

A HAPPY FAMILY

by Lu Xun

After the style of Xu Qinwen

"...One writes simply as one feels: such a work is like sunlight, radiating from a source of infinite brightness, not like a spark from a flint struck on iron or stone. This alone is true art. And such a writer alone is a true artist.... But I... what do I rank as?"

Having thought so far he suddenly jumped out of bed. It occurred to him that he must make some money by writing to support his family, and he had already decided to send his manuscripts to the Happy Monthly publishers, because the remuneration appeared to be comparatively generous. But in that case the choice of subjects would be limited, otherwise the work would probably not be accepted. All right, let it be limited. What were the chief problems occupying the minds of the younger generation?... Undoubtedly there must be not a few, perhaps a great many, concerning love, marriage, the family.... Yes, there were certainly many people perplexed by such questions, even now discussing them. In that case, write about the family! But how to write?... Otherwise it would probably not be accepted. Why predict anything unlucky? Still....

Jumping out of bed, in four or five steps he reached the desk, sat down, took out a piece of paper with green lines, and promptly yet with resignation wrote the title: A Happy Family.

His pen immediately came to a standstill. He raised his head, fixed his two eyes on the ceiling, and tried to decide on an environment for this Happy Family.

"Beijing?" he thought. "That won't do; it's too dead, even the atmosphere is dead. Even if a high wall were built round this family, still the air could scarcely be kept separate. No, that would never do! Jiangsu and Zhejiang may start fighting any day, and Fujian is even more out of the question. Sichuan? Guangdong? They are in the midst of fighting. What about Shandong or Henan?... No, one of them might be kidnapped, and if that happened the happy family would become an unhappy one. The rents in the foreign concessions in Shanghai and Tianjin are too high.... Somewhere abroad? Ridiculous. I don't know what Yunnan and Guizhou are like, but communications are too poor...."

He racked his brains but, unable to think of a good place, decided tentatively to fix on A--. Then, however, he thought: "Nowadays many people object to the use of the Western alphabet to represent the names of people and places, saying it lessens the readers' interest. Probably, to be on the safe side, I had better not use it in my story this time. In that case what would be a good place? There is fighting in Hunan too; the rents in Dairen have gone up again. In Chahar, Jilin and Heilongjiang I have heard there are brigands, so they won't do either!..."

Again he racked his brains to think of a good place, but in vain; so finally he made up his mind tentatively to fix A-- as the name of the place where his Happy Family should be.

"After all this Happy Family will have to be at A--. There can't be any question about that. The family naturally consists of a husband and wife -- the master and mistress -- who married for love. Their marriage contract contains over forty terms going into great detail, so that they have extraordinary equality and absolute freedom. Moreover they have both had a higher education and belong to the cultured elite.... Japanese-returned students are no longer the fashion, so let them be Western-returned students. The master of the house always wears a foreign suit, his collar is always snowy white. His wife's hair is always curled up like a sparrow's nest in front, her pearly white teeth are always peeping out, but she wears Chinese dress...."

"That won't do, that won't do! Twenty-five catties!"

Hearing a man's voice outside the window he involuntarily turned his head to look. The sun shone through the curtains hanging by the window, dazzling his eyes, while he heard a sound like small bundles of wood being thrown down. "It doesn't matter," he thought, turning back again. "'Twenty-five catties of what?... They are the cultured elite, devoted to the arts. But because they have both grown up in happy surroundings, they don't like Russian novels. Most Russian novels describe the lower classes, so they are really quite out of keeping with such a family. 'Twenty-five catties'? Never mind. In that case, what books do they read?... Byron's poetry? Keats? That won't do, neither of them are safe.... Ah, I have it: they both like reading *An Ideal Husband*. Although I haven't read the book myself, even university professors praise it so highly that I am sure this couple must enjoy it too. You read it, I read it -- they each have a copy, two copies altogether in the family...."

Becoming aware of a hollow feeling in his stomach, he put down the pen and rested his head on his hands, like a globe supported by two axles.

". . . The two of them are just having lunch," he thought. "The table is spread with a snowy white table cloth, and the cook brings in the dishes -- Chinese food. 'Twenty-five catties.' Of what? Never mind. Why should it be Chinese food? Westerners say Chinese cooking is the most progressive, the best to eat, the most hygienic; so they eat Chinese food. The first dish is brought in, but what is this first dish?..."

"Firewood...."

He turned his head with a start, to see the mistress of his own family standing on his left, her two gloomy eyes fastened on his face.

"What?" He spoke rather indignantly, feeling that her coming disturbed his work.

"The firewood is all used up, so today I have bought some more. Last time it was still two hundred and forty cash for ten catties, but today he wants two hundred and sixty. Suppose I give him two hundred and fifty?"

"All right, two hundred and fifty, let it be."

"He has weighed it very unfairly. He insists that there are twenty-four and a half catties, but suppose I count it as twenty-three and a half?"

"All right. Count it as twenty-three and a half catties."

"Then, five fives are twenty-five, three fives are fifteen...."

"Oh, five fives are twenty-five, three fives are fifteen...." He could get no further either, but after stopping for a moment suddenly took up his pen and started working out a sum on the lined paper on which he had written "A Happy Family." After working at it for some time he raised his head to say:

"Five hundred and eighty cash."

"In that case I haven't enough here; I am still eighty or ninety short...."

He pulled open the drawer of the desk, took out all the money in it -- somewhere between twenty and thirty coppers -- and put it in her outstretched hand. Then he watched her go out, and finally turned back to the desk. His head seemed to be bursting as if filled to the brim with sharp faggots. Five fives are twenty-five -- scattered Arabic numerals were still imprinted on his brain. He gave a long sigh and breathed out again deeply, as if by this means he might expel the firewood, the "five fives are twenty-five," and the Arabic numerals which had stuck in his head. Sure enough after breathing out his heart seemed much lighter, whereupon he started thinking vaguely again:

"What dish? It doesn't matter, so long as it is something out of the way. Fried pork or prawns' roe and sea-slugs are really too common. I must have them eating 'Dragon and Tiger.' But what is that exactly? Some people say it's made of snakes and cats, and is an upper-class Cantonese dish, only eaten at big feasts. I've seen the name on the menu in a Jiangsu restaurant; still, Jiangsu people aren't supposed to eat snakes or cats, so it must be made, as someone else said, of frogs and eels. Now what part of the country shall this couple be from? Never mind. After all, people from any part of the country can eat a dish of snake and cat (or frog and eel), without injuring their Happy Family. At any rate, this first dish is to be 'Dragon and Tiger'; there can be no question about that.

"Now that this bowl of 'Dragon and Tiger' is placed in the middle of the table, they take up their chopsticks simultaneously, point to the dish, smile sweetly at each other and say, in a foreign tongue:

"Cherie, s'il vous plait!"

"Voulez-vous commencer, cheri!"

"Mais non, apres vous!"

"Then they lift their chopsticks simultaneously, and simultaneously take a morsel of snake -- no, no, snake's flesh really sounds too peculiar; it would be better after all to say a morsel of eel. It is settled then that 'Dragon and Tiger' is made of frogs and eels. They pick out two morsels of eel simultaneously, exactly the same size. Five fives are twenty-five, three fives.... Never mind. And simultaneously put them in their mouths...."

Against his will he wanted to turn round, because he was conscious of a good deal of excitement behind him, and considerable coming and going. Nevertheless he persevered, and pursued his train of thought distractedly:

"This seems rather sentimental; no family would behave like this. Whatever makes me so woolly-minded? I'm afraid this good subject will never be written up.... Or perhaps there is no need for them to be returned students; people who have received higher education in China would do just as well. They are both university graduates, the cultured elite, the elite.... The man is a writer; the woman is also a writer, or else a lover of literature. Or else the woman is a poetess; the man is a lover of poetry, a respecter of womanhood. Or else..."

Finally he could contain himself no longer, and turned round.

Beside the bookcase behind him appeared a mound of cabbages, three at the bottom, two above, and one at the top, confronting him like a large letter A.

"Oh!" He started and gave a sigh, feeling his cheeks burn, while prickles ran up and down his spine. "Ah!" He took a very deep breath to get rid of the prickly feeling in his spine, then went on thinking: "The house of the Happy Family must have plenty of rooms. There is a store-room where things like cabbages are put. The master's study is apart, its walls lined with bookshelves; there are naturally no cabbages there. The shelves are filled with Chinese books and foreign books, including of course An Ideal Husband -- two copies altogether. There is a separate bedroom, a brass bedstead, or something simpler like one of the elmwood beds made by the convicts of Number One Prison would do equally well. It is very clean beneath the bed...." He glanced beneath his own bed. The firewood had all been used up, and there was only a piece of straw rope left, still coiled there like a dead snake.

"Twenty-three and a half catties...." He felt that the firewood was just about to pour in a never-ending stream under his bed. His head ached again. He got up and went quickly to the door to close it. But he had scarcely put his hand on the door when he felt that this was overhasty and let it go instead, dropping the door curtain that was thick with dust. At the same time he thought: "This method avoids the severity of shutting oneself in, as well as the discomfort of keeping the door open; it is quite in keeping with the Doctrine of the Mean." {Editor's Note: A Confucian reference.}

"... So the master's study door is always closed." He walked back, sat down and thought, "Anyone with business must first knock at the door, and have his permission to come in; that is really the only thing to be done. Now suppose the master is sitting in his study and the mistress comes to discuss literature, she knocks too.... Of this at least one can be assured -- she will not bring in any cabbages.

"Entrez, chérie, s'il vous plait."

"But what happens when the master has no time to discuss literature? Hearing her stand outside tapping gently on the door, does he ignore her? That probably wouldn't do. Maybe it is all described in *An Ideal Husband* -- that must really be an excellent novel. If I get paid for this article I must buy a copy to read!"

Slap!

His back stiffened, because he knew from experience that this slapping sound was made by his wife's hand striking their three-year-old daughter's head.

"In a Happy Family..." he thought, his back still rigid, hearing the child sob, "children are born late, yes, born late. Or perhaps it would be better to have none at all, just two people without any ties.... Or it might be better to stay in a hotel and let them look after everything, a single man without...." Hearing the sobs increase in volume, he stood up and brushed past the curtain, thinking, "Karl Marx wrote his *Das Kapital* while his children were crying around him. He must really have been a great man...." He walked out, opened the outer door, and was assailed by a strong smell of paraffin. The child was lying to the right of the door, face downwards. As soon as she saw him she started crying aloud.

"There, there, all right! Don't cry, don't cry! There's a good girl." He bent down to pick her up. Having done so he turned round to see his wife standing furiously to the left of the door, also with a rigid back, her hands on her hips as if she were preparing to start physical exercises.

"Even you have to come and bully me! You can't help, you only make trouble -- even the paraffin lamp had to turn over. What shall we light this evening?..."

"There, there, all right! Don't cry, don't cry!" Ignoring his wife's trembling voice, he carried the child into the house, and stroked her head. "There's a good girl," he repeated. Then he put her down, pulled out a chair and sat down. Setting her between his knees, he raised his hand. "Don't cry, there's a good girl," he said. "Daddy will do 'Pussy Washing' for you." At the same time he craned his neck, licked his palms from a distance twice, then with them traced circles towards his face.

"Aha! Pussy!" She started laughing.

"That's right, that's right. Pussy." He traced several more circles, and then stopped, seeing her smiling at him with tears still in her eyes. It struck him suddenly that her sweet, innocent face was just like her mother's had been five years ago, especially her bright red lips, although the general outline was smaller. That had been another bright winter's day when she heard his decision to overcome all obstacles and sacrifice everything for her; when she too looked at him in the same way, smiling, with tears in her eyes. He sat down disconsolately, as if a little drunk.

"Ah, sweet lips," he thought.

The door curtain was suddenly fastened back and the firewood brought in.

Suddenly coming to himself again, he saw that the child, still with tears in her eyes, was looking at him with her bright red lips parted. "Lips...." He glanced sideways to where the firewood was being brought in. "...Probably it will be nothing but five fives are twenty-five, nine nines are eighty-one, all over again!... And two gloomy eyes...." So thinking he snatched up the green-lined paper with the heading and the figures written on it, crumpled it up and then unfolded it again to wipe the child's eyes and nose. "Good girl, run along and play by yourself." He pushed her away as he spoke, at the same time throwing the ball of paper into the waste-paper basket.

But at once he felt rather sorry for the child, and, turning his head, followed her with his eyes as she walked forlornly away, while his ears were filled with the sound of firewood. Determined to concentrate, he turned back again and closed his eyes to put a stop to all distracting thoughts, sitting there quietly and peacefully.

He saw passing before him a flat, round, black-freckled flower with an orange centre, which floated from the left of his left eye right over to the opposite side where it disappeared; then a bright green flower, with a dark green centre; and finally a pile of six cabbages which formed themselves before him into an enormous letter A.

--February 18, 1924

POSTSCRIPT

Last year, after reading Xu Qinwen's "The Ideal Mate" in the literary supplement to the MORNING POST, I conceived the idea for the present story. Moreover, I thought it would be well to use Xu's style in the telling of it. However, it still remained just an idea. Then yesterday the idea came to mind again, and since I happened to have nothing else to do at the time, I wrote it out. Toward the end, however, my story seems to have gone off the track and become a bit too glum. Generally speaking, I believe that Xu's ending is not so somber as this one. But even so, on the whole, I cannot but say that my story is still "in the manner of."