

‘ALL we have to say to him is: “My dear doctor, you’re going to help us discover the secret of love.” I’m sure he’ll consider it a very noble mission.’

‘Do you think he’s up to it?’

‘Yes, I do.’

‘He’ll need persuading – you have the necessary funds.’

‘The most important thing, I think, is to make him feel he’ll be doing something worthwhile.’

‘So we’ll need to tell him everything?’

‘Yes. Well, not everything, if you see what I mean.’

‘I understand.’

The two men in grey suits were talking late at night in a big office at the top of a tall building. Through the picture windows the bright city lights shone as far as the eye could see, but they didn’t take any notice of them.

Instead they looked at some photographs they had taken from a file. They were glossy portraits of a youngish man with a preoccupied air.

‘Psychiatrist, what a strange occupation!’ said the older man. ‘I wonder how anyone can stand it.’

‘Yes, I wonder, too.’

The younger man, a tall, strapping fellow with cold eyes, replaced all the photos in the file, which was marked ‘Dr Hector’.

HECTOR AND THE CHINESE PICTURE

ONCE upon a time there was a young psychiatrist called Hector.

Psychiatry is an interesting profession, but it can be very difficult, and quite tiring as well. In order to make it less tiring, Hector had brightened up his consulting room with some of his favourite pictures. In particular, a picture he'd brought back from China. It was a large redwood panel decorated with beautiful Chinese characters – or, for those who like to call things by their proper names, ideograms. When Hector felt tired after listening to all the problems people talked to him about, he would look at the beautiful gilded Chinese script carved in the wood and feel better. The people sitting in the chair opposite him talking about their problems would sometimes glance at the Chinese panel. It often seemed to Hector that it had a calming effect on his patients.

A few of them would ask Hector what the Chinese characters meant, and this embarrassed Hector because he didn't know. He couldn't read Chinese, still less speak it (even though he'd once met a nice Chinese girl, over in China). When you're a doctor, it's never very good to let your patients see that there's something you're not sure about, because they like to think that you know

everything; it reassures them. And so Hector would invent a different saying each time, trying to come up with the one he thought would do most good to the person concerned.

For example, to Sophie, a woman who had got divorced the previous year and was still very angry with the father of her children, Hector explained that the expression in Chinese meant 'He who spends too long regretting his ruined crop will neglect to plant next year's harvest'.

Sophie had opened her eyes wide and after that she'd almost stopped talking to Hector about what a dreadful man her ex-husband was.

To Roger, a man who had a habit of talking to God in a very loud voice in the street (he believed God talked to him, too, and could even hear his words echoing in his head), Hector said that the expression meant 'The wise man is silent when communing with God'.

Roger replied that this was all very well for the god of the Chinese people, but that he, Roger, was talking to the real God, and so it was only natural for him to speak loud and clear. Hector agreed, but added that, since God could hear and understand everything, there was no need for Roger to talk to Him out loud; it was enough just to think of Him. Hector was trying to save Roger from getting into trouble when he was out and about, and from being put in hospital for long periods. Roger said that he ended up in hospital so often because it was the will of God, and that suffering was a test of faith.

On the one hand, Hector felt that the new treatment he'd prescribed Roger had helped him express himself

more clearly and made him a lot more talkative, but, on the other, it didn't make Hector's job any less tiring.

Actually what Hector found most tiring was the question of love. Not in his own life, but in the lives of all the people who came to see him.

Because love, it seemed, was an endless source of suffering.

Some people complained of not having any at all.

'Doctor, I'm bored with my life; I feel so unhappy. I'd really like to be in love, to feel loved. It seems as if love is only for other people, not for me.'

This was the sort of thing Anne-Marie would say, for example. When she had asked Hector what the Chinese expression meant, Hector had looked at her very carefully. Anne-Marie could have been pretty if only she'd stopped dressing like her mother and hadn't focused all her energy on her work. Hector replied, 'If you want to catch fish, you must go to the river.'

Soon afterwards, Anne-Marie joined a choir. She started wearing make-up and stopped dressing like her mother all the time.

Some people complained of too much love. Too much love was as bad for their health as too much cholesterol.

'It's terrible – I should stop; I know that it's over, but I can't help thinking about him all the time. Do you think I should write to him . . . or call him? Or should I wait outside his office to try to see him?'

This was Claire, who, as can often happen, had become involved with a man who wasn't free, and to

begin with it was fun because, as she told Hector, she wasn't in love, but then she did fall in love, and so did he. Even so, they decided to stop seeing each other because the man's wife was becoming suspicious and he didn't want to leave her. And so Claire suffered a lot, and when she asked Hector what the words on the Chinese panel said, he had to think for a moment before coming up with a reply: 'Do not build your home in a neighbour's field'.

Claire had burst into tears and Hector hadn't felt very pleased with himself.

He also saw men who suffered because of love, and these cases were even more serious: men only find the courage to go to a psychiatrist when they're very, very unhappy or when they've exhausted all their friends with their problems and have begun drinking too much.

This was the case with Luc – a boy who was a bit too nice and suffered a lot when women left him, especially as he often chose women who were not very nice, probably because his mother hadn't been very nice to him when he was little. Hector told him that the Chinese panel said: 'If you are scared of the panther, hunt the antelope'. And then he wondered whether there were any antelopes in China. Luc replied, 'That's a rather bloodthirsty proverb. The Chinese are quite bloodthirsty, aren't they?'

Hector realised that it wasn't going to be easy.

Some people, very many actually, both men and women, complained that they used to be madly in love with someone (usually someone they were living with)

but that they no longer felt the same way, even though they were still very fond of them.

‘I tell myself that maybe it’s natural after all these years. We still get on very well, but we haven’t made love for months . . . Together, I mean.’

For these people, Hector had a bit of trouble finding a suitable meaning for the Chinese panel, or else he’d come up with clichéd expressions like ‘The wise man sees the beauty of each season’, which meant nothing, even to him.

Some people complained of being in love, but with the wrong person.

‘Oh dear, I know he’ll end up being a disaster just like all the others. But I can’t help myself.’

This was Virginie. She went from love affair to love affair with men who were very attractive to women, which was very exciting to begin with, but rather painful in the end. For her, Hector came up with: ‘He who hunts must start again each day, while he who cultivates can watch his rice growing’.

Virginie said it was amazing how much the Chinese managed to say in just four characters, and Hector felt she was perhaps a little bit cleverer than him.

Other people had found love, but worried about it even so.

‘We love each other, of course. But is he the right person for me? Marriage isn’t to be taken lightly. When you marry, it’s for life. And, anyway, I want to enjoy my freedom a bit longer . . .’

Hector generally asked these people to tell him about their mothers and fathers and how they got along.

Other people wondered whether they could ever hope to find love, whether perhaps it wasn't too good for them.

'I can't imagine anybody finding me attractive. Deep down, I don't think I'm a very interesting person. Even you seem bored, Doctor.'

At this point Hector woke up completely and said, no, not at all, and then kicked himself because the right thing to say would have been: 'What makes you think that?'

So a lot of people came to explain to Hector that love or lack of love prevented them from sleeping, thinking, laughing and in some cases even from living. And with this last category Hector had to be very careful, because he knew that love can make people kill themselves, which is a very foolish thing to do, so don't ever do it and if you have thoughts about doing it go to see someone like Hector immediately, or call a close friend.

Hector had been in love, and he remembered how much suffering love can cause: days and nights spent thinking about somebody who doesn't want to see you any more, wondering whether it would be better to write, to call or to remain in silence, unable to sleep unless you drink everything in the mini-bar of the hotel room in the town you've come to in order to see her except that she doesn't want to see you. Now, of course, this type of memory helped him to understand people who found themselves in the same situation. Hector also remembered the nice girls whom he had made suffer because of love and he wasn't

very proud of that. They had loved him and he had only liked them. Sometimes, he'd lived through both roles, victim and executioner, with the same girl, because love is complicated, and, what's worse, it's unpredictable.

This type of suffering was now a thing of the past for Hector. (Or so he thought at the beginning of this story, but just wait and see.) Because he had a good friend, Clara, whom he loved very much and she loved him, and they were even thinking of having a baby together and of getting married. Hector was happy because in the end love affairs are very tiring, so when you find somebody you love and who loves you, you really hope that it will be your last love affair.

The strange thing is that, at the same time, you wonder if it isn't a bit sad to think that it will be your last love affair. You see how complicated love is!