

THE STRATEGY OF HSU

BY ASHBY FORD

"NO, I won't," said Yu Hsien, closing her wilful thirteen-year-old mouth with a snap.

"Indeed," I gravely answered: "remember what may be the result of disobedience. A parent may send an unfilial child to the magistrate for decapitation. I suppose that I, as your legal guardian, could do the same to you."

"You can, but you won't," she said, looking up at me with a broad smile from her favourite seat on the rug at my feet. "Even when I'm really bad, you never so much as beat me. I saw a woman once who tried to have her son executed."

"Tell me about it," I said.

"I was with my mother then; she used to do sewing and embroidery for Mrs Hsu, whose husband was district magistrate of Yin Cheng, so we lived in the Yamen there. Mrs Hsu was fond of me and often had me in her own rooms to play with her daughter. She wanted to buy me from my mother, but my mother would not sell me.

"I was playing there one day when Mr. Hsu came in, carrying a folded red paper.

"I am exceedingly worried," he said to his wife, "I want your advice about this petition. It is from a woman called Fang; she says she is a widow, living in the Nan Hotung ('South Alley'); she asserts that her son, twelve years old, is incorrigibly disobedient and that she wishes me to behead him. Such a case is most distressing. Of course, the law is

the law, and if he were a grown man I should not hesitate.

"I told the clerk to send the woman away, with a promise that the matter should be attended to. The boy—he is a nice-looking child—has been put in the prison meanwhile."

"That is good—and not good," Mrs. Hsu said. "You did well in coming to me about this. If that boy is really so unfilial at twelve as to deserve decapitation, be sure it is his mother's fault. A good parent makes a good child. You must inquire carefully into the case. Fetch that boy from the prison; you were wrong to send him these. I will take charge of him and we may find out something that way."

"Such doings are not usual are they?" I interrupted Yu Hsien.

"What, for an official to consult his wife about business? It happens every day."

"Taking a boy from prison, that way," I explained.

"No, most people would not, but both Mrs. Hsu and her husband were very clever and very good. He used to disguise himself very often and go about the city at night, finding out what people thought, and who were bad and who were not. Everybody said he was the best magistrate Yin Cheng had ever had. I know he took no bribes and his servants only dared take very little ones. There are few officials like him.

When the boy was brought to Mrs. Hsu, she gave him very good words and told him not to be afraid. She