



A TOAST TO LOVE

by Alice Yen Ho

Mr. John marched into the class. Tall and dark-skinned he looked handsome in his white cotton shirt and white trousers. There was a usual big smile on his shiny face as he brought us another idea he had gleaned from articles in the newspapers and magazines.

"If only all the people of this world could freely migrate and intermarry, there would be less fightings and wars." His teeth were yellowish from nicotine, his voice hoarse from talking in the staff room. There were two wet patches where his underarms had sweated in the

tropical weather, although all the classrooms had many louvered windows.

"We would be able to speak each other's language, exchange customs and cultures, and learn to understand each other better..." He picked up a white chalk and with a dramatic swing of his right arm as the radius—the boys always wowed in mock admiration whenever he did this—he swooshed a big circle *on* the blackboard.

Normally he would fill the flat earth-circle with arrows showing the flow of warm or cool air currents or ocean currents. Geography lesson had gone awry that morning as he filled it with arrows of people freely migrating from the Northern to the Southern Hemisphere and vice versa and from the east to the west and vice versa.

"... and be able to speak in different tongues of flame, sir."

The class roared in laughter and noise. Never giving Mr. John credibility we jeered and quipped and made smart-aleck remarks: "Why don't we start with you, sir?" Mr. John was finishing his five-year contract with the Board of Education in British Borneo and was going home to India where a traditional wedding awaited him. Sometimes Mr. John would let us feel like smarties and smiled at our antics. Other times he would shake his head in disgust: "It is a curse to be a teacher, I'll tell you," his tongue rolling even on the r in the word curse and his hand, also nicotine-stained, spread out upwards.

I was not joining in the mirth that day. I had a letter to write. My eldest sister had written home from England where she was on a scholarship. She was engaged, and to an English undergraduate. My mother, a romantic at heart, was absolutely delighted and she made no bone about it. My father, a China man right to the core, was absolutely furious. For two days and two nights he and my mother argued and bantered. It was all my mother's faults, sending us all to English schools and getting westernised in language, manners and ideas.... It was done with my father's consent because Chinese educational systems all over South-East Asia were at the *time* infiltrated with

i communist movements....

English was the official language used in all government offices, in banks and oil companies... Back and forth they hacked, and on the third day began a month-long cold war,

My father's instruction to me—I was the "home" secretary—was to write and tell my sister that there would be no blessings from him. My

mother's instruction was that as long as the man was not a criminal it didn't matter what race she had chosen to marry. It was important though, that she knew she was going to be loved forever. She was confident my sister had chosen the best for herself.

Messages of such importance were beyond my grasp of the second language to convey at the age of fourteen. Nevertheless, I did my best: first the good news, then the bad news, buried in ambiguity amongst reports on the local gossips and my latest hobbies, hoping that the reader would not cry her eyeballs out when she read between the lines.

My mother was a very modern-headed Chinese woman for her time and for the little gossipy town we lived in. (When she died a few years later, some local idiots rumoured that her untimely death was due to her outrage at my sister's marriage.) She was respected first as a teacher and then as a Chinese doctor and a capable business woman. She was well-known for her practice of the doctrine of the pulse, her diagnoses, and her prescriptions of Chinese medicinal herbs, especially with women and children. Very often patients came to her not only for cures but for small loans (seldom repaid, or repaid and loaned again), for advice on their marriages, on bringing up their little urchins or little rascals, for tips on cooking or sewing, or just to talk about basketball or Tai-Chi; well, for probably everything under the sun.

Once she was invited to the wedding of a Chinese girl to an Eurasian boy and I went along with her. A fellow businessman asked her if she would object to this when it was one of her daughters, for *it* was the hottest gossip in town then. My mother, plump and hearty, and with an arm resting on my shoulder for some kind of support (that was partly why she always took me with her everywhere), said; "It doesn't matter to me. My daughters will be free to choose whatever creed or colour they want to marry as long as there is love. In this modern age (it was the late 50s) we should look outwards..." This was a few years before my sister's engagement and my mother had been known to utter a few things that rocked the town a bit.

She loved the cinemas, she loved Elvis Presley. There must be something to hold her marriage to my father since he only knew work and no fun.

Then my second sister married a Japanese.

My father was also a respectable teacher before he went into business. He was just as well-read as my

mother but whereas my mother would use knowledge to her advantage my father would stubbornly stand on his ground. It was a quarter of a century after the Second World-War but my father was still as confounded by the fact that one of his daughters was marrying China's worst enemy... We were not well taught in our history in the missionary schools.... we had flung our culture to the wind.... what a shame to kow-tow to them now... (he drove a Japanese car and used a Japanese calculator)... sigh... My mother had by then passed away {or she would have been just delighted) and as all my brothers were in the four corners of the world, my younger sister and I had to listen to his battle hymn.

This time, however, he had to write his own letters. I was still the home secretary and at the height of this rather arduous career, but I definitely preferred to express my own opinion on this subject now that I was older. His letters were short and succinct, in a page or two of his beautiful Chinese calligraphic writing. They were very unlike our letters home (in English), which were too long he hardly had time to read them in a breath, busy as he was. These letters were neatly filed and put away in his green-coloured safe to be shared by whoever was home on holidays. In his short epistle, therefore, my second sister was reprimanded for what she had done, since he had sent her to Japan to study and acquire technology when instead she had forgotten overnight the

Japanese occupation of Asia... He was jeered at by his friends and people in town for marrying off his daughter to a "red-haired devil" and now the "little Japanese devil" too.... (my brother-in-law is 6'), All foreigners were still devils to him then. In later years we laughed over this with our brothers till four in the morning but at the time when my father's temper had seemed like hell burning on earth, it was not at all funny.

The third letter came from me in London. Of course there were a lot of stipulations during my sojourn in England regarding my choice of husband. Not in the least was I fearful of his wrath if I had dared to write home that I had married a Caucasian, a pirate of the South Seas or a man from outer space. I was not trying to please my father; I would never have done it for the greatest father on earth. It just happened that I had married a "non-devil".

My husband's ancestors had not come from the same province of China as my father's, and that too, would have been called rebellion in earlier years. But after all the revolutions at home what

was a little insubordination? He was happy this time, although he must comment that my husband looked like a highwayman because of his unusual height for a Chinese of the South (6 ft.) his burly chin and side-burns. Much to my * band's chagrin too, he tried to make me retain my maiden name. (According to Chinese tradition married women retain their maiden names and also refer to themselves as Mrs. So and So. Here again* Western society's influence was to be believed for my change of name.)

He was still not prepared for the next male addition to his family. Rumours and news came to him from his cold cronies that a Canadian boy working on the American oil rig was dating his youngest daughter. My father was just as confounded as a decade ago.

The ex-home-secretary was called upon to declare his objections as my sister was staying with me. I was, however, on my guard, having known the old man and his adage so well. In fact, I was already engaged by the party-in-love to solicit some blessings from him, if it could be called blessings. I mused over my predicament as the arbiter of the two worlds as I arrived at the old battle-ground.

I cut a notch that day as I believe I said it all in a day all that I had to say to him for more than a decade. He was not behind in his news of the changing world but he was incredibly stubborn to admit it was different from three decades ago. The idea of a Heinz 57 family was not appealing to him at first, but there was nothing he could do about it.

I do not claim it was my sharpened tongue that had changed his attitude; it must have been a process that was already taking place in him, for the change was radical. A profound atheist, he was willing to go to church to give away his youngest daughter to a Canadian. He was most happy at the wedding reception where the American boss of my sister made a toast: a toast to the East and a toast to the West, and above all, a toast to love. He and the American had been good friends for a while.

Now I come to think of all these episodes in a different light. The past, rolled out like a silent movie on a giant-size video screen, seems easier to analyse. My father was not really prejudiced but was fiercely possessive of his daughters. Perhaps he was both but had to resign himself to his fate.

Before she went overseas my eldest sister had a Chinese boyfriend (an artist) who was strongly disapproved by my father because he looked mousy. The boy suddenly became eligible in his

eyes when my sister had decided to marry an English man. Maybe he was getting used to the artist's ineligibility and his "mousy head and ears".

A Chinese business man once sent a matchmaker to ask for my second sister's hand. My father curtly told the matchmaker that the impudent fellow should first get himself a good quality toothbrush and stop dreaming. The man had such protruding teeth that seemed to be perpetually "dripping with leftovers from his meals".

When i was eighteen I could not go partying with abandon. There he would be, sitting in his station-wagon outside the club house, waiting for the party to end. An ex-classmate used to visit me whenever he was in town. My father observed that he looked like a spider and condemned him as being lazy. He was the brain of our class and had such long and skinny arms and legs that he and his

limbs would sprawl all over the chairs in our house as we made witty remarks about the amusing world around us.

Today, two decades after the first uprising by the first audacious female of our family, my father praises all his sons-in-law that they have been very good husbands he is afraid we don't quite deserve it. His advice to us is that husbands are to be loved and looked after (like porcelain vases of antique value I suppose) and not relentlessly controlled. I think of Mr. John and his radius arm and his attempted peace mission for the world... It has taken all the girls of our family—with the support of our confirmed-bachelor brothers—many years and many a battle to win a little blessing from a doubtlessly loving father, who seems to have found a new battle-ground and a few stalwart allies.