

THE GOLDEN DRAGON

By Carrol K. Michener

WAN-LI was in disgrace. She was to be spurned from beneath her husband's roof-tree and sent back to the house of her father. This was because of unfilial behavior toward her august mother-in-law, an offence against a basic tenet of Confucian propriety, therefore deserving of punishment correspondingly grave. Broadly, her crime lay in scattering heresies of the world thru the sleepy conservatism of a family whose face was set rigidly backward toward tradition; specifically, she was accused of corrupting the heart of Mei-li, her sister-in-law, whose modern experience of "ascending the dragon" is related herein.

Sitting alone in the inner chamber, Wan-li tried rebelliously, but sorrowfully, to repress her despair; and, indeed, her face as inscrutably masked the tragedy weighting her spirit as did the Buddhistic repose of the old mansion, whose ochered walls and dragon-curved roofs had dreamed through so many other crises in evanescent human lives.

But inside the gate of the outer entrance was an expression, audible at least, of her misfortune - the vicarious grief and rage of a hired servant. Wen-chun, her old *amah*, reviled the progenitors of her master's household, even unto remote generations. For three hours the old woman had lain beneath the archway, calling down curses upon the Lus. This was her right, according to custom, and the indignity to the family was one that must be borne.

Within the innermost chamber, old Mrs. Lu, whose paternal will had been flouted and her potent wrath roused, strove in vain to shut out the servant's shrieking indictments. Her maid had brought tea and heated rice-wine, and the old lady's favorite priest had been summoned from a neighboring monastery; still Mrs. Lu's anger waxed. A horn-beaked drug wizard arrived in haste from his noisome apothecary shop at the village gate, and proposed to burn her shoulders with a heated *cash*, designed to diminish her choler. But to his patient this prescription was so repugnant that he had both the wisdom and the anxiety to depart, passing quickly away to his more tranquil pursuit of miagling powdered beetles with muttered necromancy.

Then the priest came, with candle and sickly-sweet incense; he administered fragrant cups of rose-wine, for which his cloister was renowned, and chanted prayers; from time to time he struck a melodious gong. Cotton was stuffed into the lady's ears, and peace presently closed her eyelids.

Without, in the gateway, the clamor persisted. Wen-chun forgot none of the vices of the illustrious Lus; she left no family skeleton unexhumed. If the Lus had virtues she mentioned them not; and their faults rose from her tongue like a procession of ugly crows—as many as the teeth of Buddha—blackening the sunlight with the unwholesomeness of their hue. It was an example of genealogical research that indicated how thoroughly the family of Wan-li had pursued their go-between inquiries before exchanging the red cards of betrothal. And Wen-chun now labeled them all blackguards of doubtful birth, even those dusty antiquaries who had served the ancient Mings.

Recital of these scandals - although, by the devious persuasions of the oriental mind, the process was efficacious in the saving of "face" for her - did not assuage the bitterness that filled Wan-li. Her imagination invoked the sorrows that were inevitable to the married woman, for whom there is nowhere a welcome even in her father's house. She knew that until her latest hour shame must cover the woman cast from a husband's couch. She pictured the winter of her days, alone, without mate or child, eating the bitter rice of her family's charity. The words of a poet came to her mind, and she repeated them, sighingly, under her breath:

"Rudely torn may be a cotton mantle, yet a skillful hand may join it;
Snapped in twain be the string where pearls are threaded, yet the thread all swiftly knotted;
But a husband and his wife, once parted, never more may meet."

It is a fiction in the western world that love does not dwell by the Chinese hearth. Wan-li was one of many millions of contradictions to his ill-considered theory. She could have born the forthcoming separation from her mother-in-law, but

unfortunately for the tranquility of her heart, she was over-fond of her husband. For this reason she found it difficult, in view of the issue to reconcile the event of her unfilial piety with the kindly motive that had inspired it. She had designed only the innocent happiness of Mei-li, but had enraged the dragon of Confucian propriety. While the shrill clamor, shrewish and strident, continued to filter through the walls of her retreat from the rasped throat of her servant, her mind, like the steps of a miscreant seeking the scene of his deeds, groped backward over the course of her progress toward disgrace.

The matter began with her entrance into the old-fashioned house-hold; though, in a way, the beginning lay in her education, with its bursts of illumination from the great West. She was, for China, a new woman, and through an ironical destiny, her married life had carried her backward away from the light.

She was the daughter of a progressive Tao-tai in a cosmopolitan port. She had been schooled in the learning of the Occident as it's interpreted by the pedagogical envoys of America. For her eyes the fierce rays of modernity had been turned ruthlessly upon the crannies of the Orient's civilization, and in consequences, disturbing doubts of the old, mingled with half-convictions of the new, swept destructively through her mind. She was at the danger point that threatens all those who exchange old gods for new - the crossroads where reverence too often is dethroned by

GET A TRANSFER

If you are on the Gloomy Line,
Get a transfer.
Get off the track of Doubt and Gloom,
Get on the Sunshine Track, there's room,
Get a transfer.
If you're on the Worry Train,
Get a Transfer,
You must not stay there and complain,
Get a transfer.
The Cheerful Cars are passing through,
And there is lots of room for you—
Get a transfer.
If you're on the Grouchy Track,
Get a transfer.
Just take a Happy Special back,
Get a transfer.
Jump on the train and pull the rope
That lands you on the Station Hope—
Get a transfer. —The Optimist

discourtesy, belief by doubt, and faith by unbelief and impiety.

Her father, perhaps, safe in the unyielding conservatism of the old literati, had seen, or at least imagined this peril, and devised what he may have applauded as by no means a half-portion of antidote. He married her into a family as intanglement to modernity as the occult shrines of Thibet.

And it was thus that Wan-li had come to the generation-old homestead of the Lus, nestling in idolatrous contemplation against the green hillside that breathed of *feng-shui* and all the sleeping dragons of Old China's superstition.

Beneath slumbered the village of Benevolence and Virtue, from this distance graceful and softened with color as if it were on canvas, but within its crumbling walls squalid and unwholesomely odorous. Though it lay on the shore of the great Yangtze, not three hundred miles from the sea, and the tides and ships off the world swept past it daily with their exhalations of the new age, the village remained as it had been from its remote establishment—not otherwise under a republic than it was under Genghis Khan. Many of its inhabitants, indeed, were not aware of the new form of government, and most of the others understood only with vagueness. Its people were as their remotest ancestors, perpetuating every custom, intensifying every superstition. There was a handful of sophisticated merchants and literati, but they were an imperceptible leaven for the mass, which alone was visible. The queue had by no means vanished as in the treaty ports and in the South; bound feet were general, as of old, and the wailing of girls enduring the first wrappings might be heard in any courtyard. The old saying that "for every pair of golden lilies there is a kang of tears," still held its poignancy.

Wan-li had sensed these things as her bridal chair passed from the steamer-leading to the old

mansion on the hill, and her heart darkened. Lu Chang-yu, her affianced, was a foreign-school man, and though she knew her nuptial alliance was with one of the most reactionary of the old families, she had expected no such contrast as this with the scene of her girlhood in the coast metropolis; it was the antithesis of Shanghai, where the manacles of multifold Chinese custom were softened into a convenient and easy-going social hybridity.

Old Mrs. Lu had felt some misgivings over the match, she was a mountain of conservatism, and abhorred all change in what, to her, was immemorially venerable and established. She was fearful that the gossips were, in spite of lying protestations from the go-between, and that Wan-li would prove wood too rotten to be carved, after her exposure to the loose and barbarous influences from overseas. For Mrs. Lu the social and geographical world was only a savage void outside the circle of steady, saffron glory haloing the Middle Kingdom.

Her apprehensions, therefore, were susceptible to easy conviction; Wan-li, in spite of undeniable sweetness and beauty still was capable, without the least intent, of inflicting a rapid series of profound shocks upon the musk and incense complacency of her mother-in-law.

Wan-li's wedding-chests held a collection of foreign clothing - a complete outfit from Paris - over which Mei-li fluttered in an ecstasy. But to Mrs. Lu they were anathema. After once viewing them—critically, though with undoubted interest she observed that they were "hideous in design and color;" their texture was inferior to that of Chinese materials; the hat, a wide, red-velvet blossom, was "fit only for a foreign monk-ey"; and finally no decent daughter of Han would expose so much of her neck and arms. Wan-li was ordered to take them off, and to be seen thus immodestly attired no more. Perhaps all would have been well in this matter had things ended there, but Mrs. Lu was roused from her afternoon nap one day by the sound of giggling in her courtyard, and locked out upon Mei-li promenading before the household in Wan-li's Paris finery. She was an enchanting apparition to all but Mrs. Lu, whose wrath fell like thunder. Wan-li was blamed, and henceforth all faults found their way to her door.

But though, in the opinion of Mrs. Lu, Wan-li was palpably corrupting Mei-li with barbarous and unmaidenly notions, she nevertheless in some degree had won the affections of her honorable and august mother-in-law. She was outwardly respectful and modest she was capable at daily tasks, and the keys of the rice-bin had been consigned very early to her keeping—an unprecedented honor. Moreover, she was an undimmed ray of sunshine before the older women's glooms, and in spite of the veneer of her foreign training she had within her the spirit and grace of old-fashioned customs.

The August One, therefore, in casting about for the means of preserving her daughter from the bath of modern ideas infiltrating from the attractive presence of her daughter-in-law, did not at first consider the consider the dire expedient of sending Wan-li back to her parents. She conceived instead, the notion of safely marrying Mei-li, thus shifting the responsibility.

Gossip anticipated the news of this decision, and the young woman concerned heard of the go-between's overtures with a perfervid oisstress. The rumor flew to her ears that the August One's choice had fallen upon Hu Yongmi son of a rich merchant in the village of Peaceful Longevity. At this her heart stood still, for it was reputed that he was ugly of countenance, a companion of sing-song girls in the tea pavilions, and a smoker of opium. Yet the go-between painted him otherwise, and Mrs. Lu appeared content.

No such unmaidenly or unfilial thought as protesting against her mother's decision, or even of discussing it with her, occurred to Mei-li. She must be satisfied with the fate reserved for her by the gods, and with prayers to Kwan Yin, the good and merciful deity, to whom she applied tearfully, in spite of the scepticism of Wan-li. Daily she lighted a huge yellow candle in the temple of the goddess of a thousand hands, asking a fair mate with a lover's heart.

Wan-li pitied the child. Also, she pictured the gloomy days that would pass "like trailing creepers," when sunny Mei-li was gone; and she envisaged Mei-li too, unhappily cloistered in a house-hold unwashed by the light of the new days. This being her own lot, she wished nothing so ardently as to shield Mei-li from it. Her thoughts rose near to filial rebellion at the August One's intent.

So, though Mei-li dared not, Wan-li had the amazing audacity to remonstrate with her mother-in-law, repeating the gossip that Hu was unworthy, and reminding her of the proverb that "though he bar his silver door with gold, a man

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