

FIGHTING ANGEL

PORTRAIT OF A SOUL

by
Pearl S. Buck

a JOHN DAY book

REYNAL & HITCHCOCK

NEW YORK

By Pearl S. Buck

FIGHTING ANGEL

THE EXILE

A HOUSE DIVIDED

THE MOTHER

THE FIRST WIFE
AND OTHER STORIES

SONS

THE GOOD EARTH

EAST WIND: WEST WIND

. . .

ALL MEN ARE BROTHERS

[SHUI HU CHUAN]

TRANSLATED FROM THE CHINESE

FIGHTING ANGEL

PORTRAIT OF A SOUL

FIGHTING ANGEL, *the biography of the author's father, is a companion volume to THE EXILE, which is a biography of her mother. Together they form a work to be entitled THE SPIRIT AND THE FLESH*

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ANGEL—one of an order of spiritual beings, attendants and messengers of God, usually spoken of as employed by him in ordering the affairs of the universe, and particularly of mankind. They are commonly regarded as bodiless intelligences.

—*Century Dictionary.*

“Who maketh his angels spirits
And his ministers a flame of fire.”

—*The Epistle to the Hebrews.*

I

YOU might have seen him walking along the street of any little Chinese village or market town, a tall, slender, slightly stooping American. At one time in his life he wore Chinese clothes. I have a picture of him thus, seated upon a stiff carved Chinese chair, his large American feet planted before him in huge Chinese shoes, those shoes which made the Chinese women laugh behind their hands when they cut the soles, and which made many a passerby stop and stare as he strode by in dust or upon cobblestones. He even smiled himself, a little painfully, when open jokes were shouted as he passed. But the Chinese shoes, the long Chinese robe, the little round black Chinese hat with its red button—none of these made him in the least Chinese. No one could possibly mistake him. The spare, big-boned frame, the big, thin delicate hands, the nobly shaped head with its large features, the big nose, the jutting lower jaw, the extraordinary, pellucid, child-blue eyes, the reddish fair skin and slightly curly dark hair—these were purely and simply American.

But he wandered about China for more than half a century. He went there young, and there he died, an old man, his hair snow white, but his eyes still child-blue. In

those days of his old age I said to him, "I wish you would write down what your life has been for us to read." For he had traveled the country north and south, east and west, in city and country. He had had adventures enough to fill books and had been in danger of his life again and again. He had seen the Chinese people as few white men ever have—in the most intimate moments of their own lives, in their homes, at marriage feasts, in sickness and in death. He had seen them as a nation in the cycle of their times—he had seen the reign of emperors and the fall of empire, revolution and the rise of a republic and revolution again.

So he wrote down the story of his life as it seemed to him when he was seventy years old. He spent his spare time throughout a whole summer writing it. I used to hear his old typewriter tapping uncertainly during hot afternoon hours when everybody else was sleeping, or in the early dawn, because, having had as a boy to rise early on a farm in West Virginia, he could never sleep late. It was more than a physical inability—it was spiritual. "Arise, my soul, for it is day! The night cometh when no man can work." The night—the night! He remembered always the shortness of life. "As for man, his days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more."

But when it was finished the story of all his years made

only twenty-five pages. Into twenty-five pages he had put all that seemed important to him of his life. I read it through in an hour. It was the story of his soul, his unchanging soul. Once he mentioned the fact of his marriage to Carie, his wife. Once he listed the children he had had with her, but in the listing he forgot entirely a little son who lived to be five years old and who was Carie's favorite child, and he made no comment on any of them.

But the omission told as much as anything. For indeed the story was the story not of man or woman or child but of one soul and its march through time to its appointed end. For this soul there was birth, predestined, a duty to be done and it was done, and there was heaven at the end—that was the whole story. There was nothing of the lives of people in it, no merriment of feasts, no joy of love, no tales of death. There was not one word of any of the incredible dangers through which he had often passed. There was nothing in it of empire or emperors or revolutions or of all the stir of changing human times. There was no reflection upon the minds and manners of men or any subtlety of philosophies. The tale was told as simply as the sun rises out of dawn, marches swiftly across the firmament, to set in its own glory.

So others told me his story—his brothers and sisters, Carie, and his son. I heard the talk of people among whom

he lived and worked. Most of all, I knew him myself as one among my earliest memories, as one in whose house I spent my childhood, as one who in the last ten years of his life came and lived with me under my roof, and looked to me for care and comfort in his age. In spite of this, for years after he died I could not see what he was. His outlines remained ghostly to me, even when he ate at my table, most of all when he was ill and I tended him. It was only when I came back to the country that had made him and sent him forth that I saw him clear at last. For he was born in America, and he was the child of generations of Americans. No country except America could have produced him exactly as he was.

I do not know the old and precise history of his family and I have not asked because it does not matter. Some time before the American Revolution they came from somewhere in Germany, for the sake of religious freedom. I do not know just when except that I know it was in time for one of his ancestors to be a courier to George Washington, and for two others to fight loyally under Washington's command. I say it does not matter because it is not as an individual that he is significant. If his life has any meaning for others than himself it is as a manifestation of a certain spirit in his country and his time. For he was a spirit, and a spirit made by that blind certainty, that pure intolerance, that zeal for mission, that

contempt of man and earth, that high confidence in heaven, which our forefathers bequeathed to us.

The first words which he remembered spoken were words which he never forgot so long as he lived. They remained not so much words as wounds, unhealed. He could not have been more than seven years old. It was a summer's day, in June, a beautiful day, and the afternoon was clear and warm. He was sitting on the steps of the porch of the big farmhouse that was his home. He had been in the orchard looking for a sweet June apple, when he heard the sound of wheels, and looking through the trees he saw a stout, kind neighbor woman coming to visit his mother.

He had always liked Mrs. Pettibrew. He liked her easy cheerful flow of talk, larded with stories, and her rich sudden gusts of laughter, although he was desperately shy, and never answered her questions with more than a smile, strained from him against his will. But he wanted to be near her because she liked everybody and was always jolly. So he had waited until she was seated on the porch and his mother had brought the baby out in her arms and settled herself in the rocking chair to nurse him. Then he sidled around the house and sat very quietly, listening to them, munching his apple. He would not appear interested in them, for after all they were women.

"Howdy, Andy!" Mrs. Pettibrew shouted.

"Howdy," he whispered, his eyes downcast.

"Speak out, Andrew!" his mother ordered him.

They both looked at him. He felt hot all over. He knew, because his older brothers and sisters often told him, that his face easily went as red as cockscomb. He could not have spoken if he would—his mouth was so dry. The apple he had bitten was like dust upon his tongue. He scuffed his bony big toe in the grass miserably. The two women stared at him.

His mother said, worrying, "I declare, I don't know what makes the boy so scary."

"He don't hardly seem like yours, Deborah," Mrs. Pettibrew said solemnly. "He don't even look like yours. I don't know where he gets those light eyes and that red hair. Hiram especially is as handsome a boy as ever I saw—but all your nine children are big and handsome and a sight for sore eyes, except Andy. But then—most families have a runt in 'em."

And this was kind Mrs. Pettibrew! His heart began swelling in him like a balloon. It would burst and he would begin to cry. He wanted to run away and he could not. He sat, his mouth full of dry apple, scuffing his toe back and forth in the grass, caught in agony. His mother released him. She said, kindly enough, "Well, he isn't so handsome, maybe, but he's awfully good, Andy is. None of the others is as good as he is. I always say likely he'll

be a preacher, too, like Dave is and like Isaac talks to be—and if he is, he'll be the best of them."

"Well, of course it's better to be good than pretty," Mrs. Pettibrew said heartily. "Say, Deborah, before I forget—I heard a new recipe for quince preserves. . . ."

They forgot him. He could get up now and walk away. The tightness about his heart loosened a little and he could breathe again. He could walk away pretending he had not heard. They went on talking about the quinces, not knowing any more than he did what they had done. They had, that June day, in a farmhouse in the West Virginia hills, set his feet on the path that was to lead him across plains and seas to a foreign country, to spend his years there, to lie at last in a distant grave, his body dust in foreign earth, because his face was not beautiful. All his life he was good. It was better to be good than pretty. "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" Goodness was best. On that day he made up his mind he would always be good.

But then there was a tradition of goodness in his family. He could remember his grandmother, sitting beside the fire. The family in her youth had come from Pennsylvania to Virginia. They were all Presbyterians, but not she. She had been born and reared a Mennonite, and to the end of her life she wore her little, dark, close-

fitting Mennonite bonnet and held to her rigorous Mennonite faith. She had never been to what she called "a pleasuring." Church on the Sabbath, twice, prayer-meeting on Wednesday until she was old, prayers twice every day—this was the routine of the house which she helped to maintain. She sat in the chimney-place, disallowing all other life.

She had, besides religion, a great belief in ghosts. I used to wonder at a strange timidity in Andrew, and even sometimes in my childhood to be a little ashamed of it. It was not that he was in the least a coward when any necessity was concerned. That is, for the sake of his duty he could and did act in complete disregard of his life. No, it was a childlike timidity, a dislike, for instance, of going upstairs alone in the dark, a reluctance to get up in the night to investigate a noise. I have seen him return half a dozen times to see if a door were locked. "I got to thinking about it until I couldn't be sure," he would confess, smiling half shamefaced.

One day, when he was an old man, he dropped the secret unconsciously, for he never consciously revealed himself to anyone. Someone began, half playfully, one evening about the fire, to tell a ghost story. He could not bear it. He got up and went away. Afterwards he told me alone, always with that half-shamed smile, "The old folks used to tell ghost stories at home until I didn't