years recently passed had seen the armies of the invader marching relentlessly on, had seen five of the great provinces laid waste through modern war and all China in turmoil. And at this time, not far south of Peking, itself no more than a hundred li to the west, those who had united so that a nation might remain unconquered now grappled with puppets of opposing political creeds, inspired by passions and equipped with weapons all alien to the inherent tranquillity of an age-long elegance.

Down the dusty white highways to the south lurched the monster machines, and in the cities be-

yond the plain were the stir and clash and the shriek of arms that bewilder and destroy. But in the valley no flash came back, no more than a faint echo borne on some idle breeze that but gently stirred the slenderest pine. This was hallowed ground that yet remained sacred to the Lords of the Universe who lay below.

The Traveller tried hard to define the element that held him there. It was perhaps the mystery of the unknown, he thought; for down there among the immortals of their time lay the secrets of forgotten dynasties. There rested the bones of emperors who sprang from a civilization older than any that is known. Their lives were deep-rooted in beliefs that were born before history and their faith in the hereafter was sublime. So it was until, with the pomp and ceremony that was their due, they came to the plain below, on their last journey east from Peking. And as they passed further, unescorted, beyond the provinces that are known, the pattern of their lives might pass as good token when they reached The Yellow Springs.

The wide mountain range to the north grew dusky in the half-light and the shadow of the hill lengthened along the way that led to the east. Above it and beyond, winding interminably through the darkening distance, still sentinel above the furthest peak, stretched the jagged, unbroken line that was the Great Wall of China.

The Watcher by the temple remained immovable, as though he had become absorbed into the drowsy,

still peace that reigned above the sleeping kings. High beauty was in the air and a tranquillity which his age had never known enveloped him.

He rested there unaccompanied, but strangely not alone while that ace of tricksters—Time—slipped back through four decades.

Now he knew that a presence was beside him; a being intangible that spoke with the soft accents of the Manchu dialect. The gentle voice came to him as a whispered echo.

"Look your way to the west, Foreign Friend; faint sounds will follow the dawn and then draw nearer, as slowly the pageant that was Peking unfolds from the dust to pass majestically on its ultimate errand." The voice paused, then added in more pronounced tones, "Look well, for this is the very end of an era."

Shortly, borne on a light breeze, came the single note of a funeral horn, and a fluff of white dust rose across the distant edge of the plain. It seemed as though the cloud moved slowly towards the hill, bearing in its approach the deep intermittent clang of a gong and the high clash of cymbals that echoed back across the valley from the northern heights. Nearer came the wail of lamentation rising and falling above the sing-song chant of a hundred and twenty bearers. Then slowly emerging into view came their burden, the huge catafalque like some great, gaudily arrayed marquee; and the plain was suddenly alive with colour and movement and the eerie noises that are of half-unleashed emotion. At the head of this glittering cortège marched a body-

guard of Manchu princes and all the members of the Grand Council, whose habit it had been to meet their ruler at the dawn of each day in the Hall of Perfect Harmony.

A question had hardly framed itself on The Traveller's lips before the answer came softly from beside him.

"Tz'u Hsi, Empress Dowager and last of the celestial ones; she ruled China for five decades and died in the ninth year of your present century."

Behind the mighty catafalque rode mounted troops followed by the slow ambling gait of camels accompanied by their Mongol attendants. Then borne aloft in procession came a kaleidoscope of the gay honorific umbrellas that had welcomed Her Majesty back from exile eight years earlier. In contrast followed a sedate file of high Lama dignitaries in their sombre robes, then a host of white-clad officials bearing Manchu sacrificial vessels of carved jade, massive incense bearers of gold and silver, Buddhist symbols and colourfully embroidered panels. Slowly the long cortège moved up and halted at the end of its four-day journey from The Forbidden City. Three splendid chariots with trappings and curtains of imperial yellow silk, emblazoned with dragon and phoenix, and two state palanquins similarly arrayed passed on their majestic way and then came to rest. And now the great conclave was about the mausoleum, the most magnificent of them all, built by the faithful Jung Lu for his imperial mistress at a cost calculated at eight millions of taels. The dust drifted upwards and dispersed as the end

of the long procession drew up and the final ceremony at the tomb began.

The richly jewelled couch was ready to receive the coffin while about it were assembled the carved figures of serving maids and eunuchs, destined, it seemed, to stand forever in attendance. The princes, chamberlains and high officials of the Manchu dynasty made ready to take their final farewell of the illustrious dead, while the succeeding Empress Dowager, and the surviving consorts of the imperial house, offered the last rites in the mortuary chamber.

From the hill it was as though The Traveller were existing through some as yet unexplored dimension; that he sensed rather than saw a ritual that was forty years old being re-enacted on the plain below. The conviction, too, came to him that the quiet voice at his side was ageless and the whispering echo of some far richer decade. Indeed it seemed that he stood within a magic circle which was immune from the standards that set a yesterday and a to-morrow. His being had become merged in the unchanging and dateless philosophy where forty years are but a moment and death is no more than a gentle closing of the eyes and a tranquil journeying on.

Again he was aware of the soft tones of the Manchu dialect that somehow divined and then provided expression to his train of thought.

"The two great doors of stone descend for the resting place of the Empress Tz'u Hsi to be closed forever. Alas! that it might be so. It should be that at the instant of that closing, the spirit of the departed ruler is translated to Her Majesty's Ancestral

Tablet. It is in itself no more than a simple strip of carved and lacquered wood, but it is accorded honour and ceremony equal with that which was credited to the sovereign during her lifetime. You see the gorgeous chariot draped with yellow silk that bears its light burden aloft, back from the plain to Peking, along the imperial way that is swept hourly by a thousand men. There, with ceremony unsurpassed in any age or era, the Tablet is accorded its rightful place in the Temple of Ancestors that lies behind the high walls of the Forbidden City. So the spirit returns, perchance to find rest awhile, until the call comes for the ceremony at the Yellow Springs, where body and soul are cleansed new and reunited to roam at will among the sunlit hills of Enduring Concord."

The soft tones melted away, and a sudden darkness descended over the whole valley. Thunder pealed out above the high hills to the north and echoed and reverberated across the wide plain, while angry stabs of lightning seemed to pierce down into the very earth itself.

"Time," the voice whispered above the storm, "Time still plays philanderer. To the mind that would use it for measure you are moving forward instantly through two decades. Now watch as the lightning strikes. . . ."

Then The Traveller saw that from a pageant of reverential splendour the scene at the tomb of the Great Empress had transformed itself into one of stark horror. A rabble of shouting grey-clad figures had torn asunder the great doors of the mausoleum

and were rifling the mortuary chamber of its precious contents, the trappings of a Queen that were intended to accompany her through the gardens of fragrance. Loaded and then borne away on crude ox carts were the sacrificial vessels, the incense burners of gold and silver and the carved jade and ivory figures that had stood watch over their imperial mistress for just under twenty years. Nothing seemed sacred to this unaccountable mob of sacrilegious vandals—nothing. A blinding flash from the skies revealed the most unbelievable horror of all—*the body was being dragged out from the coffin* . . . It was something most shockingly macabre, so grotesquely unreal as to be indefinable. Yet The Traveller knew that it had actually happened. It was done, he recalled, by the disbanded, unpaid soldiers of an avenging war lord; some said at the instigation of an uncouth and callous authority. That was immaterial; the tragedy lay in the poignant fact that it had happened.

As swiftly as it had descended, the storm passed and a blazing sun bore down on the plain, betraying the now deserted and empty tomb. Near at hand lay the naked body of the Great Dowager Empress with every feature still perfectly intact and, even in such utter abandonment, strangely calm and serene. And she lay there exposed, yet quite impervious, to the changing elements of numberless days.

Then, unaccountably, she was there no longer as the voice, still gently, yet a little more urgently, breathed again at his side.

"It is no more than the symbol of a restless age.

The deep sorrows of China are closely interwoven with those of Ts'u Hsi: voyagers in suspense, since mortals do not choose to leave them undisturbed. For centuries the empire that was China was changeless and immune; the dawn of her civilization is dateless, though for a thousand years it has gradually declined. But the ancient sages were wise in their time, and their elegant philosophies, steeped in the old laws of cultural perfection, have lived on down the dynasties. They will continue to exist through the period of adjustment while the best, for a while, must needs lie dormant. The factor of time is immaterial; for progress—no scribe has designed a character to portray its meaning. Prosperity is known; it is born and lives solely within the mind at rest. No culture, no art, in their unchanging fashions were practised elsewhere in higher degree: no change can ever destroy such refinements, for China is essentially unchangeable. Four hundred millions of her people have been content to crave no more than a meagre life from the soil about their homes and the divine right to indulge the sacred code of filial piety. The great continent, once proudly ruled from the Dragon Throne, is stirring restlessly, but the influences that despoil her come from beyond her wide horizons. The invaders have come—the Mongols and the Tartars and the little men from the islands to the East. The outer provinces have been dispossessed for such that you term as time; it is a transitory thing, for always the people will return and the country remain mistress of her own destinies. China is vast, she is all-absorbing;

tolerant of her transgressors, unchanging in the relentless march of events about her; inscrutable, immovable and quite unconquerable. It is appropriate for it to be known that the country which the Great Emperors once ruled must suffer the internal strife of readjustment; that it is a phase in the struggle to recapture a spirit of nationalism which was lost when twilight fell over the Forbidden City. The surge is so that an ordered unity may replace the days of chaos and yield the nation strength from which will be born anew the old independence. There are the expediences of the East, used in some measure to counter those of the West, but there is no ideology that does not spring naturally from the hearts and minds of the people. China will never become heir to a doctrine that tends to destroy her heritage of human rights nor will she bear the yoke of overlords from beyond her borders. She is ever intolerant of influences that would defile the elegance of her ancient culture, and men should know the uselessness of their endeavours to implant upon her the ways that are not written in her philosophy. In the history of China forty years are no more than a moment and immune from the ruins that your progress brings about the world; hereabouts may once more become the cradle of a calmer civilization. It is no more than a matter of values."

There was a pause and when the voice spoke again it was only the breath of a whisper.

"Foreign Friend, you have come to the Hill, as no doubt others may, in search of something. You will have found only this: that in the great heart of

countless millions of Chinese people there are dignity, pride and sufficiency. Their desire in life is as simple as was Tz'u Hsi's in death—*to be left undisturbed.* Now rest for a while before you travel on beyond the Hill in your full world with its yesterdays and its tomorrows. As you go, may you yet remember and repeat and respect that simple phrase: it is the message of Malenyu.

". . . . . to be left undisturbed."

A chill breeze stirred the branches of the pine tree under which he lay. Gradually The Traveller became aware of a strange emptiness in the atmosphere about him—an uneasy sense of being suddenly alone. A wandering mist swept clear of the hill and a pale moon was shining across the valley where the Great Emperors lay at rest.

Chapter 10

PORTRAIT OF A WAR LORD

MENG LI FU was not his real name; neither for that matter was the one by which he was universally known. In China there is much in a name: one inherited from less exacting or ambitious forbears is likely, if inappropriate, to prove a handicap to those who seek the highest rank in their particular profession; and there exists in China a far greater tendency for a man's name to be regarded as a clue to his characteristics. Consequently a Chinese with the inherited appellation of "Swaying Bamboo"—suggesting that he be no more than a reed shaken by the wind—would have little chance of ever becoming a war lord unless he took steps to exchange it for one that was more fitting. The astute Marshal Meng had, quite early in his military career, rectified precisely such a state of affairs, thus enabling himself subsequently to emerge into official prominence as "Lord of the Elegant Sword."

Less officially, in the course of his swashbuckling rise to military governorship, he had, in addition, acquired one or two other titles. His soldiers, who

spontaneously regarded him as Deity, referred to him in open reverence as Tiger Fang; the provincial peasantry, whom he taxed well-nigh out of existence, dubbed him, though always from a safe distance, The Monster Leech of Loyang. In strange and simple contrast, I addressed him, though but once at his request, as Herbert: a title too incongruous by far, when I came to think of it, for a young foreigner to bestow habitually upon an aging and quite heathen marshal of Chinese armies who held, and indeed exercised, the power of life and death over tens of millions of people. Besides, though while the kaoliang wine flowed freely he liked me to consider him the Kitchener of China and address him familiarly as such, he was subject to such quick and quite unaccountable changes of mood that an ill-timed "Herbert" might have served to sever our relations, if indeed not improbably, my head.

At heart, though by no means in mind, Marshal Meng was essentially a simple man; but perceived through Occidental eyes, certain of his habits and practices might well give rise to doubts concerning his over-all merit. For my part, I never considered it my business to judge him. Neither is this rough sketch of a remarkable and often astonishing man, who projected his personality so forcibly upon my Western mind, designed in criticism or caricature: it is an unvarnished portrait drawn from still vivid memories of a brief encounter.

It took me nearly two weeks to discover that, in

the course of my vain endeavours to meet Marshal Meng, I had succeeded in becoming a source of unearned income to a host of those responsible for his protection. On first boldly advancing to the outer gates of his palatial Yamen I was immediately arrested by a scruffy-looking sentry equipped with Sherlock Holmes hat, bulging bandolier, a carbine to which was attached by wire an instrument like a meat skewer and, as a touch of the more modern Mars, two Mills bombs hung with twine and dangling precariously from his belt hooks. It cost me a dollar to speak to the sergeant and two more to interview the lieutenant who, in exchange for my cigarettes, suggested I should return on the morrow. On that and subsequent days I persevered through the costly expedient of allowing myself to be initially arrested, released and, at ever increasing expense, passed through successive ranks to be dismissed on each occasion at the level of one grade higher. I suffered this daily experience thus far in the knowledge that it was in accordance with accepted procedure; and on the eleventh day perseverance was rewarded by my introduction to an unshaven character, with cotton wool bursting forth from his quilted tunic, who purported to be a general. He, having intimated (not without avail) that he was temporarily embarrassed to the extent of twenty-five dollars, presently proceeded to inform me, with an elegant display of courteous apology, that the Tuchan was absent on a visit to his native Loyang. It was then I decided that this extravagant form of tomfoolery was obviously no more than

wasted effort; no one among my inquisitors had even inquired as to what might be the nature of my business with the Marshal; and when on one occasion I volunteered the information, it was met by a conspicuous lack of interest. So, accompanied only by a sense of frustration and the little that was left of my "ready," I turned my steps somewhat disconsolately away—back in the direction of the Treaty Port from whence I had speculatively come.

The Chinese military, I concluded, are certainly no exception to the enigma which characterizes the whole of their nation. There, for instance, was that sentry whose equipment was held together by bits of wire and twine, and the unshaven general with his tunic falling to pieces; and yet . . . and yet . . .

My mind had harked back to my service with the Shanghai Volunteers in which I had been a proud member of the Scottish Company; and now, welcoming any distraction from the bitter disappointment of my failure to meet Marshal Meng, I pondered on the strange contrast which had occurred to me.

With the possible exception of the French Foreign Legion, the Shanghai Volunteer Corps, recruited from all sections of the community for the protection of the International Settlement, must have represented the most cosmopolitan company of assorted soldiery to be found anywhere in the world. The Commanding Officer was a Regular British Army colonel whose appointment was sponsored by the War Office, and at that time the Adjutant was a gallant and immaculate gentleman who had been seconded to the unit from the Scots Guards. So far

as I am aware, no other regular soldiers of any nationality were employed on the strength. The second-in-command, during my service with the Corps, was a Portuguese business man, and the Headquarters Staff was composed of a rare diversity in race and colour, all of which combined to maintain an efficient and well-trained body of men.

In pride of place on ceremonial occasions invariably came the cavalry. This consisted of the American Troop, who sat astride their Chinese ponies garbed in "Mounty" hats, and the British Light Horse, perhaps naturally composed of the younger element among the racing and hunting community. The squadron of mounted Englishmen invariably looked resplendent with spurs to their boots and chainmail burnished about their shoulders; second only, of course, to the Shanghai Scottish, they lent a great deal of colour and smart bearing to all ceremonial parades. I am sure it was altogether a gross injustice to their habits that some jealous wit of a footslogger had once thought fit to dub them "The Tight Horse"—but inevitably the name stuck!

Then came the companies of infantry: the English contingent, which included in its ranks one or two Chinese who rightly claimed to be British because they were born in Hong Kong; the Americans, bearing their firearms on what seemed to an Englishman the wrong shoulder and swinging their own arms across their stomachs; the Portuguese, rather diminutive and dark-skinned; the Filipinos, still more diminutive and even darker-skinned; the Chinese company, all bespectacled and with a tendency to

break into the goose step; the Russians with their greatcoats neatly furled about them, even in a Shanghai summer, and then, preceded by pipers in plaid and plume, invariably raising the biggest cheer from the region of the saluting base, came the swinging sporans and pipe-clayed spats of the Shanghai Scottish—three score more of kilted exiles from their fathers' land.

In addition to the Inspection and March Past, there was another annual affair in the curriculum of the Shanghai Volunteers which produced a sense of rivalry and called for a great deal of earnest preparation. It was the inter-unit competition, adjudicated by the General Officer Commanding the British Garrison in China, to decide which was the smartest, most efficient all-round company or squadron of the whole Corps.

Though we "Shanghailanders" were always determined to take this opportunity of proving through a generous display of all that was best in soldierly qualities that we were second to none, the fact must be recorded that we never, in my time, won the trophy; neither, for that matter, did any of the other British or American units.

What happened was all the more remarkable to me since in the course of my wanderings through the interior of North China I frequently found myself in the vicinity of some native garrison; and it had amused me to witness the ill-equipped rabble of some rising war lord undergoing their military exercises. It was all precisely in keeping with the burlesque sentry hung with Mills bombs and the

broken-down general who begged me for twenty-five dollars. They would not, I feel sure, be lacking in courage, but in appearance and drill Chinese troops in their native surroundings always suggested to me a mob of overgrown slum-children playing at soldiers on a waste plot of land. In those days, before China was faced with a common foe, and prior to the beginnings of the prolonged struggle between the Nationalist and Liberation armies, no one took China's frequent civil wars with any great degree of seriousness: least of all, no doubt, the bulk of participants themselves who probably knew, to a lesser extent even than anyone else, what might be the cause of the conflict. The conflict itself invariably consisted of no more than a few days' skirmishing before the inevitable buying and selling of troops began; and, as a consequence, the swashbuckling commander who had drained the resources of the local peasantry to the better advantage of his war chest was invariably in a position to proclaim himself the victor. And then everyone went home to tea.

By this it may be gathered that the discipline and efficiency of Chinese soldiers, in those comparatively recent days, could serve no very good purpose and was therefore of little account; and this, in turn, makes it all the more remarkable to reflect on the fact that the inter-unit competition of the Shanghai Volunteer Corps, with an almost Guards-like standard of fitness was always, or nearly always, won—and deservedly so—by the company of infantry which was officered and manned throughout by Chinese.

My mind alternated between such as the sentry

I had left behind at the Yamen gates, whose profession was supposed to be that of a soldier, and the company of Chinese business clerks in Shanghai who moulded themselves into a pattern that might well be seen within the railings of Wellington Barracks . . .

Reflection on this strange paradox had occupied my thoughts for the best part of a mile on my homeward journey before my meditations were suddenly arrested by the unmistakable clatter of many horsemen ahead and the sight of a dust cloud rolling towards me from the distance. I stepped hurriedly off the narrow and crudely metalled track out of the way of their swift approach; and presently what appeared to be a heavily armed squadron of Chinese cavalry came cantering into view. The detachment, about thirty strong, was preceded by a pair of outriders bearing heavy executioners' swords over their shoulders, the main body riding four abreast immediately behind a standard bearer. They were uniformly clad in light-grey padded coats topped by rather motheaten fur caps with ear flaps; each had a bandolier and a carbine slung across his shoulder and bumped along uneasily astride sturdy, though ill-groomed, Mongolian ponies. But in the very centre of the cavalcade, flanked by another pair of ceremonial swordsmen, rode an outstanding and quite exceptional figure: he was far more smartly accoutred than the rest and, in even greater contrast, was reining in a magnificent beast which from every appearance might well have been foaled on The Curragh. By every precept this figure should

have been the fabulous Marshal himself; obviously, though, he was not, since the centrepiece around which this grizzly escort moved was beyond all doubt a foreigner. Moreover, I observed to my amazement, as in passing he cast a critical glance at me standing ankle-deep in a paddy, that the features were more than familiar: they were unmistakably those of the ever-adventurous "Mad Boy" McCammond who had caused Treaty-Port life to become both the quieter and the poorer by his disappearance from its then gay security some six or so years earlier. I was in two minds as to whether or not I should turn back. I was sufficiently intrigued to try to learn more, and besides, there at least was a man who might well prove the means of accomplishing my mission. However, on further reflection I came to the conclusion that even to see Mad Boy again and listen to his story—no doubt a fascinating one—was not worth the risk of a new series of expensive arrests. Then, almost immediately after I had started again on my way, I was aware of galloping hooves behind me and in turning saw the familiar figure draw level, rein in and dismount, almost in one effortless action.

"It's yourself sure enough, then," he greeted me.

"Mad Boy, this is grand!" I cried. "So you did recognize me?"

"Sure, and how could I not?" Then suddenly, looking slightly apprehensive, he added, "And how the divil did you know I was here?"

I could hardly restrain a smile. Whatever he was up to, Mad Boy had apparently lost none of his Irish conceit.

"If I'd known *you* were here," I replied, "I probably wouldn't have been arrested on eleven successive days on charges of attempting to see the Marshal."

He threw back his head and laughed. "Praise be to the pigs!" he exclaimed. " 'Tis always the same. But come along now and if it's himself that you're after, then sure 'tis aisy enough for you to be seeing him to-day."

We started back, I with mingled feelings of surprise and delight.

"But tell me," I asked, "what in the name of all that's insane have you got yourself up to now?"

"Praise be! And did you know I'm a general?" he replied. "And indeed I'm prouder still of the tidy price that's set about my head; it's a long story I'd be telling. But now what will it be that brings you after plaguing the Marshal?"

"Well!" I exclaimed, thankful that somebody had actually asked me at last. "It's roads. I believe there's a big scheme afoot for threading the province with roads. I'm only interested commercially," I added with caution.

What I gathered to be two bodyguards had now joined us and taken over my companion's horse as we slowly retraced our way to the Yamen.

"Roads," he reflected. "Yes, and indeed there was a scheme, but now . . . Anyhow, you'll be talking to the Marshal; it's himself that better be telling you."

"I've just paid twenty-five dollars for the priv-

ilege of learning that 'Himself' is in Loyang," I informed him.

"And indeed he was. What would you be thinking the dust storm just now was all about? Sure, it was no more than 'Himself' coming back from Loyang."

"The Marshal!" I exclaimed. "Marshal Meng—but . . . but which was he?"

"You may ask," came the reply, "for I'm niver quite certain myself. You see, he'll always be riding as one of the escort."

"Indeed! Is that caution or democracy?"

"Divil, and it's a bit of 'em both," replied Mad Boy, "but he does it, I'd be saying, chiefly for the fun of the thing."

I smiled. "He must be a character."

"A character, you're saying! He's a barrelful of monkeys in mischief and cruder by far than McGinty's backyard. But he's as fine a man as ever you'll be meeting. I'd die for him ivery day, even if 'twere not my job to be doing just that."

We had regained the outer approaches to the Yamen, and I was about to ask my friend the extent to which he was rewarded for this quaintly expressed privilege when there was a metallic clatter on the stone cobbles. I observed that my now startled acquaintance, the scruffy sentry so much of whose daily routine had been lately taken up in arresting me, was in the act of presenting arms. It was a remarkable performance made even more distinctive by the fact that in its process the meat skewer became detached from the muzzle of his carbine and,

as we passed, lay adjacent to a pair of carpet-slippered extremities.

"You'll be welcome in my quarters," my friend was saying. "They're roomy enough and Danny—the pilot—'s away."

I murmured my thanks.

"Sure and you can stay," he went on, "if indeed for the love of Michael you'll not be crying out your eyes with laughing, or be forfeiting your head for the loss of his face."

I began deliberating with some apprehension on the extent to which acceptance might prejudice my fond hopes for a long future.

"Of course," I said, rather lamely, "it's very good of you . . . very good indeed of you . . . I . . ."

"Not at all, at all, now," he interrupted me. "I'll arrange for the Marshal to be seeing you at six. 'Tis the hour before that is his sacred one."

"Sacred one?" I inquired. "The hour of Mogreb or something?"

Mad Boy was smiling. " 'Himself,' " he said, "is, if you'll not be knowing it, a high priest among heathen. I might be telling you about that hour, but 'tis better, maybe, yourself should be finding out. And if you'll be curbing that gape of surprise, he'll be showing you the finest man to be born beyond Kerry—and a bagful of pranks besides."

I was indeed surprised, if not bewildered, from the first moment of my meeting with the Marshal. I thought Mad Boy must have been back at his old tricks when he ushered me into an apartment which

was utterly devoid of any furniture or adornments save for a single bench set against one of the bare and crudely plastered walls. In the middle of this rickety form sat a huddled and begrimed creature clothed in the tattered garments of an impoverished outlaw. I glanced over my shoulder and noted that the door had been closed behind me, so that I stood alone in a state of embarrassed uncertainty before this strange and sorry figure who neither looked up nor made the slightest stir of life at my entrance. Then it occurred to me that this must be an anteroom to the Marshal's private apartment and that if I instilled into the bedraggled creature before me the urgency of my appointment, something would assuredly happen. I tried it, only to find that my idea was a mistaken one. Raising my voice to some semblance of authority, I inquired in Chinese who he was, adding that it would be as well that he answer my question, if indeed he was equipped with the faculties of hearing any speech. That utterance caused him to stir, though no more than perceptibly. But the reply which it evoked, surprising in itself, staggered me the more by the fact that it was not framed in the local dialect but delivered in the soft measured tones of Mandarin.

"I can hear and I can speak. You ask me who I am. I answer I am a common soldier. You are, I suppose, an Englishman, for you are impatient and obviously lacking a little in elegance. What might it be that you want?"

Intrigued though I was, I recovered my composure quickly, since I found myself to be little en-

amoured of the twist of this clever ruffian's tongue.

"I have an appointment with the Marshal," I replied brusquely. "Please show me to him immediately."

The tattered and uncouth creature before me then slowly raised his head and looked me straight in the eye. As he did so, I vividly remembered some children's pantomime in which the ogre is, in a flash, transformed into a glittering figure of princeliness. An exaggerated metaphor, maybe, but it was just as though the tattered trappings and generally begrimed appearance all magically fell away. A countenance rich in infinite wisdom and full of fearless intent, it was in every way the most striking I have thus far seen: indeed, a remarkable face. It was at once ruthless and kindly, and precious to behold in that moment when I became aware that the features were indisputably those of the Marshal.

Clumsily, of course, I endeavoured to make amends. I clicked my heels, then bobbed my head three times towards him, said "Your Excellency" in Chinese and added "Sorry" in my own tongue: in all, I suppose, a pretty poor pattern of apology.

"*Mai-yeo-fa-t'ze,*" he said, rather wearily I thought; and then, as though it might be in mimicry, astounded me by translating the expression into English. "It is," he repeated, "of little account."

Then, with an elegant gesture, he removed his hands from the frayed folds of their opposite sleeves and motioned me to be seated beside him. I could not help observing those hands: to his general unkempt and bedraggled appearance, they were as

much in contrast as was the form of his face and expression. They were most exquisitely shaped and, beneath the grime, undoubtedly smooth. Somehow it was difficult to escape a conviction that the dirt had been deliberately applied; it was as though the man were a well-bred actor cast in the role of destitute beggar. And here I was to find that, for once, my conviction was perfectly right.

Obeying his injunction, I seated myself cautiously at his side; for the bench we now shared was so crudely carpentered that it swayed perilously beneath us. Thus I sat for a time, in mortal dread, not daring to imagine such a scene as might ensue should this frail thing collapse in the course of our conversation. Already I had been embarrassed enough and prayed only to be spared this final catastrophe.

"To-morrow," said the Marshal, reverting suddenly to his native tongue, "I beg that you will honour me by acceptance of my hospitality in an atmosphere more appropriate to a foreign guest of obvious distinction. To-day, I would crave your pardon and ask you to excuse me: I am weary and not a little troubled."

I thanked him and in token of my appreciation and sympathy inclined myself gracefully from the waist towards him. Hastily, however, I made frantic endeavour to restore equilibrium, and with but a fraction of time to spare. As though to mock my movement, the seat had inclined in equal degree to the accompaniment of an ominous creak, causing the Marshal, who must needs be borne with it, a

moment of alert apprehension. That put "paid" to any attempts at elegance: I was much too precariously perched for further excursions into the courtesies of China. Henceforward I posed in the sadly lost style once assumed by cockaded footmen of Edwardian England, whose immobile attitude above the box bestowed dignity upon the crested carriages of society in more spacious days.

"To-morrow," continued the war lord, as calm was restored, "you will feast with the Marshal Meng Li Fu. Just now, you honour with your company no more than his most humble servant. A fact," he concluded, "which, to judge from your manner, was apparent on your entry."

"No one," I protested in all sincerity, "could fail to detect the Lord of the Elegant Sword, even though he may, for good reasons unknown to me, adopt trappings that would better become a bandit."

As I finished my sentence I became conscious of the fact that he was for the first time regarding me with interest.

"You speak my language surprisingly well for a foreigner," he remarked, "and the turn of your phrase suggests that you were born to be wise. But I fear I must call you to a state of correction. These trappings, as you term them are those of Lao Er, the lowest of all my menials, who, as you earlier suggested, is normally mute. But, as yet, not *one* among the force which form the Yamen guard, nor indeed within the garrisons beyond, has proclaimed me, thus guised, as Lord of the Elegant Sword."

"But surely—your features . . ." I began.

With no more than an elegant twist of his hand, he bade me hold my words.

"You must be unaware, I think, of certain matters. The first concerns me, the rest are affairs among the men of my armies. Was I not born to become a marshal of China, then indeed I should have been known as an actor—less talented maybe than Mei Lang Fan, but certainly more robust."

He paused as though to allow the significance of this statement its due measure of appreciation, and then continued:

"It is perhaps well that I be endowed with the ability to play a part. You see, there is much that may be said in the presence of one who is widely believed to lack the gifts of hearing and speech. Thus it is that the mute menial by whom you sit may sweep at will about the quarters of the Guard or, at such times as his uncertain health permits, boil tea for those who argue in idleness about the barrack-room. Lao Er, you will understand, must needs be a sickly man equipped with an absentee warrant which applies whenever the Marshal has affairs elsewhere. In effect, though, by some strange unquestioned artifice that is all his own, the same sick servant contrives to follow the High Tuchan on his many missions to the garrisons further afield; and if, perchance, the Marshal must unwillingly treat with the scum of a so-called central government, the slatternly presence of his silent shadow performs an essentially significant service."

The war lord cleared his throat as though to indi-

cate that his utterances were still short of their climax.

"I am told," he went on, "that you are an Englishman with a high sense of honour; and therefore I have no doubt that, in accordance with your Western code, I may belittle myself in your mind by the fact that I spy upon my soldiers. It is a pity if this be so, since it is my desire that, in exchange for my confidences, you, in turn, may honour me with certain of yours."

He continued immediately, as though to safeguard his remarks against the slightest intrusion: "So first I must explain this poor wretch who has been tortured and horse-whipped and was once all but hanged by disorderly elements among my Guard, and tell you why I cannot as yet grant him his only wish, which is the privilege of peacefully dying. As it is, I may well die first, since these days are precarious and the elements of treachery abound in whichever direction I turn the deaf ears of Lao Er. I must know the extent of it and from whence it springs; there is much that I have learnt in the past few days, but . . ." He stopped abruptly. "Why do you look at me in such surprise?"

"I . . . I must beg your pardon," I stammered. "I thought . . ."

"Of course," he reassured me. "The Marshal was indeed in Loyang; but Lao Er has not been blind to the discomforts of your several arrests. You are a persistent man, I think. Perhaps you will inform me of the cost of your persistence in the matter of bribes."

"It is of no account," I replied briefly.

"Then I, too, can be persistent," said the Marshal severely. "I would like to know how much you paid to the officers and men of the Yamen Guard."

"Well,"—I made a rapid calculation and divided the answer by half—"certainly not more than forty-five dollars in all."

"Ai Ya!" exclaimed the war lord. "You have paid my soldiers forty-five dollars!"

"Perhaps it was not quite so much," I added rather nervously.

"If you had paid them ninety dollars," replied the Marshal, "I should have been better pleased. Because, you see," he blandly concluded, "now for six moons past I have paid them nothing at all."

I was struck by the frankness of his utterance, which explained so much that I had recently experienced.

"Forty-five dollars," he reflected, "adds an urgency to your persistence; and is it, as the Irish general suggests, all in aid of my roads?"

"Not in their construction," I explained, seizing this unexpected opportunity to expand upon the objects of my mission, "but there is a substance which hardens the surface. It . . ."

"We will forbear for the moment," he broke in, "to discuss any questions of surface: there are matters which to me are of much deeper moment. I have the wish to know, first, the Englishman's impression of *me*."

This was wholly unexpected.

"I have no knowledge of official opinion," I re-

plied tactfully, "since I am neither of the Embassy nor of the Consular service. But wholeheartedly I will proclaim my own, which is widely shared, and say you are regarded as a soldier of brave distinction, an administrator of considerable merit and, over-all, a figure never-failing in its ability to capture the imagination of the multitude. Politically, it is a matter of common knowledge that you are out of sympathy with the central government and that in no greater degree are you attracted to their perpetual enemies—the new People's Army—whose rising strength Nanking but vainly endeavours to suppress. It is thought," I continued, "at least by the traders, that you may well be such a man as might hold the balance of power between these main elements of continual civil strife, since where you might choose to throw the weight of your loyal and independent armies should serve in itself to settle the issue."

The suggestion of a sigh escaped the Marshal. "I would surrender life that it might be so," he whispered. And then on a louder, more hopeful note he added, "As it is, it must, I suppose, be the roads. Indeed there may be only the roads left on which to depend for the continued existence of my power and the maintenance of all my men at arms. So *unless,*"—he laid emphasis on the word—"unless it may happen that you and your trader friends will lend some measure of practical support to the polite opinions you have so elegantly expressed, then as a last resort I must turn to the highways to deaden the attention of my troops to the rebellious elements; the

infiltrators who are finding their way into each of the scattered garrisons that house what you have generously termed my loyal and independent armies. A soldier, you know," he continued more slowly and softly, "is first of all human: he remains loyal and independent for only so long. After a time his independence must needs be fortified by some token for his service, lest his loyalty become subject to barter among agents from the armies of others."

While he paused for a moment I endeavoured to sort out in my mind the significance of what he had said. But I completely failed to fathom how it might be that the construction of highways would serve to prevent the desertion of unpaid troops to forces opposed to his. As to his alternative suggestion, I had no doubt that it was his intention to become more precise.

"If, as you suggest," the war lord went on presently, "that I hold the balance of power in China, is that not in itself a sufficiency upon which to come to agreement? I am aware of the millions of British money tied up in the Treaty Ports and which in the passage of time, I would warn you, may well become forfeit. Now, were I to offer for development, to your industrialists and engineers, the wide virgin territories of China that are beholden to me—in themselves both vaster and richer than all England—would you not, in return for such monopoly, extend your support and indulgence to me?"

This astounding offer, which I took to be genuine, led me to take refuge from immediate commitment behind long-winded explanations concerning

government recognitions, international agreements and commercial treaties about which, I may say, my knowledge was probably on a par with that of the sentry in the Sherlock Holmes hat.

He lent polite ear to this rambling discourse until such time as I dried up completely. Then he replied with a patient air:

"But I think you misunderstand me. I am well aware that this is a matter which cannot be negotiated through the diplomatic authorities whose letters of credence are addressed to the central government. For this reason it is to *you*—please understand, to you personally—that I am making this offer. Since I am told that you are the representative of perhaps the most prominent among all British industries possessing wide interests which are quite independent of governments and embassies, to you, alone, therefore, I am affording the opportunity of a great development in your own interests, in return for which I would ask no more than—shall we say—a few hundred thousand of taels in first token of good faith and understanding. I think it is a bargain which you would be wise to accept."

It seemed hard to grasp the fact that I had come here in the hope of selling an experimental ton or two of surface hardening, only to find myself sharing a precarious bench with a fabulous war lord, dressed up as a deaf-and-dumb coolie, who was seriously trying to interest me in the purchase of eighty thousand square miles of Central China.

"Will you accept?" he insisted.

"But Marshal," I pleaded, "this cannot be decided by me."

"It cannot!" he shouted in tones of rising anger. "It cannot! Then who are you who dare to intrude upon my time? Must I remind you that I am Meng Li Fu—a marshal of China, the dignity of whose position confines his attention solely to others who are of sufficient eminence to provide his proposals with an instant Yes or No?"

This roiled me: the man was being childish. "Very well, Your Excellency," I said coldly. "Then I will give you an immediate reply: the answer is No."

I sat stock still in the deathly hush that was eventually broken by the war lord's reversion to a more normal manner.

"You are a brave man," he said quietly, "and I respect you the more for it." He paused and then added more slowly, "Tell me, at what would you assess your worth?"

"My worth?"

"Shall we say, ten thousand taels?"

"You mean . . ."

"You suggested," he explained, "that my trappings might better become the bandit. Maybe I might better become the character too, since unless my roads mature with promptitude, I will indeed be a desperate man. It would be easy—very easy, I think—to hold you to hostage, though, of course, an honoured guest, for as many weeks as it might take your industrial lords to negotiate terms for your release. Do you not agree?"

Having delivered himself of this ominous statement, he regarded me with intent for a second before becoming suddenly charged with a new urgency. All in one instant he shuffled his feet, rose abruptly and moved swiftly to the door, which I was presently aware had closed behind him. It was a manoeuvre which, in that moment of my grave apprehension, could not have been more perfectly timed to catch me offguard. As I picked myself up a little painfully from the floor, I could only believe that it was deliberately done. I stood dusting my suit, stupidly surveying the splintered remains of the bench, and vaguely speculated on what there might be to follow. Then the door fell slightly ajar again and Mad Boy's head appeared, like a conspirator's, round it.

"Praise be to the Almighty!" he whispered. "Surely now and you've not been allowing him to upset yourself?"

"Oh no!" I replied in louder tones. "But, if you have such a thing in captivity, I could surely use a drink."

"Eight swords!" I ventured, thrusting forward three fingers of my right hand; but the wily Marshal had simultaneously shot out no more than an elegant two. In strict unison we closed our respective palms to throw them open again with a changed display of digits and his accompanying call of "Five bamboos!" The estimate was no more correct; so the traditional contest continued until the loser was found and called to pay forfeit: the result, I felt

sure, was a foregone conclusion, since the war lord in his cups was craftier still.

"Nine stars!" he bellowed.

"Four flowers!" I countered.

"One phoenix."

"Six scrolls—ah!" His fully open palm mocked at my solitary upraised finger while the Marshal graciously bowed to me as a victor may to the vanquished. I, in turn, appropriately raised my cup, brimful of the warm wine from kaoliang, first to him with a ringing "kam-bei" and then to my lips to drain the measure, in accordance with tradition, in a single quaff.

"Ai Ya!" exclaimed the war lord. "What the Irish general has told me is right. It seems, indeed, that both your legs must be hollow."

As I put my cup down it was immediately replenished from a burnished kettle by an exquisite maiden with a camellia in her tightly bound raven hair. Her figure was so elegantly slender as to be scarcely discernible beneath a gown of patterned brocade fashioned high to the throat and slit from ankle to knee.

In answer to my formal inquiries she said that her name was White Floating Lotus and that she would be seventeen in the first moon of the coming year. She was certainly wise to the use of cosmetics and, I should hazard, despite her coy façade, to the ways of the world as well.

White Floating Lotus was utterly mine. With an extravagant gesture Marshal Meng Li Fu had, halfway through the fourteenth dish, made me an en-

tirely unsolicited gift of her. For himself, despite an outward air of utter indifference, he appeared well content with the yet younger charms of Precious Blue Hill. Her close and quite immovable proximity to the Marshal's chair proclaimed her a hussy, while it afforded the war lord the use of but one overworked hand for his chopsticks, his cup, his more elegant gestures and an increasing insistence to engage me in the finger game.

"W. F. Lotus" and "P. B. Hill," as the droll pilot Danny proclaimed them, had just arrived at the Yamen by air from Shanghai. It was all in the day's work for Danny to purchase such playthings for the Marshal; but, as the pilot put it to me, "The Old Man's apt to be choosy and it's no picnic when I'm ordered to return the empties."

Apart from the playthings, we were a party of six until Danny passed quietly out, and the night was designed on a truly imperial scale. Certainly the Marshal was *en fête* and, in his gala rig, a striking contrast to the equally unforgettable figure who had so thoroughly unsettled me on the evening before. Now he was resplendent in a uniform—fashioned, I was told, from his own design—of blue and scarlet and gold, emblazoned with trappings and an extravagant cluster of orders in odd design. Except for the *gendarme's* hat—two sizes too small with a bobble on top—which reposed upon his head throughout the night, his attire resembled that which I once saw worn by a French firechief at a function in the town of Tours. But whether he was thus fabulously arrayed or clothed in rags was of little account to

me, drawn as I was by the strange magnetism of the Marshal's mien. Unshaven and deliberately begrimed or, as now, smooth and flushed with wine and lit by the glow of abandon, his was ever a face indescribably brave and, in moments of unguarded repose, still charged with the wisdom of all things, set off by an air of effortless grace. I found it utterly impossible to believe that even the dullest among his near-million garrisoned men could fail for a moment to detect that the eyes of a mute Lao Er were in reality those of the Marshal. This led me to wonder how much I should accept among the things which he had said on the previous day. Could this brave face have been carved on a figure of no more than fabulous fun, or was it just that he was a man possessed of a puckish wit? Was he certain that I would sprawl on the floor when he suddenly rose from the rickety bench and, of paramount importance, was I indeed even now being held as his hostage? I knew the answer to none of these things; and not a glimmer could I gain from Mad Boy McCammond, whom I had taxed all day with my questions and whose features I sought again now in search of some possible, unguarded clue.

There was nothing to be discerned. He sat, a little ruffled maybe with too much food and wine, but still erect, rather formal and, unlike the Mad Boy I had known of old, keeping an obviously tight rein on sobriety. He was uniformed in undress order of light field grey, and his tunic, with epaulets bearing the Chinese insignia of a general, had obviously been cut with precision. On his breast hung

three medals. The first two were rewards for service with the Marshal; the third, the Military Cross, he had gained in some minor British operation during the early twenties, not long after he had been gazetted from Sandhurst. It was strange indeed to see the latter worn in the wake of such odd companions. Two other things I noticed about the young Irishman that evening: he wore a revolver at the ready in its holster, and his eyes seemed but seldom to stray from the Marshal.

There was little to note about Danny before he slumped into a heap on the floor and was left there to the utter unconcern of the others. He had been in the air all day, no doubt after a long night of making up for lost time in the brighter haunts of Shanghai. I put him down as a typical young American of the daredevil type to whom life, in its probable brevity, existed as a prolonged escapade. He could hardly have been more than twenty-four, and the only embellishments his tunic bore were miniature wings and evidence that he held the rank of full colonel.

Then there was Major General Huang, who was the war lord's chief of staff. Ralph Huang was a product of Harrow and "The Shop," and in every way a delightful fellow with the unusual faculty of combining the best qualities of both the East and the West. There could be no question concerning his genuine respect for the Marshal; indeed it was impossible to be other than aware that he worshipped his war lord even more deeply than did Mad Boy. The difference probably amounted to

no more than the fact that the Irishman did at times have occasional thoughts for himself.

The party was completed by Dr. Chen, a somewhat sinister man who wore wide horn-rimmed glasses and a long black gown. He was the Marshal's minister for civil affairs and had just returned to the Yamen that afternoon, having completed a tour of several months, during which he had visited every town and district within the wide territories of the war lord's rule. Dr. Chen became more and more expansive as the night wore on; and, in the end, his timely return to the Yamen acquired a deep significance for me, since it provided an answer to at least one of my questions. It was Dr. Chen's proud boast that the success of his recent mission lay in the fact that he had brought sufficient pressure to bear upon a vast and widely scattered populace to extract from them *in advance* the taxes falling due over the next ten years. He was no more specific than to state that the necessity for such ruthless action lay in the interests of provincial developments which would ultimately benefit the people themselves.

So much did Dr. Chen say to me. To the thousands whose "benefit" would amount to no more than immediate starvation, I had a notion that he had not said "developments" but "roads."

"I must turn to the highways," the Marshal had said, "to deaden the attention of my troops to the rebellious elements." I understood *now* what he meant. "Roads" was a face-saving figure of speech, no more than a means to an end. The overtaxed

peasant must perish, I thought; but I doubted that, as he died slowly and in desperate want, he would suffer the less by knowing that his life was token for the loyalty of a soldier.

The orgy of eating had terminated with the traditional bowls of rice and tea; but while the Marshal remained on the crest of his form, in a mood of ever-increasing benevolence, no question arose of forsaking the table. The war lord, who periodically wiped his glowing face with a steaming towel, had consumed without aid a full flagon of native liquor and was now surveying with relish a second, which he insisted upon opening himself by the simple expedient of breaking its neck on the back of my chair. He offered me a share in this; but anticipating the immediate effect of such a travesty of brandy upon an already discomforted stomach, I craved most courteously to be excused, and the Marshal, despite his earlier designs so obviously aimed at seeing me "spliced," seemed now less inclined to insist. Ralph Huang was aware of the reason, which he whispered in a neutral tongue: "*C'est la dernière bouteille dans la cave.*"

"Marshal Meng," I presently began, with a view to making some expression of thanks to a lavish host, but he raised his disengaged hand in objection.

"I would like it," he said, "if you would address me more familiarly by the honourable name which was given to him who was once the Marshal Meng of England."

During this stage of the proceedings the war lord, not a little surprisingly, was suffering from hic-

coughs which he unleashed at intervals upon his audience with a deafening lack of restraint.

"Of England?" I repeated in a bewildered voice.

"Ker-cher-na," he announced whilst in the throes of an internal upheaval which expelled itself like a clap of thunder re-echoing from the rafters.

Mad Boy took the opportunity of mouthing across at me, "Kitchener—he's after asking you to be calling him Herbert," at which astonishing prompt I have no doubt my already bemused expression assumed the look of a lunatic. But if indeed it was the Marshal's wish, then . . .

"Look here, Herbert . . ." I began, accidentally slipping back into English, but that was as far as I got before stranger events began to happen.

The door opened and an officer of the Yamen Guard approached the Marshal. "It is an hour before dawn," he announced. "Your Excellency wished to speak with the rebels before they bow to the sword."

In a moment the war lord was steady and his clear voice penetrated the stillness of the room.

"Bring them before me now."

As the officer went about his bidding there was a stifled gasp followed by the scamper of feet and, though my eyes were held to the Marshal, I was aware that the girls had hurriedly left through the servants' door. Then I heard the nervous tones of Dr. Chen excusing himself on some hastily framed pretext and I knew that he must be lily-livered too. So only the three of us, Ralph Huang, Mad Boy and I, remained seated by the Marshal as the main

door opened again to admit, with their guards, six men whose heads were shortly due to be severed.

They were a strangely assorted lot. One was outstanding in his physical bearing and fearless expression and in particular contrast to another—who looked no more than a boy of fifteen—upon whom terror had taken a merciless grip. The remaining four were nondescript rabble. All were stripped to the waist, their wrists manacled, and each had been branded on the chest with the indelible legend of "Traitor." They knelt in line and bowed their heads before the Marshal. Meng Li Fu then rose, poised in perfect dignity, bowed in turn to them and bade the guards unshackle the men and then withdraw. Presently, in slow, steady tones of quiet authority, he addressed himself to the condemned.

"I know each of you," he began, "by name and that you are emissaries from the armies of others who would barter for the loyalty of my troops. I know also," he went on, "from whence you each have come and where I shall shortly return your severed heads, whilst your bodies remain rotting above the soil. I offer you no quarter, for your kidney is such as calls for none; but as an honourable soldier I will grant to your elected spokesman the usual courtesy, which is the last privilege of speaking at will from the heart. Please stand to your feet."

The Marshal then seated himself, and the branded men all rose with the exception of the whimpering boy who remained kneeling and pleading most pitifully for mercy.

"High Tuchan—I am no rebel, no traitor. Justice," he cried, "has forsaken me. Oh my Lord, I have served none but you . . . none—never . . ." Then he broke down so completely in a torrent of sobbing that I was moved irresistibly to the point of intervention.

"Your Excellency," I said rising, "this is none of my affair, but permit me to suggest that the boy seems over-young to have part in such troubles as these."

It had to come out, though I, whose business it should have been to remain silent, nervously watched the Marshal's face with a sense of grave misgiving. His features, masklike and immovable, cast a contemptuous glance at the squirming youth; then, to my intense surprise, he gently commanded the boy to rise, to be silent and to stand apart from the others.

"My honoured guest, the Englishman," he added, "presumes to say you are innocent. For his sake, therefore, I will spare you the headman's sword." He turned to face the others. "I now await the words that would spring from the spokesman's heart."

The words then came from the one of broad stature and fearless expression.

"High Tuchan," he began with a gracious bow, "first I speak not as a common soldier under arms to the Lord of the Elegant Sword; but as a captain in the Nanking Company of Guards whose allegiance is to Marshal Chang. And, since you have extended to me the last liberty of speaking from the

heart, I would say, High Tuchan, that I am an actor of equal talent with you."

In the unbearable silence which followed this opening, I was conscious that Mad Boy's hand moved instinctively towards his holster.

"You said just now," continued the captain, "that you pose as an honourable soldier. You are an able and fearless one—yes; but I say that he who one day wears the insignia which proclaims him a marshal of China and on the next is to be seen in the guise of some mute, mild mercenary, so as to spy upon his restless and unpaid men, can never, at least in the code of the central armies, be considered a soldier of honour."

Again I was aware of Mad Boy shifting his feet as his hand took a grip on the butt of his revolver.

The spokesman now concluded: "I will use my last words in the expression of thanks for the patient ear so graciously afforded me. In return for this, I will extend to you the gift of some knowledge that may be of service in your private affairs. Among your Yamen Guard and in all the garrisons which house so many who may shortly desert your arms, it is everywhere known that the mute Lao Er has the same brave eyes as the Marshal Meng Li Fu."

He bowed elegantly and was silent.

Then with a wealth of deliberation and dignity, the Marshal rose and, after a gesture of courtesy, began his answer to this outspoken address:

"Captain Yang—for I am well aware as to your real identity—you are the brave son of a proud father whom I was once honoured to know as Provincial

Governor of Northern Hupeh. What you have said is only thus far true: indeed you saw the same eyes in the sickly halfwit, the same eyes which *I* now use with envy to regard the finer figure of youthful courage which is *you*. Because I am a proud man, though with less reason to be than your father, I have never before betrayed the fact that the mute Lao Er was none other than my son. His eyes—yes, they were brave; but that was all: none the less I dearly loved him, for which reason I kept him by me, forever close at hand."

"If your words be true, High Tuchan," came back the challenging voice of Captain Yang, "then I claim this extension to my last privilege. Call him, now, to your side, so that I may take my final leave of father and son together."

The rest of us at the table were fully conscious that the condemned man had indeed thrown down a last challenge to the old Marshal which must surely be beyond his wits to counter. I turned apprehensively from the younger man, chin high and fearless in face of his imminent end, and looked up into the features of the war lord. He, in turn, stood his ground like a rock, his countenance sublime, his expression quite unwavering. And when he spoke it was with a voice charged as though from the very depths of human emotion.

"I pray, Captain Yang, that you will forbear to taunt an aging man who speaks to you thus humbly in his hour of most desperate grief, that you will not torture me the more by an insistence that I have the poor wretch brought before us now. You see

. . ." and it was as if the Marshal's eyes, now brimful with unchecked tears, reached out towards the stars, "you see, sad creature though he may have been, he was a son who was abundantly precious to me; and . . . and he died this afternoon. That . . . that is all there is to be said."

Even the men whom he had condemned were moved beyond further words by the Marshal's apparently genuine expression of grief. His was the curtain; he had seen to it that his must be the last lines spoken in this strange, unaccountable drama. And presently, as though it were to clear the stage and change the set, the guards returned and led the five men out to meet their ignominious end.

The Marshal wiped his face; then seizing the flagon of brandy, he raised its jagged neck to his lips and, throwing back his head, drained its contents in a single audible gulp.

"Your son . . ." I began presently, anxious to create the courteous but quite false impression that I, too, had been deceived by his display of histrionics. "Your son—through what means did he die?"

The Marshal turned himself fully towards me, and soon his whole countenance was beaming in obvious delight at my question.

"He died," he replied, "at the very moment in which his purpose for living was complete. He died this afternoon—on the Highway."

For a time his whole frame shook in a paroxysm of hiccoughs and uncontrolled mirth at the calculated success of his cunning. Then abruptly his attention was aroused by the whimpering of the lad

whose life he had spared at my behest and who still stood, despite it, a picture of stark terror at the far end of the room.

In an instant, it seemed, it had all happened and was over. That perhaps was the only merciful thing about that most dramatic moment of a quite unforgettable, indeed almost unbelievable, evening.

In less time than it took me to realize what he was about, the Marshal had impulsively seized the revolver from Mad Boy's holster and shot the snivelling youth straight through the heart.

It was something horrible and haunting. I was hardly aware that in the next moment the war lord had thrown the still smoking gun with a thud on the table before us, and was now addressing himself to me in completely casual tones.

"My foreign friend, it is possible that you are not acquainted with the custom of China," he was saying. "In this country it is understood that he who chooses to save a drowning man must needs support him throughout the length of his remaining days. The lad was young: I would not have my honoured guest fettered by an obligation of which he was doubtless unaware."

"But . . . but Marshal, I . . ."

"*You* had saved his life," he concluded with utter indifference. Then he rose a trifle unsteadily to his feet. "Come. It is dawn with over-much death in the air; and an actor, like a marshal, tends to grow weary."

We all automatically rose and moved from the table, while the war lord, with his hand on my

sleeve, went on, "I must thank you for honouring me with your distinguished company and, indeed, I am sorry that it will not now be necessary for your visit to be further prolonged. The American colonel—if you wish it—will fly you back to your Treaty Port tomorrow or . . ." He paused and looked about him. "General Huang, where *is* the American colonel?"

Ralph Huang could hardly suppress a smile as he nodded at the Marshal's feet, where lay the recumbent figure of Danny in an attitude of deep and drunken slumber.

"Ai Ya!" exclaimed the war lord, fearful lest at an earlier hour he had unaccountably also slaughtered his pilot. Hurriedly and as though to make certain, he unsheathed his sword and drove its tip fully an inch into the fleshier part of the American's buttock.

Danny came to with a yell which gave complete satisfaction to the Marshal, who merely nodded, put up his sword and made for the door.

Ralph Huang and Mad Boy stood strictly to attention and bowed but perceptibly as the war lord, with stately carriage and grave dignity, moved out between them. So he passed from view through the door and out of my immediate, since emptier life.

But fortunate indeed are such as I, whose walls of memory are richly adorned by the colours and contrasts of many a Chinese canvas; and most remarkable among them all, in vivid reflection, is the portrait of a war lord with an inscrutable look upon a strangely elegant face.

Chapter 11

RETURN TO EDEN

IN THE spring of 1945 I spent a week end at that famous rendezvous of North Country anglers, the Mitre Hotel at Wichell, overlooking the wide expanse of woods below Harby Castle which slope down to the clear grey and effortlessly moving waters of the river Eden. Here is a paradise for those who would cast a fly towards the ripple of a rising salmon, but I had been drawn more urgently by nostalgia, back to a boyhood haunt. While buzz bombs fell haphazardly about London, I sought brief sanctuary in the loveliest stretch of woods and water which, in many years of roaming about the world, I had yet found.

New folk had come to the village and it seemed that my old friends were gone. What I had known as an inn was a flourishing state-managed hotel, its erstwhile stables converted into a garage; a half-hourly bus service brought its week-end litter to the glades; and I was a stranger after the passing of nearly four decades. But there was the rough green with its ancient commemorative cross, and about it

the picturesque dwellings had, for the most part, changed only in their tenantry. The Norman tower, successor centuries ago to an earlier Saxon edifice, still rose above the ivied church—testimony in a decadent age to a steadfast and changeless faith. And, older than history, as yet unhewn, were the deep, lush woods below that flanked on either side the soft, rippling curves of the river. To all these I was no stranger: no more than a man may be to his mother or indeed, ever, to the sights and sounds and the early springtide of his first environment. Basking in the gentle glow of this reflection and in the noon stillness of an April Sunday, I strolled past "The Old House" and leisurely along by the village green, knowing that my footsteps would lead me down the steep slope, past the lych gate by the Church and inevitably on to the waters of the Eden.

I paused awhile as my thoughts were distracted by what was at first the trickle, then the small stream of villagers and visitors who came towards me, homeward-bound from Sunday morning service. Some passed by in motorcars, to whom I paid no heed: they would be domiciled further afield. It was a local face I sought; one, or perhaps more, that might not have mellowed beyond recognition. But all were unknown to me as indeed, obviously, I was to them.

At the end of the procession two young men walked together. Both of them looked to be under twenty, and, although they did not present what I was looking for, they claimed my undivided attention. Magnificently built so that they seemed taller than the

six and a half feet which I judged them to be, they each bore clean, clear-cut, rather sensitive features so alike as to deny any doubts as to their relationship. But in the matter of their dress they presented not only a strange contrast to this rural setting, but an exact and indeed somewhat unconventional antithesis to one another. One wore, like a tight glove, a superbly tailored Khaki service jacket, its highly polished buttons arranged in clusters of three; his shoes and belt had the sheen of rich mahogany, and, its gilt-edged peak almost touching the bridge of his nose, his blue hat was resplendent with large silver badge and band of "dice-board." A single star on each shoulder proclaimed him to be an ensign in the Scots Guards. The other walked with a no less unaffected swagger and wore becomingly the "square rig" and "bell-bottomed" trousers of the lower deck. I stood there, lost to all else, fascinated by their appearance and by the spectacle in a Cumberland village of an officer in the Brigade marching along with a *matelot* who could hardly have been other than his identical twin.

As they approached me, absorbed in gay conversation with each other, I was overwhelmed by a curious desire to know who they might be and how, and when, they had come to live here—if indeed they did—and a number of other things about them as well, including the quite inconsequential consideration as to whether they had ever thought of changing uniforms and confounding their friends.

"Excuse me butting in," I said rather limply to the officer, "but at one time I had quite a few friends

in your regiment. I was wondering if you knew . . ."

His keen young eye regarded me critically as he and his carbon-copy in bell-bottoms halted abruptly in their tracks, but when I mentioned the name his face lit up and he said immediately, "Oh yes, sir. Colonel John." His glance swivelled round to the solitary star on his shoulder, "Frightfully senior, of course."

"And have you come across . . ." I mentioned the name of a boy whose father I had first met when he was an attaché in Peking.

"David!" He exclaimed jubilantly. "But he's my greatest friend; always has been—that is, discounting this hairy *matelot* here. David was at school, then at Caterham and Pirbright with me; we passed out together at Sandhurst—he got the belt. We've been up at Hawick but are going overseas on Tuesday. But I was forgetting; I knew David first as an infant in China."

"In China!" I exclaimed. It instantly struck me that this superb specimen of young Guards officer seemed somehow even more remote from any association with China than he did with this quiet corner of Cumberland. But I realized by his afterthought that we could no doubt discover a host more of mutual acquaintances.

"That's intensely interesting to me," I added, and suggested that the two of them should come back to The Mitre with me and have a drink. It was the sailor who demurred, explaining that they were both on short embarkation leave and that their

grandparents, with whom they were staying, would be expecting them.

"But, sir," he added, "if you would care to come in—the house is just here—I know they both would be delighted. Why not stay to lunch?"

I was struck now not only by their appearance but by their charming manners, and perhaps rather too eagerly accepted. The young soldier said, "Excellent show! Come on," and we moved off.

"I'm Nigel," said the same voice, emanating from somewhere considerably above the thin patch on my crown, "and the Senior Service on your left is rightly represented by my one-day-older brother, Anthony. Here's the gate. Forgive us if we do a lightning change; we only parade like this for church. You know, sir, the old people rather expect it. Choose the dry sherry, it's better than the medium . . ."

" 'The Old House,' " I observed, trying to conceal my excitement. "How long have your grandparents lived here?"

"Oh, about ten years, I suppose," came the reply as we walked up the gravel drive to the front door. "They moved here from the south just after we came home to school."

I realized that as they had come from another district I would not have known them in my time, a fact which was fully confirmed by my first eager glance at the charming and very handsome elderly couple who greeted us at the door. Here I was left to introduce myself, since the moment the boys reached the hall they did no more than mutter something quite inaudible in polite reference to me be-

fore throwing their caps onto a camphor chest and bounding upstairs after one another, shouting "Off with the motley!" and undoing buttons and straps as they went.

"Steady, there!" implored their grandfather after them. "You'll have the house down on top of us."

"What wonderful chaps they are," I remarked. "By the way, they were kind enough to ask me in. I hope you don't mind. I'm afraid none of us know each other's names. Mine is . . ."

My attempt to give expression to the formalities was immediately swept aside with a laugh and an unmistakable welcome towards a cheerful log fire and two decanters of sherry.

"They're quite hopeless," remarked their grandmother, with an amused, yet quite obvious expression of deep affection on her face. "We are delighted you should come." And I sensed that, while the boys were staying here, nothing else very much mattered.

"Are they here often?" I inquired.

"Oh, yes," she replied. "We've more or less brought them up since they were eight. You see, their parents, my son and his wife, are abroad . . ."

"Dry or medium?" interposed the grandfather, fingering a decanter and wincing only slightly as a heavy boot flung to the floor above rattled the chandelier under which he was standing.

"Dry if I may, please. Odd," I went on, "that twins should choose different services."

Their grandfather was in the midst of explaining that they were different in many ways when he was

interrupted by a series of violent leaps which instinctively caused him to screw up his features and draw his chair slightly further out of range of the centre of the threatened ceiling.

"For instance," his wife explained for my benefit, "Anthony sits on his bed and draws his trousers on delicately. Nigel invariably jumps into his! It's always been the same. Won't you stay for luncheon?"

I must have appeared excessively rude by not immediately acknowledging her kindness, but my attention had focussed on a photograph that stood in a silver frame above the writing desk. I was not aware that my hostess's eyes had followed mine until she remarked quietly:

"She's very lovely, don't you think? That was taken many years ago, but only the last three may have changed her, though we hope . . ." She cleared her throat. "She is the twin's mother, of course. Our son and she were on their way home from China at the beginning of 1942 and were caught in Manila after Pearl Harbor. They are in Santa Lucia internment camp—that's all we know. Not very healthy, we hear; the Japanese can be a bit brutal . . ."

"I'm terribly sorry," I said hurriedly. "I . . ."

"But we must forget it," she went on, "especially when the boys are home and both of them just going overseas." She turned to me and smiled a little wearily. "We try not to think about that either: everyone's got their little troubles and after all we escape quite a lot up here. I only mentioned it because you were looking at that photograph and she,

poor girl, has had more than her share. It started when the twins were born . . ."

There was a crash in the hall outside, immediately followed by another, and as their grandfather turned up the lapels of his coat and drew his head downwards, the boys each cleared the last flight of stairs, from a standing jump. Then in a moment, quite indistinguishable to me now, they towered like a couple of giants above the lintel of the door, clad in the most disreputable country clothes and almost bursting, it seemed, with fitness and health.

"Grannie, are the big eats laid on? We're starving," said one.

"But *famished,*" echoed the other.

"Yes, tell Bessie," came the soft rejoinder. "Listen, tell Bessie to lay an extra place and then we're ready."

As they scrambled towards the back premises I made mild protest only to be met with the whispered reassurance, "It's all right. I've been hoarding a ham, but they don't know yet; you see, it's the last day they'll . . ."

I am afraid that the rest of her sentence was lost, for as the warcries echoed along the passage I was no longer able to contain myself.

"You were saying when the twins were born," I reminded her, vainly endeavouring to control my excitement. "It is almost inconceivable how these coincidences occur, but the mention of China, the names of Anthony and Nigel, the day's difference in their ages, and finally the photograph of their mother which ties it all together have convinced me of some-

thing. Just," I concluded, "to be finally certain—I apologize for not catching it—but surely your name must be Forsythe."

"Of course, it's Forsythe," broke in the old man, emerging from his coat collar and regarding me closely. "Have you some news . . ."

"My news," I replied, "is no more than ancient history, but it has a bearing on the present. First, sir, I must ask if you ever heard about the adventures that attended the birth of these two giants?"

The old man sat a little more upright in his chair and his wife leaned a little nearer towards me.

"Only," he countered, "that they were born long before they were expected, in a hill station or on a train or something, and there was trouble of a sort—one of those Chinese rebellions, if I remember. The boy was away exploring in the wilds at the time, not expecting anything to happen for a coupla months, and the girl—well, she's never said very much . . ."

"She wouldn't," I observed. Then rising, I picked up the photograph in the silver frame and turned to the two who were now regarding me with an air of interest and expectancy.

"Sir, and with your permission, Mrs. Forsythe," I said, "you should *all* know the story, for I feel convinced that if I relate it none of you will worry any more about the twins' mother in Santa Lucia camp. This girl, though her looks belie it, is not only the toughest, but quite the bravest woman I know. My part in that drama was infinitesimal compared to hers. I merely ran ten miles over the hills to find a doctor—and again two days later to find a padre

to christen those two frail bundles of practically nothing, before they had to run the gauntlet of opposing armies. To me it was no more than a dramatic adventure and always a race against time, but for her . . . Good God!—forgive me—this girl could go through hell without turning a hair and come out of it quite unscathed. None of you need worry on her behalf—not for a moment—ever . . ."

The gong echoed through the old house and there was laughter and scurrying footsteps in the hall. Mrs. Forsythe rose and put her hand on mine. "Tell all of us," she said softly. "It'll be most interesting, but shall we tackle 'the big eats' first?"

Then she led the way into the dining room.

During the midsummer of 1926, whilst I was stationed in the humid Yangtze valley, I succumbed to a bout of malaria and was subsequently ordered away from Hankow to recuperate for a full week at Mei-shan, a small resort situated in the hills of South Honan, some sixty miles distant. The idea would hardly have appealed to me at the best of times, for the place consisted of no more than a few widely scattered bungalows and a guest house which served as a cooler retreat for British and American wives, with their children, whose menfolk were wont to join them only at week ends. At this time, the idea appealed to me still less, for things were afoot which would seem to demand the presence at their posts of all responsible Britons.

The three cities of the Central Yangtze, known collectively as Wu-han, were under immediate threat

of capture by advancing Red Armies led by a then unknown young soldier called Chiang Kai-shek, who was later destined to spend over twenty years fighting against them. Among the battlecries of this conquering force sweeping up from the south were "Down with Imperialism," "Abolish the unequal treaties," and exhortations to force out the foreigner and seize his property. It seemed no time to be leaving Hankow, principal of the Wu-han cities and a Treaty Port with a large and prosperous British concession protected by no more than a cruiser and a gunboat anchored off the Bund, two platoons of Royal Marines and the local Volunteers recruited from foreign business representatives such as myself.

The fact that the British territory was subsequently overrun, the Marines withdrawn, the Volunteers disbanded, the Union Jack openly insulted, and the concession meekly handed over at the behest of an apathetic Whitehall, is no more than a now forgotten page in the history of the decline of British prestige abroad during the past twenty-five years. But it serves here to create an atmosphere in which the lives and property of English men and women were of little account to the crude, warring factions on the spot and, apparently, of no great concern to those who sat in comfortable officialdom at home.

Had I known that events were to follow with such unexpected suddenness I would have disobeyed orders and stayed in Hankow; but, as it was, I travelled the sixty miles north to Sin-Tien station on the Peking-Hankow railway and was thence borne in a wicker chair up the steep three-mile track that led

to Mei-shan. There, remote from communication with the outside world, I was prepared to stay no more than a week, somewhat self-consciously a lone able-bodied male amongst a host of women and children in a rather ramshackle and overcrowded guest house.

On the second night of my visit the most violent thunderstorm broke over the wide range of hills surrounding us, the fury of which became the more eerie from the frightened screams of children and the baying of pariah dogs seeking shelter. At the height of the storm, I thought I heard a woman's voice calling in urgent tones below my window and endeavouring to be heard above the tumult. I threw up the sash, and as I did so an almost blinding flash of lightning revealed the bedraggled and drenched figure of a young American wife I knew, clutching a hurricane lamp and appealing to me to come quickly. I threw on a few clothes and an old trench coat, and within a few seconds I had let her into the hall.

"Stella, what on earth . . ." I began.

"There's no time to waste," she said urgently. "It's a doctor and a nurse quickly. I'm sharing a bungalow with Kitty Forsythe and she's starting to have a baby . . ."

"Good God!" I exclaimed, "there's no one in this place." I thought frantically. "But wait a minute, there's Mrs. James who runs this joint. I think she *was* a nurse . . ."

"Well, for heaven's sake get her quickly."

I ran along and hammered on Sophie James'

door, hoping to make myself heard above the unceasing clamour of the storm. Presently I had informed her what was happening in the nearest bungalow. She was a brick, that woman, if ever there was one; said she'd never been present at any birth except her own and that all her nursing had been done in army wards during the war, but she'd pack some things and go along right away, and in the meantime Stella must remove those soaking clothes and have her bed.

"I know everyone who's in Mei-shan at the moment," she went on, "and there's no one else—certainly no midwife—so it looks as if you and I will have to tackle this job between us."

"Me!" I said, trying to conceal my horror.

"Oh, your part's easy," she assured me. "You have only to find your way to the Inland Mission hospital and bring back a doctor as fast as your legs will carry you. If only there were telephones! But if you keep to the right track it can't be more than ten miles . . . Here, take this hurricane lamp; and, Stella, you come along to my room."

I had discarded my sopping trench coat and hidden it with the lamp under a bush (which I never succeeded in rediscovering) when the storm passed and dawn broke suddenly. I cursed my lack of training and recent bout of sickness as I cantered the last two miles of my journey in an open shirt and shorts and a pair of canvas shoes which continually seemed to be taking in fresh supplies of sand and gravel. I was grateful for my good fortune in finding the way, and even more so for the manner of my

reception at the Inland Mission Summer Hostel, where, though it was before six in the morning, all appeared to be up and about. They insisted I must eat and rest and indeed, to my impatience, seemed more concerned about me than the urgent object of my journey.

"Babies," one of them said, "are born in China prematurely and otherwise, at the rate of well over a thousand an hour without much fuss or preparation. It is a natural function . . ."

"Yes, but . . ."

"You look as if you'd got a touch of malaria . . ."

It was no use protesting. I had to suffer being given some dope, which certainly refreshed me, but I felt that precious minutes were slipping by and was not happy until I was shortly urging on the sluggish ass that had been rounded up, with another of its kind, to convey the doctor and me back to Meishan.

"Damn!" unexpectedly exclaimed my companion, in somewhat unmissionary parlance, some two hours later as we trotted along within half a mile of the bungalow. "I've forgotten the blasted anaesthetic."

Sophie James met us at the door.

"How is she?" I began.

"Wonderful! Truly marvellous," was the reply. "Doctor, would you like to come along?"

Within five minutes he rejoined me on the mound of rough scrub across the pathway.

"In oodles of time," he remarked. "By the way, d'you know her?"

I shook my head. "Think I met her husband

once. He goes off into the Gobi looking for eggs, or something." Then we smoked and sat in silence for a time.

"Funny thing," he observed presently. "I did my stuff at Bart's—years ago, of course—but I've never attended an English woman before—not for this sort of thing, I mean."

I was almost asleep when I suddenly remembered something and sat up. "What about that anaesthetic?" I asked. "Shall I go back?"

"Oh no, that's all right," he replied. "Mrs. What's-her-name, the nurse woman, has sent her Chinese cook over on one of the donkeys."

"Then it's all right if I go and get some shut-eye?"

"You'd better," he advised, "and I'll see about somebody pumping up a bit of water. Ought to get it on the boil . . ."

It was after seven in the evening when I awoke, and the news was already abroad that less than an hour earlier Mrs. Forsythe had given birth to a boy. The event was really no immediate concern of mine, but I found it impossible to escape some feeling of apprehension when I walked out in the cool evening air and observed Mrs. James' cook astride the animal which had earlier borne me in the same direction, leisurely ambling towards the bungalow with a package in train. That girl must have had a hell of a time, I thought.

I realized the next morning that my sentiment was fully justified: another boy had been born half an hour after midnight.

There was nothing suitably available with which

to put his statement to the test, but the doctor calculated that the infants would probably not weigh as much as seven and a half pounds between them. Neither he nor the ex-army nurse was fully qualified or up-to-date in obstetrics, but they had managed to bring the miracle off, so far successfully, with hardly the aid of a single amenity normally available in the meanest English household.

I glanced at the little man whose sparse frame was drooping with anxiety and fatigue. Then spontaneously, and for no reason other than that I had suddenly developed a profound admiration for him, I wrung his hand and said, "You ought to be proud . . ."

"Oh, I'm getting quite good at it now" was all that medical missionary would say in acknowledgment. "But," he added, "it's that young mother who deserves all the praise. I'll wager that no mere man could ever have lived out the time she's been through; and yet she's lying in there now, as happy as Larry, and just as proud of those boys as though they were a couple of giants."

"I hope they will be, some day," I said, then added rather tentatively, "Are they all right?"

"About a fifty-fifty chance," he replied. "I've sent word back to the Hostel asking them to arrange for a fully qualified nurse and some equipment to be sent up from the Mission Hospital in Hankow. In the meantime I'll stand by here, and Mrs. James and I'll do all that's possible. The mother's sheer strength of will should see her through all right, and the boys stand a fair chance—provided, of

course," he concluded, "nothing unforeseen happens."

The unforeseen did happen at five o'clock two mornings later.

I was rudely awaked by one of the junior British Consulate staff from Hankow.

"We've got to get moving right away," he urged.

"Who? Where?" I asked, sitting up.

"Everyone—all these women and children here—the missionaries too, wherever they are. It's got to be done right away, otherwise anything may happen and the Consul-General cannot accept responsibility. Look here," he went on rather breathlessly, "while you're pulling on some clothes I'll tell you the position. Briefly it's like this: Chiang Kai-shek's troops are in Hanyang and literally at the gates of Hankow, and demonstrations are already taking place at the boundaries of the Concession. Marshal Wu Pei Fu told the C.G. last night that he can hold on to the city no longer than a further forty-eight hours, if that. It's all the time we've got to get the women and children out of here, down to Hankow and aboard the ships."

I was feverishly drawing on a pair of shorts, still slightly bewildered.

"Aren't they safer *here* than in Hankow?" I ventured.

"Safer! Listen, Marshal Wu has sent a special train to Sin-Tien. I came up in it. It's waiting down there now. He's done it at the instigation of the C.G. to give these people a chance. You see, when the Marshal gives up Hankow he has elected to with-

draw his army here—*here* to Mei-shan, and stem the Reds' advance towards Peking. Don't you understand—this is the day-after-tomorrow's battlefield . . ."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Oughtn't we to take them north?"

"My instructions are quite clear," he replied. "Besides the Yellow River bridge . . ."

I was halfway into a light pull-over when I suddenly remembered.

"Good God!" I exclaimed, and sat down on my bed.

"For heaven's sake get a move on," said the other. "We've no time . . ."

"When has the train got to leave?" I asked.

"No later than five this evening—that's twelve hours from now. The evacuation ship is sailing at midnight."

"All right," I said. "The houseboy will wake everybody here and tell them to get ready. You must explain things—tactfully, of course, if the kids are about—and then get somebody to take you round all the bungalows—all of them where there are foreigners staying—except the nearest one and I'll deal with that myself, right away."

Then I went over and stirred the little missionary doctor, who was sleeping fully clothed on the open verandah of Mrs. Forsythe's bungalow, and told him the news. When he grasped the full significance of it, a cloud came over his normally unruffled countenance and he disappeared inside the door to confer with Sophie James.

After about five minutes they both emerged and indicated that Mrs. Forsythe would like to see me.

I found her, propped up on pillows, and if her face betrayed any manifestation of physical strain this was entirely overlaid with an unutterably lovely radiance that absorbed every feature. Within her reach were the two halves of a wicker hamper, each of which housed in smug repose quite the tiniest person I had ever seen.

"Aren't they darlings?" she remarked. Then, turning to me, "I've never met you," she said. "I only know you've been terribly kind and that's all the more reason why I wanted to thank you for what you did. It was grand of you."

I murmured something before she went on.

"So now we've got to strike camp?"

"Can it be done?" I asked. "Otherwise I'm quite ready to . . ."

"There would seem no option," she replied.

A frail, rather delicate hand emerged from the bedclothes and was laid on mine.

"We'll have to try," she continued, "but I'm afraid we must rely on you again. I wonder—can I ask you? You see, I don't worry about myself; but my sons—they're such tiny little chaps—I would like somebody to christen them first—you know—just in case . . ."

I had to swallow hard before I could reassure her that somehow it would be arranged; and then I left hurriedly, biting back a weak tendency to emotion and a thousand curses upon the wretched consequences of man's barbarity. With no great sense of

chivalry or heroics I just knew that there was the one woman I'd cheerfully die for.

It was nearly midday before I returned, pretty well all in, from the faraway Mission Hostel, accompanied by a stalwart in light clerical garb who had won the half-mile for Cambridge in 1909. Mei-shan was deserted, save for the small party gathered at the bungalow. It included the doctor, Sophie James and Stella, who with me stood sponsor at the little ceremony devoted to Anthony and Nigel.

But there were the chair-coolies waiting by the mound opposite, and close on five o'clock, after innumerable halts for necessary respite, we completed the hazardous journey down to Sin-Tien station. There, the doctor and the padre insisted on accompanying me onto the train with no intention of returning to their Mission until the personal crisis was over and the party free from danger. They, like Kitty Forsythe, who with her sons and Mrs. James was in possession of the next compartment, had nothing but the most remote thoughts for their own security.

About an hour later the train slowly pulled out south, along the single track towards Hankow.

It must have been nearly nine in the evening that our slow journey came to an abrupt halt, and it was growing dark when the consular representative and I walked along the line to discover that the locomotive which had been drawing the train now steadfastly refused to budge an inch further. We were still twenty miles away from our destination, and if we delayed much longer I feared that some of our

passengers might become panic-stricken. Then a series of things happened which I must confess brought more than momentary panic to me.

A lever-driven trolley came round a bend in the line towards us with four pairs of Chinese hands propelling it at top speed. An English official of the railway, who was accompanying it, had the presence of mind to leap off the vehicle in time, as did the others, before it hit the bumpers of our engine with terrific impact. But the Englishman lost no time in picking himself up:

"Wei-tzo! Wei-tzo! Kwei-kwei wei-tzo!" he urged the driver of our train. "Get back! Get back! Quickly!" he repeated in English.

Spontaneously the alarmed Chinese in the cab swung the lever over to reverse, and with a wheeze, accompanied by a great outpouring of steam, the train which had refused to proceed forward—through some miracle—moved back. We reached a siding and the points were switched over again with no more than moments to spare.

We could hear their approach for miles in the still gathering dusk, and we stood on the embankment waiting with awe and apprehension in the knowledge—which we silently prayed our restless passengers might not share—that Hankow had fallen and that a defeated army was being swiftly borne towards us in a wild stampede to the north.

I shall not easily forget the macabre sight of those monster trains rushing past us in the half-light. No less than a hundred and eighty open wagons, half of them set with bell tents, the rest loaded with guns

and equipment, were drawn in one unit by four powerful locomotives which belched forth furnace-lit clouds of grey smoke and sparks which flew high into the dusk, while on the couplings of the foremost hung the splintered wreckage of the lever-driven trolley. Less than a mile behind came another of similar dimensions, then another, followed by yet one more, seemingly even of greater magnitude and thundering past at higher speed than its forerunners. Then from away up the line to the north there came back to us a vivid flash, followed by a noise which there could be no mistaking—the simultaneous impact of a hundred metal buffers. We knew then that calamity was not far distant and that the chance of our party ever reaching sanctuary or of Anthony and Nigel continuing to live had become highly doubtful. Any means of escape from our predicament seemed hopelessly remote.

On hearing the crash, the railway official was the first to leap into action. With a quickness apparent in both mind and body, he seized a red lamp from the guard and raced down the track. He had the brave and unhesitating intention of waving to a stop any further mass units that might be following up. In retrospect, the grimness of the situation assumes a lighter aspect at the thought of a lone Englishman flagging to a halt a train-borne Chinese army in retreat. Nevertheless that is what he succeeded in doing and within an hour he was back, begrimed and perspiring, accompanied by two of Marshal Wu's staff officers.

They were both intellectual, if somewhat over-

wrought young men, and before proceeding with the English official further along the track to take toll of the damage ahead, they advised us to evacuate the train immediately and hide somewhere in the surrounding country. Only half of Wu Pei Fu's army was to the north of us, they explained, and the remainder were about to pass us along the railway track on foot. They could not offer any guarantee for their discipline or behaviour. "Morale is pretty low among defeated troops," observed one of them, "and the Marshal will be quite unable to accept responsibility if the soldiers go through the train and take what they want. Even if they don't," he added, "now the line is blocked ahead, the Marshal may well decide to dig in here, and your train will be no more than a target for both sides. It is certain," he concluded, "that, now they have taken Hankow, the Reds will come this way. If you have a hundred foreign women and children with you, then they should move away from the railway to-night, otherwise . . ."

It was just wild barren country about us, without any sign of habitation and no immediate means of obtaining either food or water which would be fit for drinking. The place was almost unbearably humid and infested with mosquitoes. It was therefore in a decidedly unpromising atmosphere that the consular official, the padre and the doctor and I held our swift consultation. My first question concerned Kitty Forsythe.

"Not too good," was the doctor's verdict. "That

journey down the hill has used up pretty well all the strength she had."

"I see. And the twins?"

"Look here," he said, "I'm sorry I'm not very up-to-date as to what might or might not be done, but you must take my opinion for what it's worth. To shift any of them to-night would be murder; to-morrow possibly—but not to-night."

There was silence after that for a moment as we all tried desperately hard to think of a solution. Then came the quiet, authoritative tones of the padre.

"Two of us," he said, "must try and get through to Hankow and arrange a relief party. We obviously can't follow the railroad so we must take a chance across country. I say two, because that gives a better prospect of one getting through. The river must be about seven or eight miles to the east of us, and there should be creeks a launch might be sent to if we can find one. Now I think that you,"—he turned to the doctor—"are the best man to take charge here, then you'll be close to that young mother. I suggest you clear everyone else off the train with all their belongings and tell them to disperse at least a hundred yards away from the embankment and see the mothers impress upon the kids that the slightest sound may imperil the whole lot of them. Leave only Mrs. James on board with Mrs. Forsythe and the twins. Tell her to draw the blinds and jam the door of the compartment. That should get us through to-night at least. Then the remaining one amongst the four of us must scour the countryside

for food and something that's fit to drink; that is most urgent and vital, otherwise those children will be drinking all kinds of muck. Right? Now that's all settled, which of you two are coming with me?"

"Listen," I said, "I agree, and I'm sure the rest of us do too, with all you suggest. I think it's the only chance we've got." The other two murmured their agreement. "*But,*" I added, "excluding the doctor who has a definite job here, the three of us will draw lots to decide which two make for Hankow and who goes scrounging for food."

Lots were quickly drawn and the padre and the consular official immediately set off to the South and disappeared swiftly into the night. I, having borrowed all the money the others could spare to supplement what I already had in my possession, scrambled down the embankment to search for farms; and the doctor, who, it struck me, had the toughest assignment of all, climbed back into the train.

It was after daylight when I rejoined the party, accompanied by two somewhat apprehensive, but richly bribed native boys who had travelled miles with me, laden with chickens and eggs, several ducks, a quantity of buffalo meat, which I thought might serve for a stew, and an assortment of vegetables. I had also managed to acquire a few pots and pans, but I had not been very successful in the matter of precious fluids. True, I had obtained a certain amount of milk, secreted in two bottles tied out of view round my waist; it played no small part in sustaining throughout that day the lives of the twins

and possibly that of their mother as well. For water, one of my henchmen bore two churnfuls slung across his shoulder on either end of a pole; when that was finished, as in the heat of the day would quickly be the case, I had in mind to explore the potentialities of the engine.

I found my fellow travellers hidden from view of the railway embankment, about half a mile away from it, and scattered about the dried-up bed of a shallow creek. They were all perfectly composed; and if any of those women knew the full portent of the imminent dangers they were facing—and the majority of them must have known it—they kept their fears to themselves and allowed no trace or suggestion of it to extend to the children. And how those women, who normally never did a hand's turn for themselves in their own kitchens, got down to the preparation and distribution of the provisions! They organized themselves into various tasks without so much as a hint of dispute, made fires, boiled water, plucked and drew the poultry, prepared a stew pot, and, because the children outnumbered them, probably partook of but little for themselves. I left them with a profound admiration for their pluck and, hung about with the milk and delicately clutching half a dozen eggs, made my way to the train.

An endless stream of grey-clad troops, the residue of Wu Pei Fu's army, were steadily moving north along the railway embankment and I was relieved to learn from the little Mission doctor that, although they had been continually passing through most of

the night, they had chosen to ignore the train. It was not surprising, since it bore the appearance of being utterly deserted.

"Are they bearing up all right?" I asked rather anxiously.

"I'm desperately worried," he replied. "She's tried to feed them several times during the last few hours, but either they won't take it or, more than likely, she's got nothing to give 'em."

"I've brought some milk . . ." I began.

"You have? Good man! Where is it?"

I undid the knot under my shirt. "Here," I said, "and a few eggs."

"You're a wizard," he exclaimed with a sigh of relief. "Mrs. J. has got a spirit lamp and we'll have a boil-up; then we'll give Mrs. F. breakfast and if the little brats won't eat after that, I'll serve it to 'em myself in an eyedropper. Come on! The day may yet be saved."

As the morning wore on it became almost unbearably hot, and by midday the air both in the train and in the unshaded creek was stifling. Flies were everywhere. Sophie James and Stella, who took it in turns to minister to Kitty Forsythe and her sons, had stripped themselves well-nigh to the last limits and were oblivious to all else save creating such comfort as they could for their charges, though the little doctor seemed capable of remaining cool whilst fully clad even to the extent of his collar and tie and jacket. By early afternoon, when the scorching sun was at its height, the women a little distance away who struggled against mounting odds to keep

the children distracted and free from fear, had long since followed Sophie James' and Stella's example. In heart-breaking circumstances they were behaving with a magnificent disregard for the dangers that beset them, and only Kitty Forsythe deserved a little more praise than they.

I sat with her as she lay on the seat opposite, stretched across the length of the compartment, and I stirred up the sparse, oppressive air about her brow and face with the aid of a folded paper. Still there were little beads of perspiration about her forehead, which Stella dabbed from time to time with a handkerchief soaked in eau de cologne. The infants in their little wicker cribs had been taken next door, where Sophie James and the doctor watched over them. The windows were open now, for the last remnants of the retreating force had passed by and there was at least respite for a while, save from the burdensome heat and the intolerable menace of the flies. Then at about five o'clock there came the rumble of big guns in the distance. Gradually they broke into their overture in growing crescendo as those from the north spoke back, and some minutes later we heard the whine of the first shell.

Kitty Forsythe raised herself slightly, then sank back against the cushions which had been heavily stacked beneath her. "What a mercy it is," she breathed, "that Anthony and Nigel don't know what it's all about! Do you think . . ." She turned to me. "Do you think that the other children are all right? Oughtn't you to go and see?"

I rose and was leaving her compartment when she added, "Have a peep at my young men too, will you? If they're awake and have a lean and hungry look, tell them they can come in and have tea."

I slid the door to, and as I turned round in the corridor I came face to face with the most hideous-looking Chinaman I had ever yet set eyes upon, and I had seen a good many.

"*Yao su'mah?*" I asked abruptly. "What do you want?"

"*Mu-chin, Yao mu-chin shiao hia tza.*" He wanted, he had said, the mother and the small children, and I was wondering which would be the swiftest, surest and most noiseless way of killing him when I heard other feet clambering on the train from the permanent way below and a burly figure appeared in the corridor.

"They're coming," he proclaimed breathlessly. "They're on their way. It won't be long now."

It was at that moment, I think, that my nerve cracked. The thing had become too much of a grotesque nightmare.

"*Who* are coming?" I shouted at him, overwrought and oblivious to my surroundings. "Who?"

"The British Navy are coming," was the quiet reply. "Calm yourself, laddie. Though a bit informally clad I'm Number One of the 'Grasshopper,' and if I were you I'd take my hands off that ruffian there because he happens to be kingpin of the chair and stretcher party, and I gather he's important. Now here's the scheme . . ."

Within a quarter of an hour these forerunners of

the relief party had been supplemented by no less than two fully trained doctors and nurses from the Inland Mission in Hankow, escorted by an array of British naval officers and bluejackets. Emergency supplies of all kinds had arrived, and a host of Chinese were ready with the wherewithal to bear burdens of any variety or description.

The thunder of the guns and the scream of shells passing in both directions overhead grew in intensity as the party moved off in an easterly direction to where, six miles across country, two naval launches, escorted by a gunboat, had penetrated a creek as far as it continued to be navigable. This was an operation which, apart from actual combat with a formidable enemy at sea, was, I suppose, as near to the heart of the British Navy as any could be. It was carried out in a manner typical of the Senior Service and, I am sure, altogether in keeping with its best traditions.

A score of bluejackets proceeded warily across the rough countryside, each carrying some unfamiliar, yet quite at home youngster on his shoulders and in many cases leading another by the hand, chatting away gaily to them as though they might for all the world have been their own children whom they were bringing home again after a pleasant day's excursion to the sands. Wives and mothers, their decorum now fully restored, rode in chairs or walked with officers of the escort, and none of them glanced more than casually over their shoulders. Between them and the deserted train moved more slowly the end of the procession. Two baskets swung on either

end of a pole over the shoulder of a sure-footed young Hunanese, bore Anthony and Nigel to safety, and they appeared to be sleeping peacefully in the even motion resulting from the half-walk, half-trot which is the gait of the practiced Chinese bearer. And then there was Kitty Forsythe, quite the bravest of them all. She was carried on a litter borne by eight men and flanked on either side by doctors and nurses. Every now and then her stretcher was placed on the ground, the bearers moved away and some special attention was given to her. I maintained my place well to the rear of the convoy. For only once had I essayed to walk beside her and I had noticed that her forehead and hair were saturated, that her eyes were blinded by tears she struggled to hold back, and that there was a trickle of blood where she had bitten through her lower lip.

"Hold on," I had urged, "not much further to go now . . ."

"I'm all right." She had managed to smile back. "Right as rain. You've been . . . so helpful. This is . . . awfully thrilling, isn't it?"

I had slipped back quietly again then, to the rear of the party. I could find no courage within me that might even remotely be a match for hers.

And so it was until we arrived at the narrow creek, where a young and rosy-faced lieutenant in charge of the naval launches saw all the women and children safely housed aboard. It was significant that he turned to salute Mrs. Forsythe as she was gently hoisted over the rail and then lowered into the cabin. Maybe he knew her; more likely it was just

a typically naval gesture. It was, anyhow, admirably appropriate. Then he wheeled round to face me, a pair of binoculars swinging about his chest.

"Any more for the *Skylark?*" he shouted cheerfully.

"Yes," I retorted, stepping aboard. "One of your best shilling sicks to Margate, please. Here, lend me those glasses."

As the gangplank was drawn in and the screws started whipping up fresh mud to the shallow surface of brown water, I looked back, through powerful lenses, across the long barren distance we had come. Dusk was just falling, but I could still faintly discern the outlines of the train standing high above the embankment. A moment later the scene was obscured by a blinding red flash followed by a long muffled roar. As the smoke cleared I could detect that our train was now no more than a faint blur of smouldering wreckage. I lowered the glasses and turned away. There had been no time to lose.

I turned to the elder Mrs. Forsythe. It was obvious that all four of them, sitting in silence round the table, were deeply impressed with the significance of my story.

"Your daughter-in-law and the boys," I concluded, "went on almost immediately to Shanghai whilst I, with others, remained for a time to sort things out in Hankow. But I had the most wonderful letter from her which I shall always cherish; and later on your son, too, wrote to me most kindly. Then presently I was posted away to the wilds of Manchuria

and, you know how it is, events happen and one loses touch. So, since that evening nearly nineteen years ago now, when they were the minutest bundles slung in baskets from either end of a bamboo pole, I had not seen the twins again until this morning."

I surveyed their massive frames, hunched in polite attention to me across the table.

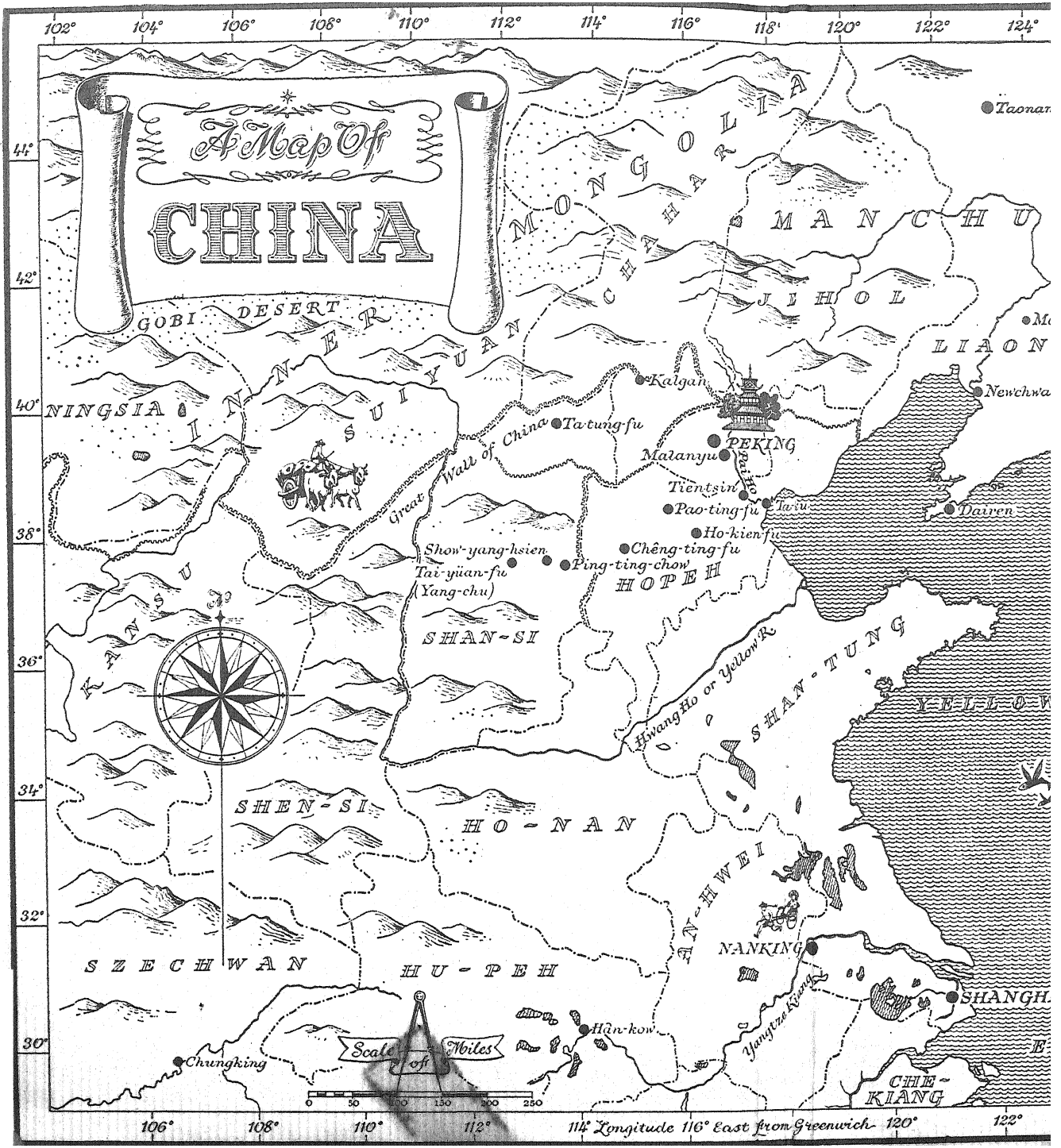
"Don't worry about your mother," I urged them. "She'll come through again all right. Perhaps now we can all feel a little more certain of that."

I glanced up at the clock, then rose and took my hostess's hand.

"Thank you. And again thank you for listening to me," I said. "For me this has been the most memorable reunion, and, may I add—a very wonderful homecoming too."

The old man cleared his throat, his eyebrows slightly raised. "Homecoming . . . ?"

"You see, sir," I concluded, "I had a less precarious beginning than the boys. I had the advantage of everything which science had devised by the turn of the century and all the care and attention that money could provide. More precious than that, sir, I enjoyed the luxury of being born and living my earliest years not only in the spring magic of these lovely surroundings, but, as it strangely happens—in this very house!"


A Map Of
CHINA
MONGOLIA
CHAHAR
MANCHU
JEHOL
LIAON
GOBI DESERT
INNER
SUIYUAN
NINGSIA
Kalgan
Newchwa
Ta-tung-fu
Great Wall of China
PEKING
Palace
Malanyu
Tientsin
Pao-ting-fu
Ta-iu
Dairen
Ho-kien-fu
Chêng-ting-fu
Show-yang-hsien
Tai-yüan-fu
(Yang-chu)
Ping-ting-chow
HOPEH
SHAN-SI
KANSU
Hwang Ho or Yellow R.
SHAN-TUNG
YELLOW
SHEN-SI
HO-NAN
NAN-HWEI
NANKING
SZECHWAN
HU-PEH
Han-kow
Yangtze Kiang
SHANGH
Chungking
Scale of Miles
0 50 100 150 200 250
CHE-KIANG
102° 104° 106° 108° 110° 112° 114° 116° 118° 120° 122° 124°
44° 42° 40° 38° 36° 34° 32° 30°
106° 108° 110° 112° 114° Longitude 116° East from Greenwich 120° 122°

(*continued from front flap*)

a few months before his twenty-second birthday it all came true, and Mr. Farquharson embarked on a career in China that lasted through the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war.

As a representative of Imperial Chemical Industries, Ltd., one of the great British business houses, he traveled up and down China for a decade. His personal, high-spot reminiscences of those days are a much needed leavening in the current emphasis on Red China. For this is at once a chronicle of an earlier day and also an evaluation of the lasting human qualities of the Chinese people that wars and revolutions will not change.

The book is not a continuous narrative of the author's activities, but rather a series of episodes that typify and interpret his experience—in the hot and humid Yangtze Valley of Central China, in the hinterlands of North China, in Manchuria. Here are Chinese peasants, business men, war lords; here are the sing-song girls and the White Russian refugee Countesses. They all belong in the picture of China as Mr. Farquharson knew it and he writes of them with understanding, affection and humor.

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