

A HOUSE DIVIDED

by Pearl S. Buck



New York

P. F. COLLIER & SON
CORPORATION

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A HOUSE DIVIDED

I

IN this way Wang Yuan, son of Wang the Tiger, entered for the first time in his life the earthen house of his grandfather, Wang Lung.

Wang Yuan was nineteen years old when he came home from the south to quarrel with his father. On a winter's night when snow drifted now and again out of the north wind against the lattices the Tiger sat alone in his great hall, brooding over the burning coals in the brazier, as he loved to do, and always he dreamed that his son would come home one day, a man, grown and ready to lead out his father's armies into such victories as the Tiger had planned but had not seized because age caught him first. On that night Wang Yuan, the Tiger's son, came home when none expected him.

He stood before his father, and the Tiger saw his son clothed in a uniform new to him. It was the uniform of the revolutionists who were the enemies of all lords of war such as the Tiger was. When its full meaning came to the old man he struggled to his feet out of his dreaming, and he stared at his son and he fumbled for the narrow keen sword he kept always beside him and he was about to kill his son as he might kill any enemy. But for the first time in his life the Tiger's son showed the anger he had in him but which he had never dared to show before his father. He tore open his blue coat and he bared his smooth young breast, brown and smooth, and he cried out in a loud young voice, "I knew you would want to kill me—it is your old and only remedy! Kill me, then!"

But even as he cried the young man knew his father could not

kill him. He saw his father's upraised arm drop slowly down and the sword fell mildly through the air, and staring at his father steadily, the son saw his father's lip tremble as though he would weep, and he saw the old man put his hand to his lips to fumble at his mouth to steady it.

At this moment when the father and son stood thus facing each other, the old trusty hare-lipped man, who had served the Tiger since both were young, came in with the usual hot wine to soothe his master before he slept. He did not see the young man at all. He saw only his old master, and when he saw that shaken face, and that feeble changing look of anger suddenly dying, he cried out and running forward, he poured wine quickly. Then Wang the Tiger forgot his son and he dropped his sword and with his two trembling hands he reached for the bowl and he lifted it to his lips and he drank again and again, while the trusty man poured out more and yet more from the pewter jug he held. And again and again the Tiger muttered, "More wine—more wine—" and he forgot to weep.

The young man stood and watched them. He watched the two old men, the one eager and childish in the comfort of the hot wine after his hurt and the other bending to pour the wine, his hideous split face puckered with his tenderness. They were only two old men, whose minds at even such a moment were filled with the thought of wine and its comfort.

The young man felt himself forgotten. His heart, which had been beating so hard and hot, turned cold in his bosom, and a tightness in his throat melted suddenly into tears. But he would not let the tears fall. No, some of the hardness he had learned in that school of war served him now. He stooped and picked up the belt he had thrown down, and without a word he went aside, holding his body very straight as he went, into a room where he had been wont to sit as a child to study with his young tutor, who later was his captain in the school of war. In the darkness of the room he felt to find the chair beside the desk, and he sat

down, and he let his body be slack, since his heart was so dashed.

It came to him now that he need not have let himself be so passionate with fear for his father—no, nor so passionate with love for him, either, that for this old man's sake he had forsaken his comrades and his cause. Over and over again Wang Yuan thought of his father as he had just seen him, as he even now was in that hall where he sat drinking his wine. With new eyes he saw his father, and he could scarcely believe this was his father, the Tiger. For Yuan had always feared his father and yet loved him, though unwillingly and always with a secret inner rebellion. He feared the Tiger's sudden rages and his roarings and the swift way he thrust out the narrow bright sword he kept always near at hand. As a little lonely lad Yuan waked often in the night, sweating because he dreamed he had somehow made his father angry, although he need not have been so fearful, since the Tiger could not be truly angry with his son for long. But the lad saw him often angry or seeming angry with others, for the Tiger used his anger as a weapon with which to rule his men, and in the darkness of the night the lad shivered beneath his quilts when he remembered his father's rounded, glaring eyes and the way he jerked his coarse black whiskers when he raged. It had been a joke among the men, a half-fearful joke, to say, "It is better not to pull the Tiger's whiskers!"

Yet with all his angers the Tiger loved his son only, and Yuan knew it. He knew it and he feared it, for this love was like an anger, too, it was so hot and petulant and it lay so heavy on the child. For there were no women in the Tiger's courts to cool the ardor of his heart. Other lords of war when they rested from their battles and grew old took women to amuse them, but Wang the Tiger took not one. Even his own wives he did not visit, and one, the daughter of a physician who, being an only child, had inherited silver that her father gave her, was years gone to a great coastal city where she lived with her own daughter, the only child she ever bore the Tiger, to give her learning in a foreign

sort of school. Therefore to Yuan his father had been everything of love and fear, and this mingled love and fear were hidden hands upon him. He was held imprisoned and his mind and spirit were fettered often by this fear of his father and the knowledge of his father's only, centered love.

Thus had his father held him fast, although the Tiger did not know he did, in that hardest hour Yuan had ever known, when in the southern school of war his comrades stood before their captain and swore themselves for this new great cause, that they would seize the very seat of government of their country and put down the weak man who sat there, and wage a war for the good common people who now were at the cruel mercy of the lords of war and of the foreign enemies from abroad, and so build the nation great again. In that hour when youth after youth so swore his life away, Wang Yuan drew apart, held by fear and love of his father, who was such a lord of war as these cried against. His heart was with his comrades. A score of harsh memories were in his mind of the suffering common people. He could remember their looks when they saw their good grain trampled down by the horses of his father's men. He could remember the helpless hate and fear upon an elder's face in some village when the Tiger demanded, however courteously, a tax of food or silver for his men. He could remember dead bodies lying on the ground and meaningless to his father and his men. He could remember floods and famines, and once how he had ridden with his father on a dike, and water was everywhere about, and that dike was dark with lean hunger-ridden men and women, so that the soldiers must be ruthless lest they fall on the Tiger and his precious son. Yes, Yuan remembered these and many other things and he remembered how he had winced to see these things and hated himself that he was a war lord's son. Even as he stood among his comrades he had so hated himself, even when for his own father's sake he withdrew secretly from the cause he would have liked to serve.

Alone in the darkness of his old childish room, Yuan remembered this sacrifice for his father, and to him at this hour it was all a waste. He wished he had not made it, since his father could not understand it and did not value it. For this old man had Yuan left his own generation and their comradeship, and what did the Tiger care? Yuan felt himself misused and misunderstood his whole life long, and suddenly he remembered every little hurt his father ever gave him, how he had forced his son out to see his men do their feints of war when the lad was reading a book that he loved and was loath to leave it, and how his father had shot down the men who had come to beg for food. Remembering many such hateful things, Yuan muttered behind his closed teeth, "He has never loved me all his life long! He thinks he loves me and that he holds me the only dear thing he has, and yet never once has he asked me what I really want to do, or if he did, it was to refuse me if what I said was not his wish, so that I always must take thought to say what he wanted and I have had no freedom!"

Then Yuan thought of his comrades and how they must despise him, and how he now would never have a share with them in making his country great, and he muttered rebelliously, "I never did want to go to that school of war at all but he must force me to go there or nowhere!"

This soreness and loneliness grew in Yuan so that he swallowed hard and blinked his eyes quickly in the darkness and he muttered furiously as a hurt child mutters to himself, "For all my father knows or cares or understands, I might as well have turned a revolutionist! I might as well have followed after my captain, for now I have no one—no one at all—"

So Yuan sat on alone, feeling himself the loneliest soul and very dreary, and none came near him. Throughout the hours left of the night not even one serving man came near to see how he did. There was not one who did not know that Wang the Tiger, their master, was angry with his son, for while the two quarrelled

there were eyes and ears at the lattices, and now none dared to turn that anger on himself by comforting the son. It was the first time Yuan was paid no heed, and so he was the more lonely.

He sat on and would not search for any way to light a candle nor would he shout for any serving man. He folded his arms upon the desk and put down his head upon them and he let the waves of melancholy sweep over him as they would. But at last he slept because he was so weary and so young.

When he woke it was faint dawn. He lifted up his head quickly and looked about him; then he remembered he had quarrelled with his father, and he felt all the soreness of it in him still. He rose, and he went to the outer door upon the court and looked out. The court was still and empty and grey in the wan light. The wind was dead and the snow had melted as it fell in the night. By the gate a watchman slept, huddled in a corner of the wall for warmth, his hollow bamboo and his stick with which he beat upon it to frighten thieves away laid down upon the tiles. Looking at the man's sleeping face, Yuan thought with gloom how hideous was its slackness, the jaw loose and hanging and open to show the ragged teeth; although the man was at heart a very kindly fellow and one to whom in his childhood, and not many years ago, either, Yuan had often turned for sweets and toys at street fairs and such things. But to him now the man seemed only old and hideous and one who cared nothing for his young master's pain. Yes, Yuan now told himself, his whole life had been empty here and he was suddenly wild with rebellion against it. It was no new rebellion. It was the breaking of the secret war he now felt had always been between him and his father, a war grown he scarcely knew how.

In his childish early days Yuan's western tutor had taught him, trained him, plied him with the talk of revolution, of reshaping the nation, until his child's heart was all afire with the meaning of the great brave lovely words. Yet he always felt the fire dis

when his tutor dropped his voice low and said most earnestly, "And you must use the army that is one day to be yours; for country's sake you must use it, because we must have no more of these war lords."

So unknown to Wang the Tiger did this hireling subtly teach his son against him. And the child looked miserably into the shining eyes of his young tutor, and he listened to the ardent voice, moved to his core, yet checked by words he could not speak, although the words shaped too clearly in his heart, "Yet my father is a lord of war!" Thus was the child torn secretly throughout his childhood, and none knew it. It made him grave and silent and always heavy-hearted beyond his years, because though he loved his father, he could take no pride in him.

In this pale dawn, therefore, Yuan was wearied past his strength with all these years of war within himself. He was of a mind to run away from it, and from every war he knew, from cause of every kind. But where might he go? He had been so guarded, so kept within these walls by his father's love, that he had no friends and nowhere he could turn.

Then he remembered the most peaceful place he had ever seen in all the midst of war and talk of wars in which he had been from childhood. It was the small old earthen house in which his grandfather once lived, Wang Lung, called the Farmer until he grew rich and founded his house and moved it from the land so that he was called Wang the Rich Man. But the earthen house still stood on the edge of a hamlet and on three sides were quiet fields. Near it, Yuan remembered, were the graves of his ancestors set upon a rising bit of land, Wang Lung's grave, and other graves of his family. And Yuan knew, because once or twice or more, he had passed there as a child when his father visited his two elder brothers, Wang the Landlord and Wang the Merchant, who lived there in the nearest city to the earthen house.

Now, Yuan told himself, it would be peaceful in that small old house and he could be alone, for it was empty except for the

aged tenants his father let live there since a certain still and grave-faced woman Yuan remembered had gone to be a nun. He had seen her once with two strange children, one a grey-haired fool who died, and one a hunchback, his elder uncle's third son, who became a priest. He remembered he thought the grave woman almost a nun even when he saw her, for she turned her face away and would not look at any man, and she wore grey robes crossed upon her breast; only her head was not yet shaven. But her face was very like a nun's face, pale as a waning moon is pale, the skin delicate and tightly stretched across her small bones, and looking young until one came near and saw the fine and hair-like wrinkles on it.

But she was gone now. The house was empty except for the two old tenants and he might go there.

Then Yuan turned into his room again, eager to be off now he knew where to go, and he longed to be away. But first he must take off his soldier's uniform he hated, and opening a pigskin box, he searched for some robes he used to wear and he found a sheepskin robe and cloth shoes and white inner garments, and he put them on in haste and gladly. Then silently he went to fetch his horse, stealing through the brightening court, past a guardsman sleeping with his head pillowed on his gun, and Yuan went out, leaving the gates ajar, and he sprang upon his horse.

After Yuan had ridden awhile he came out from the streets and into lanes and alleys and out from those into the fields, and he saw the sun come slipping up beneath a blaze of light behind the distant hills, and suddenly it rose, nobly red and clear in the cold air of that late winter's morning. It was so beautiful that before he knew it some of his dolefulness was gone and in a moment he felt himself hungry. He stopped then at a wayside inn, from whose door, cut low in earthen walls, the smoke streamed out warmly and enticingly, and he bought hot gruel of rice, a salty fish and wheaten bread sprinkled thick with ses-

ame, and a brown pot of tea. When he had eaten everything and had drunk the tea and rinsed his mouth, and paid the yawning keeper of the inn, who combed himself the while and washed his face cleaner than it had been, Yuan mounted on his horse again. By now the high clear sun was glittering on the small frosty wheat and on the frosty thatch of village houses.

Then being after all young, on such a morning Yuan felt suddenly that no life, even his, could be wholly evil. His heart lifted and he remembered, as he went on, looking over the land, that he always said he would like to live where trees and fields were, and with the sight and sound of water somewhere near, and he thought to himself, "Perhaps this is now what I may do. I may do what I like, seeing that no one cares." And while he had this small new hope rising in him before he knew it words were twisting in his mind and shaping into verse and he forgot his troubles.

For Yuan in these years of his youth found in himself a turn for shaping verses, little delicate verses which he brushed upon the backs of fans and upon the whitewashed walls of rooms he lived in anywhere. His tutor had laughed at these verses always, because Wang Yuan wrote of soft things such as leaves dropping down on autumn waters, or willows newly green above a pool or peach blossoms rosy through the white spring mists or the dark rich curls of land newly ploughed, and all like gentle things. He never wrote of war or glory, as the son of a war lord should, and when his comrades pressed him to a song of revolution until he wrote it, it was too mild for their desire, because it spoke of dying rather than of victory, and Yuan had been distressed at their displeasure. He murmured, "So the rhymes came," and he would not try again, for he had a store of stubbornness in him and much secret willfulness for all his outward quietude and seeming docility, and after this he kept his verses to himself.

Now for the first time in his life Yuan was alone and at the behest of no one, and this was wonderful to him, and the more