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CHAPTER 1

The School of Adversity

IT WAS THE TWELFTH DAY of the second month, and all over China people were celebrating the Birthday of the Flowers by tying red strips of cloth on the trees and bushes. These red strips fluttering gaily in the breeze were their birthday greetings to the new flowers.

My father, however, had no time for such celebrations. He was busy at his desk in the Viceroy's Yamen* when a servant entered and saluted him, "Great Master, I have good news to report. You have a new daughter and the madam is well."

"Another daughter!" my father sighed. "That makes eighteen children in all. Too many! Too many!"

"Too Many" became my baby name. Though their first greeting was not enthusiastic, my parents did not neglect me. They sent around the customary red eggs to all our relatives and friends to tell them of my arrival. When I was one month old, these relatives and friends came to visit me, bringing gifts of embroidered caps, baby shoes, bibs and similar articles. Then they enjoyed a feast including a dish of chicken noodle soup. Noodles are a

*Governor's administration building.

symbol of long life, and are always served on birthdays.

In spite of the fact that my parents thought eighteen children were too many, before long another sister arrived, and they gave her the baby name of "Full House." She was followed by number twenty, who was also a sister, so they called her "Running Over." All my sisters were good-looking, but I was considered rather plain. Yet it was I, alone, "Too Many," who left the high ancestral walls to enter a mission school, crossed the ocean to America, and now have the honor of writing to you.

Hangchow, near the coast of central China, is my old family home. Here the Tsai family have lived for generations and here are the graves of my ancestors. Hangchow is one of the beauty spots of China, famed for its flowering hills, picturesque West Lake, historic temples, storied pagodas and the swift-flowing Chientang River that sweeps its southern walls and then empties into the long narrow neck of the Hangchow Bay. There the river crashes into the high spring and fall tides as they surge in, forming a wave of foaming water which retreats for miles back up the river and submerges both banks along the way. This phenomenon is called the Hangchow Bore. So great is the beauty of Hangchow that there is a common saying, "Heaven is above; Hangchow and Soochow are below."

My grandfather was born in the early part of the nineteenth century, when the Manchu emperors still ruled China. After he passed the government examinations required for a high literary degree, he received an appointment to the governorship of the important Province of Kwangtung, in the south. So

Three children in old-fashioned clothes

he left his wife, six sons and a daughter in Hangchow, and made the long journey south to take up his new post. Alas, no sooner had he reached it than he was stricken with disease and died. When my grandmother heard the news, she was stunned. She sat like a statue for days. Her sons tried in vain to move her, get her to speak, eat, or go to bed. She only sat staring in front of her. Now with no visible means of support, she must raise six sons and a daughter. She, who had been trained to ease, must toil night and day. She must dismiss the servants, sell the house, and pawn all the fine garments. Her family must learn to eat rice gruel and cabbage. But she resolved, come what may, all her sons would be scholars, in the family tradition.

My father was the second son, and many a time

he told us of his childhood poverty. "How do you think I got my education?" he would ask my brothers, when they complained of hard work. "We did not even have a teacher or the books we needed. I had to walk through wind and swirling snow for miles to borrow a book, and agree to return it after a certain number of days. Then we boys, after a day's hard work, would sit together around the table and copy from the borrowed book. In the center of the table was a small cup of oil, with a floating wick, giving a very dim light. When we were hungry we would eat a handful of cold, leftover rice from the basket. In the winter months our hands were so numb we could hardly hold our pens. You don't know what hardship is!"

Somehow the family managed to get along. The boys were largely self-educated, the elder taught the younger. When they grew to manhood, they prepared to take the literary examinations that opened the way for civil service, just as their father and grandfather had done. The daughter, of course, was not allowed to study. She was only a girl and must learn to do the housework.

My father and his older brother passed the first degree examinations in Hangchow, and later went to Nanking to take the examinations for the next degree. On the day appointed, the two brothers appeared at the Examination Halls. Both were dressed in long blue cotton gowns and short black coats. Their hair was neatly braided in long queues and they wore black skull caps; each carried a basket containing fruit, pens, ink, a bowl and chopsticks.

Gaily colored awnings hung over the entrance. At the gate two attendants roughly searched the young

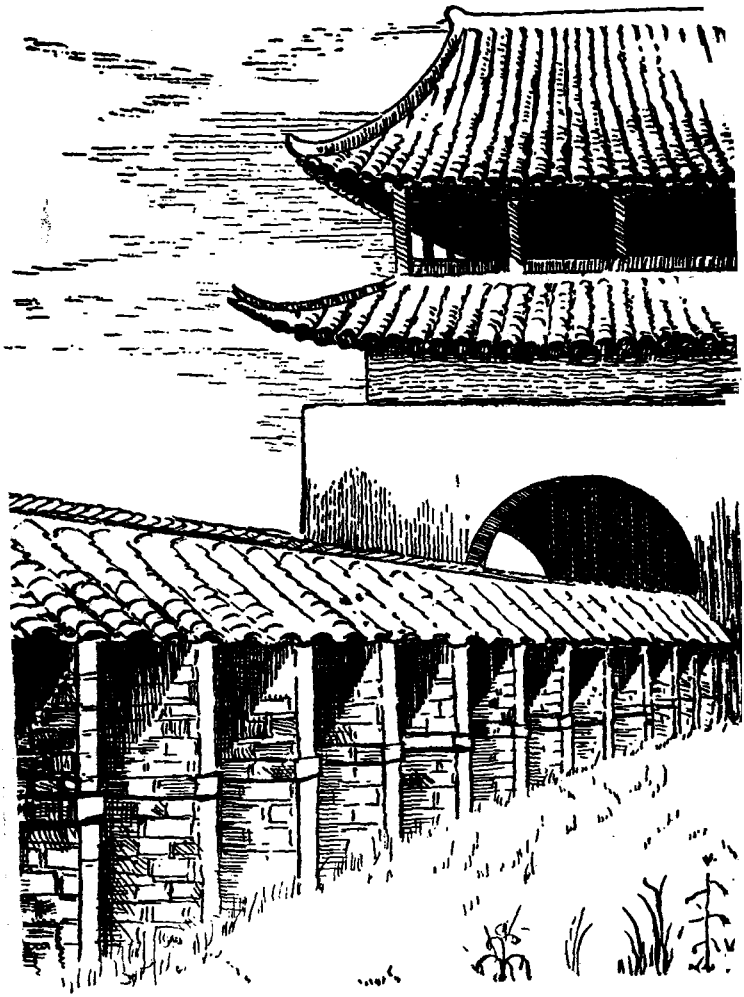
men for hidden papers or books. They entered an open courtyard where crowds of students and attendants milled around. A high tower overlooked the many long rows of examination cells which extended on four sides from the tower. Each row contained about a hundred cells, opening into a narrow aisle, and exposed to the weather in front.

The two brothers were very nervous and kept close together to bolster their courage. They were assigned separate cells where they laid down their baskets. The cells were the size of telephone booths, and each contained a narrow board to sit on, a niche in the wall for a light, a nail to hang the basket, and another board for a table.

Soon the examiners summoned them to the courtyard, called the roll and gave each student his roll of paper. This was all the paper he was allowed, so he carefully hid it in the pocket of his gown. Toward evening, the examiners went to the street gates and with great ceremony closed and sealed them. This was a signal that the examinations were to begin. For three days and nights no one could go out or come in for any reason whatever.

In the tower overhead, an examiner appeared and beat a gong to call the students to assemble in the courtyard. They gazed up and saw him wave a banner. He called out in a loud voice: "O ye spirits of the dead! Look upon these students gathered here! If any has offended you in word or deed do you now punish the offender and avenge the wrong." The nervous students, who believed in evil spirits, shivered with fear, some nearly fainting. The gong was sounded again, and the students went to their own cells.

An attendant, holding a lighted lantern with the



Examination cells and tower

subject of the essay written on the sides, passed slowly down each aisle, giving the students time to see the title clearly. During the three days and nights, the students could neither lie down to sleep or speak to anyone; an attendant paced up and down the aisle to guard against any cheating.

At mealtimes when the gong sounded, each took his bowl and chopsticks out to the courtyard, where there were great steaming caldrons of rice gruel. He dipped out what he wanted, noisily wolfed it down, and then turned back to his cell. The strain of preparation, anticipation and prolonged concentration was so great that there were always a few students who died under the ordeal, and their bodies were passed out through a secret door in the wall.

When the essay was finished, each signed his name on the designated flap, sealed it and handed the paper to the examiner. Then when the gates were opened, they went out, too weary to speak, anxious only for a place to lie down for a few hours. The examinations were strictly impartial. The subjects always demanded a thorough knowledge of the Confucian Classics. The Board of Examiners read each essay and judged it on its own merits before they unsealed the author's signature. Appointments were often given to those who received the highest grades. This system of examinations had been in operation in China since A.D. 600.

One day a messenger handed an official notice to my grandmother stating that my father had passed the examination! Grandmother had no money to give the messenger for bringing the good news, so she took her best coat to a neighbor for a deposit, and borrowed money. She and Father were very happy, but my uncle was so disappointed he went

to his room and wept. Soon another messenger arrived with a notice saying that uncle too had passed. Another coat was taken to the neighbors, and more money borrowed to pay the second messenger, and the family sat down to celebrate the great occasion, shabby but proud.

Every member of the family eventually won an important political post. My eldest uncle became Vice-Governor of Hopei Province, living at Tientsin; and my father Vice-Governor of Kiangsu, living at Nanking. Later he became Acting-Governor, and held many other important offices. My third uncle became a high official (*Taotai*) in Peking; my fourth uncle, Mayor of Paotingfu; my fifth uncle, Mayor of Yangchow; and my sixth uncle, Mayor of Siangyang, in Hupeh. As for the despised little girl, she married an official having the highest rank of all, instructor of the Emperor himself! Such are the sweet uses of adversity!

Many years later my father became head of the Examination Halls in Nanking. He used to don his gorgeous robes, put on his cap with a peacock feather hanging down behind and a red button on top (the insignia of the highest official degree), and set out in his green sedan chair with eight bearers. Liveried horsemen preceded and followed him.

Father always had a deep affection for the poor and did much for them. One night during the examinations he decided to see what was going on below. He took off his official robes, put on an attendant's gown and went downstairs. In the darkness of the courtyard he heard someone sobbing. He found a student huddled on a step, crying as if his heart would break. "What is the matter?" Father asked. "Who are you?"

"My name is Hung, and I am from Wusih. My widowed mother is too poor to send me here, but some friends loaned money for me to come. My essay slipped out of my gown and fell into the night soil! Alas, now I have no more paper and I dare not return and tell my mother I have lost the chance! It would break her heart! I can only kill myself." My father was moved with compassion. "I have a roll of paper which I do not need," he said. "I will get it for you, and you can rewrite your essay. Wait here for me." When he returned the young man looked in his face, recognized him as the Chief Examiner and kowtowed before him. "Sir," he cried, "I shall remember you with gratitude all my life. You have saved me and my mother!"

The next incident after passing his examinations was a strange marriage. In China engagements are often made when both parties are young, and arranged without either the boy or girl seeing each other. Sometimes the parents arrange them even before the children are born. So it happened that at an early age my father was engaged to a young woman whom he had never seen and who lived far to the north, in Peking. As there were no mails in those days, and they had had no news of her for some years, my grandmother urged him to go up to Peking, marry his bride, and bring her home.

The journey to Peking took several months and was very tiresome and difficult. He was surprised to find on arrival that she had been dead two years, and her coffin was there waiting for him! According to Chinese custom, she was his wife and he must bring her coffin back to Hangchow and bury her in his family graveyard. Now his first wife was dead, so he must marry again. He married a girl from

Hangchow who bore him seven children and then she too died. After her death he went to Peking again and married a beautiful young lady, with whom he fell deeply in love. This woman, my mother, was not only beautiful, but very capable and a great help to him in his work. She was slender, with delicate features, and an ivory-tinted complexion. Her jet black hair was brushed smoothly back into a knot at the neck, and fastened with gold and jade hairpins. She bore him fifteen children. But her burdens as wife and mother, and mistress of a vast household, were so great, that she urged my father to take a concubine to share the responsibilities with her. The latter bore him two children, so in all he had twenty-four children—quite a family, even in China, where big families are common.

After my father had had various political offices, and had been stationed in several cities, he went to Nanking, where he lived from 1870 to 1910.