HUNDRED ALTARS

By

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HUNDRED ALTARS

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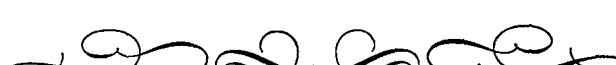

To the everlasting people, -
my friends of Hundred Altars

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I

Stranger's Entry

"You have come to the right place," said the old Chinese diviner looking fixedly across the table at the merchant who sat opposite him. "This village of Hundred Altars attracts the favourable 'wind and water' influences (*fêng shui*). And if a man expects good fortune in his business it is wise for him to settle in fortunate surroundings. When the spirits are hostile, efforts are useless."

Ma, the merchant,—a short fattish man, bull-headed, with keen slanting black eyes,—listened attentively to the soothsayer's words. Because of his occult knowledge, this lean old man in his patched cotton coat and the big horn rimmed spectacles looped over his ears with bits of string, was greatly respected in the countryside. The peasants summoned him to cast out devils, to read omens and, in general, to reveal the will of the spirits towards all their undertakings. For none knew better than he the mystic rules of those magic "wind and water influences" which the West can never fathom, but the East has long lived by. They might so easily be disturbed by a running stream, or angered by too tall a building. Such things would lead them to desert a village leaving ill-luck behind them. Or again, they might be pleased with the shape of a mountain or an outgushing spring, and gather to focus happiness upon that place. No ordinary man could tell what the "wind and water" spirits might do—or why. But the diviner was the village high priest of *fêng shui.* He knew—and under his wise direction the peasants took no chances of offending the invisible ones who dwell in every field and tree and brook. At his command the farmers burned red paper to the spirit of a tree which refused to bear fruit, or to the

Well God if the water failed, or built a new house or refrained from building one.

"Even the neighbouring villages of this region," the old man droned on in his sing-song voice, "admit that our situation is lucky. The natural features around us are balanced and harmonious, and rightly related to produce harmony in those who live among them. The ordinary folk here are content. Over a hundred years ago a famous scholar was born in Hundred Altars. No other hamlet round about can make such a boast. He won distinction for our village by securing a high degree in the Imperial examinations during the lifetime of my grandfather—a soothsayer even as I."

"That indeed is an honour to any place!" exclaimed Ma.—Merchant though he might be, he respected scholarship like all Chinese, even above the riches which he worked for. Where one successful scholar had been born, he thought to himself, the good *fêng shui* might produce another—perhaps even in his own family, though as yet he had no sons. Under the Empire it was the ambition of every man no matter how humble or great to have a scholar born into his house. For though the nation's governors were chosen from the nation's scholars, learning was loved also for its own sake. A scholar shed lustre not only on his kindred and on his birthplace, but was even revered throughout the land as one more jewel in that crown of culture of which the Chinese are so justly proud.

Well, Ma had come to consult the omens and they were good,—better than one could hope. So here in Hundred Altars Village he would buy land and make his home. He told the diviner so.

"But why not stay where you belong,—where you are already settled?" the old man asked suspiciously.

Ma had expected this question. He knew he must give reasons, and good ones, for coming to a new place since "moved people" in China are always under suspicion. Most folk prefer to die where they are born. Why, then, should a man leave home un-

less his neighbours forced him to because he was an undesirable member of the community? For two good reasons only;—flood or famine. In Ma's case it was a flood that had swept away the village near Tientsin where he was comfortably settled.—"The waters flowing over it like a strong tide have ruined the region," Ma explained, "it is necessary to seek a new place."

"Well, that *is* a reason," the diviner admitted cautiously. "Perhaps you might be accepted here."

Ma knew well enough what he meant. A stranger might be outwardly accepted, yes, and kindly treated—for a time. But residence in a rural community does not necessarily mean true membership in it. He would never be allowed to live and do business in the closed corporation of a village where most people were kin in some degree and all were friends and neighbours for generations, unless he, a newcomer, could bring guarantees of honesty and solvency. Until people knew who he was and why he came, and what manner of man he might be, none would sell him land, or give him a voice in community affairs, or let his sons have their daughters in marriage. Ma was no fool. He realized all this. And so he had wisely taken the precaution of bringing a "recommendation letter" from a man named Chien with whom he had had business dealings.

"This letter guarantees me," he said, spreading it out on the table in front of the diviner, "You know Chien of course. He is the nephew of a man of the same name living in the village."

"Yes, yes,—Squint Eye Chien!—I know him well," the diviner answered, giving his client a much more friendly smile than heretofore. "That nephew was an earnest, hard working lad who got a good place in the town where he earns thirty silver pieces a month, they tell me, in a cloth shop."—For a few minutes the soothsayer rambled on about the Chien family; how greatly Chien himself was respected in Hundred Altars,—and all about his nephew and his nephew's wife, until Ma tactfully dammed this stream of village gossip by asking him where it would be best for him to buy land.

"Tell me first the hour and the day and the month and the year of your birth, and then I will see what animal presides over it and what element controls your fate, and whether you belong to those folk who should trade southward and westward, or whether you should direct your energies toward the south and east."—So saying the old man delicately turned the pages of the thin paper Almanac with his pointed fingers tipped with inch long nails, too fragile and too precious to be cleaned.

Ma had often seen copies of this Almanac with its quaint pictures of gods and goblins and weird animals, a book prepared each year by the Emperor's own astrologers in their musty office under the shadow of the Peking city wall. There was a copy in nearly every house and ordinary people used it as a calendar. But only a diviner knew how to interpret omens from this sacred book of the unscientific science of *fêng shui.* He, and he alone, could read its secret meaning. It taught him how to interpret dreams, to cure sickness; how to decide the influences that rule men's lives, and to foretell lucky and unlucky days for weddings, funerals and building new houses. Even such seemingly trivial matters as the right date and hour for taking a bath, cutting one's hair, paying a call or buying a pig, the soothsayer was asked to look up in the Almanac.

When Ma had told what he was asked to tell, the diviner, after carefully consulting his book replied, "The piece of land southeast of the village street, close to the Black Dragon Spring would be best for you and your purposes. Facing it is the stone lion from the holy Mount Tai Shan which forbids evil spirits to pass that way. To the north is a range of hills to protect you from bad influences that might come from that unlucky direction. Studying the omens of your life I find that there and there only you should build your house so that your affairs may prosper."

The merchant rose and bowed his thanks. For once the mystical and practical combined in his favour. Good water near at hand was a precious asset in his plans. He drew from the folds of

his gown a roll of copper coins politely wrapped in paper and laid them on the table. They amounted to less than fifty cents as we count money. Nevertheless the sum was a generous fee judged by village standards. And Ma knew as well as the diviner that the latter would receive a present of like amount from the owner of the piece of land which the merchant had been recommended to buy.

"I thank you for your advice," Ma said bowing respectfully, "and now I will go and call on the chief Elder, and talk with him of my intentions."

Without his consent and the approval of the old men's council who helped him regulate village affairs, Ma could never take advantage of the good fortune that the diviner foretold for him in Hundred Altars. These men, speaking for the group, might if they chose, refuse the hospitality of the village to anyone they did not like. Therefore they, no less than the soothsayer, must be consulted by a stranger who desired to come and live among them.

When Ma rose to leave the diviner went with him to the door to see him off, not heeding his requests to "go no further, go no further. I am unworthy of your kindness."—That it was Ma's duty to say to an older man and a scholar who, though poor enough—as witness the patches on his cotton gown—commanded more respect than any merchant. But when the diviner insisted on coming as far as the street gate, Ma was greatly flattered.

The diviner's gesture was a tangible asset. Passing villagers remarked the goodbyes between host and guest. A stranger so honoured by a man with the title of "teacher" and a knowledge of reading and writing which few of them could boast, must be a person worthy of regard,—a man who might be welcome in the village. For no one but knew already of the merchant's purpose in coming to Hundred Altars. The carter who drove him out from the city of Peking—a half day's journey distant,—had inquired at once not only where he was going, but why. And Ma had told him frankly. A stranger could not hide his inten-

tions lest he arouse suspicion. A hidden motive must be a shameful motive and every man whether carter, muleteer, neighbour or even passerby, had the right to know the business of the person he served or dealt with,—not only know it, but tell it to all and sundry. So the carter had brought news of Ma's plans to the village and discussed them at the teashop, and the peasants began judging the newcomer's *p'i ch'i* (inner nature) the moment they heard the size of his tip.

As Ma sauntered slowly down the village street, he thought it was but natural that the diviner should praise the situation of Hundred Altars. On three sides the village had a sheltering screen of mountains, and, on the fourth the hills opened and the plain with its wide horizons stretched away for a full hundred miles to the sea. This fertile tract of country where the springs never ran dry and the crops seldom failed, was cut up into fields,—squares and triangles and long ribbons of good farming land. For the most part the tillers of the soil were the owners of it, and lived in the network of villages scattered over the countryside, and but rarely in isolated farmhouses.

This great North China plain is a strong land. It is a stubborn land too, with a long hard winter and cruel spring winds laden with suffocating dust from Mongolian deserts, and short hot summers with torrential rains. But just as one is often surprised to find queer nooks and corners of unexpected tenderness in strong characters, so here one finds gentle valleys with leafy orchards lying against a background of stark, rock-ribbed hills, and wild violets and iris springing up between the stones of dry river beds.

It is indeed a strong country. So much has happened there, and it wears the air of remembering everything. For centuries it has been the stage of wars and invasions, and great dynastic changes. The mighty Tangs once ruled the whole of it. The ruined temple on the hill crest nearby is a memory of the warring Liaos. A lonely pagoda on a distant crag proclaims a victory over Tartar hordes who broke like a storm through the passes

of the Great Wall which writhes along the mountain tops scarcely fifty miles distant. A half ruined Buddhist shrine on a rocky slope rising abruptly beyond the village and the thirteen lonely tombs of the Ming Emperors in the deep valley to the north speak of the coming and the passing of this last Chinese dynasty. There is something dramatic in these crumbling temples and tombs and the extinction of the great people who built them, though theirs was often only a fierce dominating feudal renown.

But Ma the merchant did not dwell on ruins as he looked about him. He was no lover of the past, but a man whose nature and ambitions were essentially of the present. Indeed for the times he lived in, he was modern minded. What interested him were the yellow roofed buildings of the Black Dragon Temple glittering in the morning sunshine on the summit of Flowering Eyebrows Hill. They had been given as an Imperial compliment by a Manchu Emperor to the Dragon God of the springs whose pure water was one of Ma's main reasons for coming to Hundred Altars.

A descendant of this great Manchu sovereign still ruled the Celestial Empire, though people said he was a weak youth and might not be able to hold on to his throne for very long. Yet he remained, so far, a power in the land, and the peasants told how now and then he came on pilgrimage through the countryside giving gifts. Indeed his Summer Palace was not far away, just beyond the spur of pointed hills that looked like a scholar's pen rest, and was another lucky omen for Hundred Altars. The Imperial Hunting Park was not far distant either, and on a clear day one could see, thirty long miles across the plain the stone freckled hill of Tang Shan, famous for its hot springs where the Emperor had a small travelling palace.

Musing on these lucky surroundings Ma presently reached the Elder's house. Two small boys were playing beside the doorway in a pile of dirt. Their hands and faces were black with it. They even had dirt on their tongues. He asked them if the Elder was at home. "He is, he is not, he is, he is not," they answered

mischievously, and darted through the gate. But presently a bright-faced woman hearing the commotion appeared. "Forgive these little ones," she said in a chirping, bird-like voice. "They are too young to understand courtesy. Now if you are looking for the house-father he has just returned from the fields and is washing himself in the kitchen. Enter and I will call him."

Ma waited but a few minutes before a very dignified farmer came into the room. It was easy to see why such a man had been chosen elder for he was a natural leader of his fellows. Not that there was anything overbearing in his manner. Far from it. The wrinkles on his face were plainly the dry beds of kindly smiles, and his strong features, unlovely but lovable, showed wisdom, good judgment and integrity of purpose.

Host and guest greeted one another politely, each clasping his own hands and bowing. Ma felt instinctive and ungrudging respect for the Elder, a fine figure of a man who at seventy five had still the body and muscles of a man of fifty.

When both were seated the woman, obviously a daughter-in-law, brought tea and Ma explained once more about the flood in his home village, and how his house had crumbled and his neighbours scattered. "I am obliged to seek a new home," he added, "and I have heard this is a lucky place."

"It is," replied the Elder quickly, "but we already have a hundred homes here, and each has its family altars and its ancestral tablets. Many of us are bound together by blood bonds and we have been established here for centuries. The record of our earliest settlers is lost. No one knows when or whence they came, but legend says they were the subjects of fairy emperors who, partly covered with fur or feathers, taught our people to cook food, build houses, and till the soil. Thus our earliest traditions have bound us to our land. The need to work it is in our blood," he added proudly.

"These things I have heard said," Ma answered bowing respectfully.

"We have our own customs too, established this long time," the Elder proceeded calmly, "our own code, and our own conventions. It might not be easy for a stranger . . ." he paused, then asked abruptly,—"Have you any guarantors?"

"Yes, Chien, the nephew of your neighbour down the street is ready to guarantee me. I have a letter from him here."

"I see," Elder Chi nodded, "and what is your business?"

"I am a merchant."

"Well, we are all farmers in this village, men of the soil as I have told you, and mostly related to one another. But there might be a place for an honest merchant among us. Our fields however are not for sale," he added cautiously,—"Where did you think of establishing your house?"

"The diviner thinks I might get the piece of vacant land near the Black Dragon Spring. With that excellent water I could set up a wine distillery. I have silver to buy your millet to make wine. And in addition I would keep a shop with flour and such other merchandise as your field folk need.—So none would lose by my coming."

"It may be so," the Elder answered still a little doubtfully, "I will discuss the matter with neighbour Chien.—You've seen him already?"—Ma nodded assent.—"If he is prepared to confirm his nephew's letter saying you are an honest man and you yourself are prepared to abide by our customs, perhaps we might be willing to have you come among us."

Thus the interview ended, and Ma went back to the little local inn where he was lodged and waited calmly for the villagers' verdict. Meanwhile Elder Chi talked the matter over with Liu and Chang and Shih, his assistant headmen. And he consulted Chien who answered frankly,—"I am certain Ma is such a man as my nephew says, a good neighbour, neighbours, and an honest trader. Besides he might, if he belonged to Hundred Altars, buy our surplus grain at better rates than those 'big stomached' speculators from the city."

Then the diviner was called in to give his opinion, and the priest of the parish temple, Trembling Sea, a large man with heavy-lidded eyes. Wu, the coffin-maker, also said his say, and the innkeeper Chin put in his word, adding shrewdly, "If we should need to borrow it might be well to have a man with silver in the village, instead of depending on the money lenders of Peking with their ruinous rates of interest."

So they all talked back and forth and after much wagging of tongues and shaking of heads the peasants agreed that Ma should be allowed to settle in Hundred Altars, though they felt this permission for a stranger's entry was no light thing to give. Indeed few outsiders ever came to disturb the peace of the village except once a year at the short season of pilgrimage to the mountain shrine of Miao Feng Shan beyond, and then they only passed by and quickly withdrew again. At all other times the hamlet lived apart, aloof from strangers and new ideas—asking only to be left in peace and guarding its isolation stubbornly. For near as it was in actual distance to the great capital of Peking, the village was miles away in spirit and the peasants, born on the land and living by it, detested towns and distrusted townsmen.

So Ma was duly grateful when he was finally invited to join the community, and at once offered a feast to his new neighbours so that he might come among them as a friend and equal. Now he could begin to bargain, dollar by dollar, for his land while silent witnesses noted that he was both shrewd and generous. And next he built his house and his shop and his distillery. Then last of all Ma again consulted the old diviner, and bade him choose a plot for his family tombs. For until Ma brought his "spirit tablets" and the bones of his dead to Hundred Altars he might not call that place his home. It was unthinkable that the ancestors should lie among strangers. Human society in this most eastern East is founded on the bond between the living and the dead. The latter still form part of the family, and care for their comfort is a descendant's first duty. Therefore, only when

the graves of his forefathers were properly prepared on his own land, and their spirits had been reverently invited to enter their new home, could Ma himself and his wife dare to install themselves in Hundred Altars.