

CHINESE LITERATURE



1978 8

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Mo Shen

The Window

In March last year I was in a train heading home after finishing my press assignment in another province.

Seated opposite me were two middle-aged peasants deep in a discussion about something. After a while I realized they were going to alight at Sian and were worrying whether or not they could catch the long-distance bus for Huhsien that same day.

Suddenly a clear voice from a seat near the window interrupted: "Don't worry! The bus leaves at 2 p.m. There'll be plenty of time for you to catch it."

We all looked in the direction of the speaker, a young girl aged about twenty-four, with large shining eyes, plainly dressed. Since she had been quietly reading, nobody had taken any notice of her.

She sounded so sure of herself another comrade then asked: "Do you happen to know if there is a long-distance bus to Yaohsien this afternoon?"

"Yes, there is one at 3 o'clock," the girl replied.

"What about an earlier one?"

"Yes, but. . ." she hesitated. "I'm afraid you may miss it."

"What time does it leave?"

"At one o'clock." After a moment's thought she added, "Look, this train is due to arrive at Sian at 12.37 p.m. I'll draw a map for you. Once you reach the station, continue up that road until you come to the number 8 bus-stop. Take a bus from there to the long-distance bus terminal. If you hurry, you may just catch it." Then she sketched out the route on a scrap of paper and handed it to the man.

"Thank you very much, comrade," he said with gratitude as he looked at the map. "Do you often travel on the long-distance buses?"

The girl smiled and shook her head, "No. Never."

"Oh, do you live in Sian?"

Again she shook her head.

Puzzled the man persisted: "Then you often go there?"

"Not frequently."

By then all the listeners were interested and another passenger asked out of curiosity: "How can you know the place so well?"

This made the girl blush. Then she smiled modestly and murmured: "I . . . I just know it, that's all." At this she lowered her head and resumed her reading.

Since everyone's curiosity had been aroused, we all hoped she would say more, but she remained silent until she got off the train thirty minutes later.

Shortly after my return to the press, we were contacted by the railway bureau about a mass emulation efficiency drive. They had organized a team of highly skilled workers to demonstrate various aspects of their work and the opening demonstration would be that day. They would like to have it reported in the press to help boost their campaign.

The demonstration had already begun when Old Shih and I arrived at the large hall which was packed full. The audience enthusiastically clapped or praised the performers, who were the best chosen from among nearly ten thousand workers and staff of the railway bureau. Some were elderly, others middle-aged. The last to be introduced was a girl, whom to my surprise I recognized as the one on the train.

A booking clerk at another station, she could give the distances and the fares of journeys between all the main stations in the country.

Her supposed passenger making the inquiries was a young man. Glancing disinterestedly at the girl, he asked in an offhand way: "How far is it from your station to Yinchuan and how much does it cost?"

Without hesitating the girl promptly replied: "It's 1,460 kilometres, and costs 25 yuan 80 fen."

Astonished, the youth became more interested and picking up a railway map he inquired: "How about to Chuchow?"

"1,900 kilometres, and the fare is 29 yuan 30 fen."

The audience applauded. Then an old man stepped forward who for many years had worked as a booking clerk. He asked with interest: "You certainly know all about the main stations, but what about the branch lines?"

"I'm not so sure." Then blushing she added shyly: "I'll try."

"How far and how much to Hsihokou on the Yingtian-Amoy line?"

"It's 1,682 kilometres and costs 28 yuan 30 fen."

"To Janchialin on the Kweiyang-Kweilin line?"

"1,100 kilometres at 23 yuan 6 fen."

Silenced, the old man, his head to one side, asked delightedly: "What's your name?"

"Han Yu-nan."

"And how long have you been working?"

"Three years."

"Well I'll be damned! Three years!" Amazed he turned to the head of the group who confirmed it. Then, facing the audience and raising his arms, he exclaimed: "Marvellous! This is the first time in my life that I've met someone who can challenge me."

Before the audience could clap, the director announced: "Comrade Han can also tell us the arrival and departure times of trains at all the first and second class stations administered by our bureau. So let's carry on now with the demonstration."

Another round of applause rang out.

Han's performance not only astonished us laymen, but also the old railway workers. Her knowledge went far beyond the limits of her

job. Everyone could imagine how many hours she had spent learning all those hundreds and thousands of dull numbers. We wondered how she had done it and if the long-distance buses in Sian had anything to do with her work?

Inquisitive to find out more, Old Shih and I returned to our office. We reported all this to our director and discussed our plan with him. With his approval, we visited Han a fortnight later.

Old Lei, secretary of the station Party committee greeted us warmly and took us to the booking office where the clerks were busy at work.

As we watched young Han, we discovered that she was exceptionally fast selling tickets and that her method was rather unusual. Apart from her answering normal inquiries, she would sometimes hold out a card for a passenger to read. Once she even answered a passenger in his own dialect which we found very difficult to understand.

After an hour she closed her window for a break. Knowing that we were reporters from the press made her very shy. It was only after our repeated assurances that we would not publish anything without her approval that she relaxed and talked to us.

She began:

I started work as a booking clerk in 1974. Many comrades thought it was a good job when I began learning, but I wasn't satisfied. There were all sorts of little things to attend to and I was terrified of making mistakes with so much money passing through my hands each day. However, that was the work. As I was completely green and slow at the job, the passengers would get exasperated. Trains and passengers pass through here from all parts of the country and by night you are hoarse from talking. But some passengers who've never travelled before drive you mad. You tell them the express train does not stop at small stations and they demand why. Once an old man hearing the announcement that train 83 would be delayed until 19.00 hours came back to return the ticket he had just bought. When I told him the train would arrive in about an hour, he became furious and yelled: "You are supposed to serve the public, yet you are cheating me. The announcer said the train would be delayed for nineteen hours!"

Such incidents were not uncommon and I grew more and more fed up with the passengers. Gradually my attitude towards them also got worse.

In the summer of that year, a middle-aged man wanted to book a ticket to Huahsien. I informed him that train 54 did not stop there.

"Eh?" he replied as if deaf.

I repeated the information, but his response was the same. After the fourth or fifth time, I was fuming: "What's the matter with you? Please move aside."

He looked rather taken aback and then handing over his money again said: "I want a ticket for Huahsien."

I almost lost control of myself, but seeing all the passengers lining up, I simply tilted my head and said: "Eh?"

"A ticket for Huahsien, please."

"Eh?"

Everyone burst out laughing.

Flushed with anger the man complained: "What a terrible attitude!"

"Nonsense! My attitude to you is good," I retorted. "You acted like that several times, I only said it twice. Yet see how impatient you are!" And so saying I slammed the window shut.

I honestly felt he was in the wrong and sat sulking behind my window.

Three days later I had a row with a passenger going to Szechuan, who wanted to pay his fare in small coins wrapped up in a handkerchief. I told him to go to a shop and get banknotes, but when he refused I would not sell him the ticket.

A fierce quarrel ensued.

The following day was the Spring Festival. My friend, Lu, had arranged to come to my home.

His full name is Lu Ping-hsiang and he is an assistant locomotive driver. We'd been in love for more than six months, but felt too shy to tell our families, so we arranged that he would come to my home first on the holiday and then I would visit his home on another holiday.

Early that morning I got up feeling a mixture of happiness and

shyness and told my mother about Lu's coming. She became very nervous and complained that I should have told her earlier, but when Lu came she relaxed and bustled about preparing a meal. As she was cooking, she discovered she'd run out of soya bean sauce and sent me to buy some from the store.

Since we needed it urgently I dashed into the store only to find the shop assistant chatting animatedly with an old acquaintance. I waited patiently for a while and when she made no move to serve me, I finally called out: "Comrade, please can I have some soya bean sauce?"

She just glanced in my direction and then ignored me.

I repeated again: "Comrade, I'd like some soya sauce..."

Before I could finish she had stalked over, glaring, and snapped at me: "Since you haven't even bothered to take the lid off your jar, how can I fill it?"

Stung by her rough tone, I replied: "Look here, comrade, I didn't come to have a quarrel with you..."

"Did I choose to pick a quarrel with you?"

"What do you mean? What an attitude!"

"If my attitude is not good, I must have learnt it from you!"

"Why you! ... You! ..." Words failed me. Then an argument started over the counter.

When I was on duty the next day I related the story to my colleagues, who all agreed I had been badly treated. As we were talking, Secretary Lei entered and so I told him about the incident.

After I'd finished, he gave me a serious look and said: "Young Han, I'm glad you hate that sort of attitude. Both that shop assistant and you are serving the public, so in the future you can remember the affair as a mirror which not only reflects the behaviour of others but also your own." Then he took out a letter from his pocket and asked me to read it.

Puzzled I took the letter, which was from a worker at the Luchyang Steel Plant. He'd written:

... Early in March this year, my wife gave birth to a child.

I wired my mother to come and help us out. Two days later

I received a telegram that she was already on her way.

A week passed but she had still not arrived. Then another week. Anxiously I sent another telegram asking what had happened and the reply came that she should have arrived. I wondered what could have happened to her.

Since my mother had never travelled by train before, my brother wrote her destination on a scrap of paper and gave it to her in case she made a mistake changing trains. When she alighted at your station, she went to the booking office to buy a ticket. The clerk at window number two, a young girl with two short pigtails, asked her where she was going. My mother replied she was going to Luchyang, but perhaps she did not say it clearly enough or perhaps the clerk did not care. Anyway the girl took the money and carelessly threw her a ticket for Loyang. My mother then remembered the paper in her pocket and was about to show it to the girl, when she slammed the window shut. Although my mother knocked on the window several times, the girl ignored her.

As a result my mother travelled all the way to Loyang in the opposite direction. At Loyang she traipsed about for a whole day until she finally discovered she was in the wrong place. Being old and having high blood pressure, when she heard that she was more than 1,000 *li* from her destination she fainted from worry and fatigue. She was rushed to hospital, where she lay in a coma for twelve days, her life in danger.

Only when the hospital at last contacted us, did we understand what had happened. Then I went immediately to Loyang...

This caused my family great distress and it has made me think deeply. I've often been guilty of carelessness and irresponsibility in my work. Now I see how I should behave. After all, whatever work we do in this country, we do it to serve the people. All our actions affect the masses. It is to be regretted that so few people seem to realize this so far. I don't know who that clerk was, nor do I wish to know. Who is to blame? She's only partly responsible. I just wonder why our standards and morality have declined to such an extent in the past

years. Why have so many good comrades been influenced? I ask myself these questions all the time. I hope that your station leadership will not criticize that comrade too much. Rather, if possible, please let her read my letter. It may help her to understand more about the responsibilities of a booking clerk. . . .

Unable to continue, I buried my face in my hands and wept on my desk. I felt so ashamed and I would have felt better if that comrade had called me some names, but instead of blaming me, he had tried to excuse me. From his letter, I knew he was a very thoughtful man with a high political consciousness. Then I thought of myself, and of all the foolish things I had done. . . .

When my fit of crying had passed, I raised my head and biting my lips admitted: "I'm sorry. I was very wrong, Secretary Lei."

Seeing that I was genuinely upset, he said in a gentler voice: "Tell me, Young Han, what did you do wrong?"

"I should never have treated the passengers like that."

"Anything else?"

I tried to think of something to say but couldn't.

"Young Han," he continued, "maybe what I'm going to say isn't correct, but I think the main problem is that you do not understand what it means to be a booking clerk. Why should you be so impatient to our passengers, when normally you're quite an even-tempered sort of girl? Our passengers are people going to be re-united with their families after long absences or those helping to build up our country. Just think of their dreams and hopes as they eagerly queue up in front of your window. Everything you booking clerks do is connected with our country's construction and the lives of our people." He paused and still looking at me seriously continued: "Take those peasants from the mountain regions. You get annoyed with them because they have not done much travelling and ask you all sorts of questions, but have you ever thought how in the old society they could never have travelled by train? Today they can. They may not look like it, but in fact they have a profound sense of change. Through our work, we can show them the warmth of the Party and Chairman Mao towards them and that they can take pride in being the

masters of the state. If we do a bad job we can hurt their feelings. So tell me, Young Han, what have you done for them? . . ."

Despite his gentle tone, I felt ashamed to the core. Tears filled my eyes when I considered what he had said.

That night I hardly slept for remorse.

From that moment my attitude to my work changed. The next day, a passenger was inquiring about a ticket to Talien. "29 yuan 9 fen," I stated. Instead of giving me the money, he leaned forward and repeated his question. I again replied but he still failed to catch what I had said. I repeated it loudly a third time but he remained holding his money in his hand.

The day before I would have flared up. But now I resolved not to lose my temper no matter how often he asked. Finally I wrote down the price on some paper and showed it to him. He immediately gave me the money.

Yet holding his ticket, he still hesitated to leave.

"Is there anything else I can do for you, comrade?" I asked.

Suddenly he poked his head in through the window and said gratefully: "You've been so kind, young comrade!" Then pointing to his ear, he added: "I suffered from an ear disease and my hearing is bad. Other people usually get very impatient with me, so thank you for your kindness." He fumbled in his bag for a large red apple, which he presented to me, while the other passengers clapped.

No passenger had ever been so friendly to me since I first began work. I thanked him but gave him back his apple. Tears moistened my eyes.

After that I was very strict with myself. I discovered that quite a few passengers had bad hearing. To find out the reason I went into the booking hall to become a passenger myself. To my surprise I found the hall very noisy, so that although one could hear the passengers speaking clearly behind the window, they could not hear the replies distinctly.

This really upset me, because I had thought that many passengers had deliberately pretended not to hear me, whereas in fact they could not. My own subjectivity had landed me into a lot of trouble!

Once I changed my attitude to my work, then all sorts of ideas about

how to serve the passengers better sprang to my mind. For example, some stations sound alike, so I wrote their names on cards and would show these to the passengers. Whenever they could not make out the difference between Hsiangfan and Hsiangtan, or Hsinan and Sian, I would show them the appropriate card. Passengers come from all over the country and pronounce the names of the stations in dozens of different ways. I tried to learn to speak and understand various dialects.

One of my comrades, Young Chu, helped me on her own initiative. The youngest member of our staff she was very enthusiastic and had been in a literary and art group. She could speak a little of the Shanghai and Cantonese dialects, and so each day she gave me lessons.

In our free time we practised calculating on the abacus, drawing a railway map, writing labels with the distances and prices covering the main network of stations. These we put up around the office and recited in our breaks. I loved to practise, reciting them as I got up or when I went to bed, even on the bus to and from work.

Before this Lu and I had always gone to see a film or walked by the River Wei on our days off. Now I begged him to help me memorize the figures, by asking me questions while I tried to answer. My mother thought things had gone a bit too far and so she scolded me. "Are you crazy, you silly girl?" she said. "How can you relax and enjoy yourselves with you talking all the time about kilometres or milimetres!"

After three months my work became much easier. By the end of the year I had sold 20,000 tickets without making one mistake. One day, Secretary Lei came to me with a large bundle of letters and said: "Your letters, Young Han." Startled, my heart beat fast. Perhaps something had gone wrong again because of my carelessness. But all the letters were full of praise. They had been written some time before, but Secretary Lei had kept them as he never gave praise casually.

"Well, Young Han," he said beaming, "try not to get too big-headed."

I grinned sheepishly.

Chu punched me and laughed.

Young Han paused for breath. Spotting the cup on her desk, I poured her some water.

"So you had no more problems after that?" Old Shih asked. She was silent for a while and then continued.

It was in March 1976 that under the influence of the "gang of four" everything was turned upside-down and right became wrong. Some people at the station put up a big-character poster criticizing Secretary Lei as a "capitalist-roader". I said I didn't agree and so some people began to attack me.

The main attack came over my application for membership of the Youth League. It had been approved by our booking office branch and handed on to the main branch for discussion at a meeting. Unknown to me, the secretary of the station's Youth League committee had secretly conspired with some members to attack me. I went to the meeting very excited, taking my notebook to jot down their opinions. Within ten minutes of the start, I could no longer write anything down. The first speaker said I had only a vague understanding of the political situation and so I didn't dare to go against the tide. The next criticized me for not concentrating only on politics but on trying to become a bourgeois specialist at my job. The third went even further. He asked if Secretary Lei had shown me a letter from a worker in the Luehyang Steel Plant. He declared it was a counter-revolutionary letter slandering public morality by saying it was no good and that our standards had declined in the past years. He said only those who were against the revolutionary order of the time would claim that. He alleged that by showing me the letter Secretary Lei was involved in counter-revolutionary activities and accused me of being an accomplice of this "capitalist-roader".

It was so obvious that the whole show had been rigged. I was trembling with rage. Several Youth League members unconvinced by these attacks took the floor on my behalf. Pointing at my accusers, Young Chu said: "I think you are jealous of Sister Han

and so you are trying to attack her. All the passengers praise her and don't notice you. That's why you hate her." But she couldn't go on, she was choking with tears of indignation.

Early next morning I saw some big-character posters attacking me and mentioning Young Chu. One claimed there was a sinister person manipulating us. There was also a cartoon of a girl with short plaits, her head raised reciting a list. On her forehead was a lump as a result of having bumped into a large boulder, and written on the rock were the words: "The direction is wrong!" Behind the girl, another with long pigtailed, was encouraging her: "Nothing wrong! Bump again!"

I could hardly bear the pressure. Whatever my many faults, I did not think it was wrong to try and serve the people. Ignoring everyone I turned away and rushed back into the office, tore the labels with the station names on them off the walls, threw them to the floor and stamped on them. Secretary Lei came into the office just as I had finished.

I found it hard to stop the tears streaming down my face. Finally I cried out: "That's the last time I'll ever do such a stupid thing again." Angrily I stamped on some more cards. "I worked like an ox day and night. . . . And what do I get? Nothing but criticism! It's just asking for trouble. Oh, hell! Why did I ever try to be an ox?"

All the time Secretary Lei smoked, wrapped in thought and saying nothing until I had calmed down a bit. Then he raised his eyes and said carelessly: "Young Han, do you think everyone should clap their hands and sing your praises just because you've done a good job?"

His remark jolted me.

In the same tone, he continued: "If that's what you think, then you're very wrong. In that case every single Chinese would be a Lei Feng."

Then he began to pick up the cards one by one, dusting them while he spoke: "You say you won't be so stupid again, that you'll never again be like an ox. Well, I'll tell you a story. . . ."

"Before Liberation, an outstanding revolutionary fighter, he threw all his energies into revolution to liberate the people. He crossed the snow-covered mountains, waded through marshlands and endured unimaginable hardships.

"After Liberation he devoted his life day and night to the interests of the people. Everyone says the light burned all night in his office and he never took enough rest. One day his staff and attendants ganged up to write a big-character poster demanding that he take better care of his health and rest more. Having read their opinions, he agreed but said that as he was getting older, he had to do more work for the Party.

"He said he was the ox of the people, and that is how he had worked gladly all his life. For years he had relished work and insisted on shouldering the most tiresome, the hardest, the heaviest loads, wholeheartedly and without complaint, making great efforts to pull the plough and sow seeds of happiness for the people. . . ."

"Finally he became seriously ill through overwork. Rumours about his illness spread among the people and all expressed the one hope that after some time he would be cured. Young Han, how the masses loved him and hoped he would be. . . ."

I was moved by the quaver in Secretary Lei's voice.

After regaining his self-control he went on: "But actually his case became worse and knowing that he had not long to live, he worked even harder. Even when he was too weak to speak, his thoughts were for the people and he hummed *The Internationale*. When his pain was intense, he told his nurse: 'Please go and look after some other comrades. You can do no more here!' Later. . . later after his death had been announced, eight hundred million Chinese people wept as one throughout the whole country. They all said. . . such a man will never die. . . ."

". . . Of course, Premier Chou!" I exclaimed, standing up. "Our beloved Premier Chou!"

Secretary Lei made as if to continue but could not as tears welled in his eyes and, covering his face with his hands, he remained thus for a long time. Then his voice came as if from far away: "Young Han, you're still. . . too young to understand. I've been a Party

member for thirty years, but when I think of Premier Chou, I feel as if I'd never even qualified."

Wiping my eyes with my handkerchief, I was about to answer when a voice called Secretary Lei from outside the door. It was Young Chu. She must have overheard our conversation. Racing into the room, she grasped Lei's hand as tears flowed down her cheeks. Then she suddenly turned and rushed towards me saying: "Sister Han, I want to be an ox for the people too."

Hugging each other, we both wept.

.....

That day changed me. I seemed to have grown up, talking less. Everyone noticed it. Young Chu also changed from a laughing girl, fond of singing, to a meditative one who spoke not a word. I knew she was gathering her inner strength. It added a depth to our lives. We secretly started an emulation campaign, to see which of us was more considerate to the passengers and who was the more competent. We carefully studied the needs of the passengers and discovered that they had three main worries. First they were worried lest they arrived at their destinations at an unsuitable time. Next they were anxious in case they missed their connections. Lastly they were concerned that they would not find their units or a room in a hotel. So we learned not only all the timetables for trains run by our bureau, but also all the bus timetables in all the province's main cities. Then we learnt the directions to all the large hospitals, factories, colleges and universities in Peking, Shanghai and Sian. It wasn't going beyond our duty. For the sake of our passengers, I was willing to learn all kinds of information.

I'd arranged to visit Lu's home on May Day. On 28th April, he came to see me. As soon as he came into the room and saw me memorizing the timetables, his face darkened.

"What's the matter with you?" I asked.

He sat there sullenly and only when I pressed him did he reply: "Yu-nan, please stop all this nonsense."

"Why?"

"Stop pretending!" he answered irritably. "They've been putting up big-character posters criticizing you. Yes, you've been making

enormous efforts, but you'll end up being labelled as a bourgeois specialist. Don't make trouble for yourself."

"But Lu..."

He interrupted: "The secretary of your Youth League committee has cited you in a speech at a branch meeting as a typical negative example because of your activities in 'Encouraging the Youth to Go Against the Political Current' and it has spread throughout the whole bureau. Yet you're still in the dark."

Amazed at his anger, I asked: "But Lu, whatever others may say, the important thing is, am I taking the correct path or not?"

"It's no good," he shook his head. "All the newspapers and magazines are full of that stuff."

"But are they correct?"

"Who cares?" he suddenly exploded. "But if you don't watch out you'll get into a whole lot of trouble."

Even though he had a hot temper, he'd never been so angry with me before. I was very upset. "I know, Lu, I've caused you some trouble too."

He leapt up and burst out: "Me? I'm not afraid of anyone! Look at me, I'm as tough as can be. They can do what they like to me." He banged his fist on the table and paused before continuing: "But I don't like them getting at you, Yu-nan!" He wheeled round and went out slamming the door.

The River Wei was near my home, its banks wide and quiet. That afternoon I went there by myself. The pebbles reminded me of the times Lu and I had thrown stones into the water for fun. At the big locust tree I remembered the day I had told him about my problems with the passengers, complaining that some were unreasonable. He had smiled without commenting. All these memories made me feel worse. I tried to shut them out and wandered about aimlessly. I raised my head and saw in the distance the Chinling Mountains in a blue haze. The Wei flowed rapidly south as far as the eye could see, the sunlight shimmering on the water. Eagles soared high above the horizon. It was a beautiful sight.

Sometimes nature's grandeur refreshes one and causes one to reflect. I seldom do that. But at that moment I thought of the

endless flow of history, the revolutionary cause, mankind's ideals. I stood there transfixed gazing into the blue distance. It was over the rivers and mountains and land of our country, like this river and land, that the ashes of Premier Chou were scattered. He dedicated his life to serving the people and working for future generations, and his spirit lived on in our hearts guiding us. He had owned nothing. He had had no children of his own. And his ashes had been scattered in accordance with his selfless ideals. What pressures and problems could I not withstand when I thought of Premier Chou?

That brought me back to earth as I dashed back to my office, saying aloud to myself: "No! Not over my dead body. You won't allow me to serve the people? Well I won't take it. I won't!"

3

So I carried on serving the passengers as best I could like before. If I had some free time, I would help the old people, not for praise but because it was my job and I didn't care about the criticisms. One Sunday Young Chu and I went to Sian to sketch a map of the city's principal units. Then we memorized it.

On May Day I did not see Lu nor go to his home in case I embarrassed him. I often longed to see him, but I tried to push such thoughts to the back of my mind and threw myself even more into the work.

In the middle of July, I was working on the night shift. It was raining and there weren't so many passengers in the booking hall. At about half past eight, an old peasant aged over fifty suddenly rushed into the hall. He leaned his head towards the window and panted: "Comrade, which is the fastest train to Sian?"

Sensing his urgency, I immediately replied: "Number 46 express train at 9.03."

Handing me the money, he turned to his anxious companions and said: "There's no time for a meal as the train will be here soon."

I asked what was the matter as I gave him the tickets. He explained that they were commune members from Five Star Brigade in the Chinling Mountain region. A girl student had accidentally poisoned

herself while spraying insecticide and now her life hung in the balance. They had set off the previous evening carrying her by stretcher to the station without stopping. Now they were rushing her to Sian for emergency treatment.

Seeing the anxious looks on their perspiring faces, I asked an old worker to keep an eye on the tickets while I went to the duty room to get the key to unlock the platform gates, so that they could carry in the stretcher before the train arrived. Then I rushed back to my office to fetch a raincoat to cover the girl. Perhaps those commune members had never travelled before, anyway they kept thanking me over and over again.

The girl was certainly in a serious condition, delirious and tossing about. Worried about her, I caught sight of her face when one of the peasants lifted the quilt and was startled. It seemed so familiar! Yet when I looked again carefully, I was sure that I did not know her.



The train arrived, and so I hurried to buy some cakes for them. I gave them to the old peasant. "Here uncle, you haven't had anything to eat for a whole day. Please have these when you're on the train." Accepting them, he replied, his voice choking: "You are so kind to us. We peasants of Five Star Brigade will never forget you all our lives!"

"Now, now, uncle!" I felt very touched by his words. "It's you who've suffered so much to save this girl's life. How can I ever forget you?"

He was going to say more, but as the bell signalled the train's departure, I urged him to get in.

The train was about to leave when I suddenly thought of something. It would arrive at Sian at 11.31 p.m. and the last bus to the hospital left at midnight. Since they'd never been to Sian before, they could easily lose time finding the way. And time meant that girl's life! So I quickly drew a map for them with my pen on a bit of paper. Then I held it against the window of the train and explained it to them over and over again until they were quite sure of the route. Only then did I feel at ease.

The train started to pull out and I jumped back behind the safety line. The peasants waved to me from the window until the train was quite a distance from the station.

Lu suddenly flashed into my mind. If he knew how the timetables and maps could help to save a young girl's life, surely he wouldn't be so angry with me? Stubborn as he was, he still was a very sensible fellow. I wondered how he was.

To my great surprise, a week later to the accompaniment of beating gongs and drums, a dozen peasant representatives from Five Star Brigade came to our station with letters of praise. All the passengers were curious and appreciative when the old peasant told the story of that night. News had somehow got around that I was being attacked and so many of the passengers in indignation got together to write a big-character poster headed: "To Attack Comrade Han for Serving the People Is Wrong". As I was off duty that day, it was not until I came to the yard the next morning that I saw it pasted

on the wall with letters of praise. And many passengers had added their comments in ink, such as:

"Learn from Young Comrade Han!"

"Comrade Han is like one of our family!"

And some remarks were even more pointed:

"Those who persecute Comrade Han are opposing Chairman Mao's teachings on serving the people!"

"Comrade Han's spirit in serving the people is correct. Those who go against this will come to a bad end!"

.....

I was so overcome that I wept. No one had ever given me such support and encouragement as those people. To serve the people filled me with joy, and I told myself that come what may I would do this all my life. That would be my only aim.

Time sped past. It was nearly the end of August before I had time to realize it. One day, when I had just finished selling some tickets for the express train number 46, Secretary Lei came to tell me there were two passengers outside who insisted on seeing me.

Puzzled I went out to find none other than the girl student and her father. They both took my hands in theirs affectionately.

"How can I ever thank you, comrade," her father began. "Hsiao-lin would surely have died but for your help."

I thought he was just being polite, so I explained: "It was nothing. The people you should really thank are those commune members who brought her here!"

"No. We want to thank you all!" Hsiao-lin chimed in. "The doctor said I had a narrow escape. An hour later and that would have been that. All the peasants when they heard that said we must thank you first. But for you they'd have lost two hours."

Feeling embarrassed I changed the subject and asked the girl if she was better.

"Fit as a fiddle!" she beamed. "Sister, my father said that the moment we got off the train, we must come to thank you." She held my hand tightly all the while, innocently insisting on calling me 'sister'. She positively sparkled with health and I thought what a lovely younger sister she would make.

"You know, you look vaguely familiar to me," I said. "I'm sure I've seen you somewhere before."

"Really?" She looked at me ingenuously. "But this is the first time I've seen you. Where do you think you saw me?"

I tried hard to recollect but finally gave up. Then we talked about other matters, until I noticed that it was time to return to my work.

"You go back first, dad," she said to her father. "I'll wait here for sister and then I'll bring her home for supper."

I protested but she refused to listen and so helplessly I went back to my office.

Actually I always felt awkward with strangers and I was shy being a guest, but because this family had invited me so earnestly and sincerely, I felt unable to refuse. So when I finally accepted their invitation, Hsiao-lin's joy knew no bounds. She took both of my hands in delight giggling.

Her mother was waiting at the doorway when we arrived. As I entered she took me by the hand to the middle of the room and patting my head looked at me from head to foot while she praised and thanked me. I just stood there in embarrassment, not knowing whether to stand or take a seat.

Hsiao-lin had disappeared and then strode in with someone who hung about the entrance, reluctant to come into the room.

Surprised at this, Hsiao-lin urged: "Hurry up! Come and meet big sister. What's the matter with you today?"

Her brother moved forward dragging his feet. One look at him and I was struck dumb, for it was none other than Lu!

He stopped in front of me staring at his feet, wishing to look at me, but afraid to. His face was like a beetroot.

"The moment I heard what had happened," he stuttered, "I guessed it could only be you. . . ."

Both his parents and sister were confused. The girl kept asking: "Do you know her then, brother?"

Not answering her, he turned to his father and stammered: "She is . . . well, we had arranged . . . for her to come . . . on May Day. . . ."

Raising her eyebrows, the truth dawned on Hsiao-lin,

She threw herself on me and hugged me: "*Aiya*, sister . . . I mean sister-in-law!" She broke off, jumping with glee and clapping her hands. "Oh, now I see! Now I see!"

The feeling of family intimacy grew stronger. Then the mother grinning widely was ordered by her husband to stop standing about and hurry and get some food ready for their guest.

I stayed with them until after eleven o'clock, when Lu escorted me home. Instead of catching the bus we chose a quiet path. Lu turned to me as we walked along: "Yu-nan, you know . . . all these days I've been longing to see you, but I was afraid. . . ."

"Afraid? What of?" I asked.

"Of you, that you'd snub me. Oh, Yu-nan, are you still angry with me? . . . Well, what I want to tell you is that I was wrong."

My heart was beating madly. "Oh, Lu. . . ." I said softly, and then could find no words to express my feelings. As I looked at him I wanted to laugh, but for some reason tears filled my eyes.

That night I returned home very happy, very excited.

A blush appeared on Young Han's cheeks and her long lashes swept down passionately.

Entranced by her story we were abruptly brought back to earth when she cried out as she looked at her watch and rose to her feet declaring: "My goodness! I almost forgot my work!" With that she dashed shyly out of the room.

We did not try to delay her saying goodbye to her. She opened her window smiling an apology, then turned to face the passengers with a friendly and earnest expression.

When we reached the entrance, both of us halted inadvertently, and with feelings of respect gazed back at her window for a while. . . .

Illustrated by Chang Keng

Dawn on the River

Prologue

I can't deny that I have received a certain amount of praise for my efforts in the enemy rear in the Changwei Plain fighting. But I cannot accept such personal praise. Such radical changes as came about in the situation at the time could never have been brought about by any one individual but only by the efforts of our people.

Look at the whole nature of these particular operations. Take only the happenings of one night, the night when I started out on my mission. If it hadn't been for Young Chen and his family, I wouldn't be here to tell you the story, let alone be praised. I know very well where credit is due, so if you ask me to tell you something about my personal experience, Young Chen is the person who comes to my mind. What's that? You want to know about him? All right.

1

It was the autumn of 1947. The Kuomintang offensive against the liberated areas was in full swing. The part that affected me, and the

whole story that I have to tell, is the campaign that autumn in the Shantung Peninsula. We had held large areas in the hinterland, far beyond the actual peninsula, but we had been forced right back. In the wake of the Kuomintang troops which had reached the heart of the Shantung Peninsula, came their jackals, known as the "Return Home Brigade" — the landlords and their hangers-on who had been thrown out or who had run away. Now, protected by the Kuomintang, they were back, looting and murdering and taking revenge. Our own people, the liberated area government workers, had reorganized themselves into Armed Working Corps.

I myself was in the region west of the Wei. The terrain between my region and the river was very strongly held in depth by the enemy. One night I was sent for by the head of the Political Department. When I got to his office he was standing looking out into the gloom of an overcast evening, lost in thought. There was only a dim oil lamp in the room. He turned round. I was rather taken aback by the gravity of his expression. Something had gone seriously wrong, I realized at once. He nodded a greeting, and said, "Have you heard what's happened across the Wei?"

"No. What?"

"No. 1 Armed Working Corps has collapsed." He was speaking almost under his breath. "They've got Ma Han-tung and Liu Chun. They're both dead."

This was a frightful blow to me, and I had no words. No. 1 Armed Working Corps was famous, and Ma and Liu were both personal friends as well as very fine comrades whom we could ill spare. My mind went back to our long years of fighting together, when we were both in the guerrilla fighting in the war against the Japanese. Recently they had been in the Shantung Peninsula, across the Wei, fighting strenuously, where the bare mention of their names was enough to scare the daylights out of the Kuomintang spies and agents.

The whole region east of the Wei had been turned into a Kuomintang network of strongholds, small forts and communication centres. It was a very difficult area to work in. That was why the No. 1 Corps, under Ma and Liu, had been transferred there. They had done a magnificent job, continually harrying the enemy along the

main highway, waylaying and blowing up their lorries, cutting telephone wires and making it hot for the "Return Home" ruffians. They were a force to be reckoned with. And now they had been killed!

"They were given away," said my chief, with a groan. "Not everyone was loyal. Their hide-out was surrounded. They held out for a day and then..." He had to stop speaking, and drew hard on his cigarette, while he looked out of the window again. He lit another cigarette from the stub. Neither of us spoke.

Finally he turned round. "Comrade Yao," he said, "we want to send you and Yang over there, to take over as commander and deputy of No. 1 Corps. You'll have to leave at once, and get the men regrouped as soon as possible. We must keep up our pressure there. What do you say to that?"

What could I say? The situation was clear enough. Of course we had to keep up our stand east of the river, and regroup No. 1 Corps. I felt honoured to be given such a job by the Party, and resolved inwardly to do my best to be worthy of it.

My chief and I shook hands heartily on it, and I went out to pick up Yang. There was no time to be lost and we knew we had to set out at once. The H.Q. I had just been at was west of the River Wei, and the area we had to get through was very strongly held, solid with enemy-held strongholds. It was some forty *li* to the river, and our only chance was to go straightaway, at night — daylight travel was out of the question. Once across the river we could move in daylight, though it would still be risky.

Neither Old Yang nor I knew the way, and it was a very dark night, with heavy low clouds blacking out the stars. It was as black as a tinker's pot, and looked as if a storm was coming on — not a night, in fact, to try to go through even well-known territory. One false step and we should not reach the Wei before daybreak; that would be the end of us — not that that mattered, but our mission did. We would have to have a guide. We said as much at H.Q. There were usually people going one way or the other, but tonight, as luck would have it, there was only one person available — a little devil, who was sent for.

He turned out to be small in stature, sixteen at the very outside. The only indication that he was not the inexperienced youngster he looked to be was a long scar on his chin. He was certainly smart enough, with his business-like salute, with his tommy-gun, and his own appraising glance at us.

The H.Q. chief obviously knew and respected him. "Ah, here you are, Young Chen," he said cheerfully, his arm on the lad's shoulder. "We've got a job for you. This is Commander Yao and Deputy Commander Yang. You've got to get them across the Wei by daybreak."

"Right you are." His voice carried complete assurance.

Personally I didn't feel so sure, as I looked at this slight youngster. He's only a kid still, I couldn't help feeling. Is it fair to ask so much of him, and can he do it? The chief must have read my thoughts. He laughed.

"Yao, old man, you don't have to worry," he said. "This is one of our veterans. He's a seasoned communications hand, even at his age. He lives on this side of the Wei and knows the lie of the land. Both his parents are Party members. He'll get you across without a doubt."

2

We were hastening on our way eastwards towards the river, along narrow footpaths. It was black as pitch — you could hardly see your hand in front of your face. There was no beginning or end to earth or sky, nor a glimmer of light anywhere on the plain which we knew stretched around us. The whole earth was fast asleep, but not the air. In the far distance thunder muttered, muted as though unable to disentangle itself from the close-packed clouds, and lightning reflected from above the thick covering showed vaguely. It was stifflingly hot, so hot that the cicadas in the willow trees began to sing again, and the heavy air was full of the smell of moist earth. There was a tremendous storm brewing, I felt apprehensively. I could not forget my chief's urgent words: the troops across the river must be regrouped in three days. There was a new "mopping-up"

operation coming soon, with a fresh Kuomintang division thrown in. We would never even retain our tenuous positions if we were not ready for action before the operation started. Our people would suffer intolerable hardship, and our military task, to act in strict coordination with our mates on the eastern front and blunt the edge of the enemy drive, would have failed. Yang and I had to get across tonight.

The wind began to rise.

At first there was only the suspicion of a breeze, like the whisper of wavelets on a seashore. Our clothes moved slightly on us and leaves rustled. Then a more definite undertone of noise crept in, until, with a howl, great gusts tore down on us, bending the *kaoliang* over and snapping twigs off the trees. It howled as it came. The clouds were still close over our heads, but now the thunder started out again as though it had burst free from its fetters and was bringing down the very heavens on us.

Then the whole storm broke.

Down came the rain, solid as though from a waterfall, right across from the plain. The noise of thunder was almost continuous and our ears rang with it. Jagged forked lightning lit up the fields and showed us the lashing rain and our own inky shadows in terrifying clarity. We were one moment blinded by its intensity and the next engulfed in complete blackness, hearing nothing but the pounding of the rain and the deafening rolls. . . .

I cursed the storm — the very thing I feared. There we were, drenched to the skin, as wet with sweat as with rain, groping our way painfully through this dangerous territory. Comrade Yang and I had no idea even of our general direction. In this kind of terrain you are lost at once unless you are born in it. Yang and I argued about our direction, but Young Chen plodded ahead with never a word, save for short warnings over his shoulder from time to time. "Look out! Small ditch ahead!" or, "We'll have to get over to the right. There's a pillbox to the left here."

Lucky we have such a good guide, I thought to myself. We'd not stand a ghost of a chance otherwise. Yet as I saw his stocky little body in the lightning flashes so steadfastly going ahead, I was

moved to pity and at the same time deep love. He was such a youngster.

My mood changed as the rain kept on. At least we weren't likely to run into anyone on such a night, I felt. . . .

But just as I was feeling a little less tense we ran slap into a bunch of the enemy. Right in front of us, obviously close at hand, we heard the sound of footsteps splashing through the mire. Before we could take cover a flash of lightning showed us that we were close on to a group of about twenty "Return Home" gangsters, with about a dozen of our men, prisoners, barely ten paces from us. They saw us at the same moment. Both sides were taken aback and made no move. There was a second's silence, and then the rattle of gunfire.

I threw myself down and opened up in their general direction. Bullets whizzed over my head, and there was a confusion of sounds, cries and footsteps. Someone tripped over me — I had no idea whether it was friend or foe. When we needed the lightning, there was none. I was suddenly pushed and a voice called out: "What are you waiting for, you fool! We've lost our prisoners in all this!" I got off a shot at him, and was nearly deafened by a rifle going off in my ear. I realized I was in the middle of the enemy gang. . . .

3

Silence fell as abruptly as the skirmish came.

I had lost Yang and Young Chen. I glared anxiously round in the next lightning flash but could see no one, only the heavy raindrops glistening.

At a loss, I ran around, staring and staring, and clapping my hands, as we had agreed to do. It seemed an eternity before I picked up my mates again, one after the other. Thankful to find we were all unharmed, we trudged on again.

The wind began to drop and the rain abate. But the clouds did not lift. There was not a star to be seen. The frogs started up their croaking, delighted by the deluge, and the fields and ditches were alive with gurgling water.

We stumbled along for some time before we realized we were not on any track, but in a swamp, rank with waist-high reeds, with fireflies twinkling on their tips. . . .

Young Chen went slower and then stopped. I saw him look anxiously round. "I dunno!" he said. "Where on earth have we got to?"

"What! You don't know?" cried Yang. "I wondered why we were in this messy place. You're lost, aren't you? D'you know whether we're going east or west?"

"I think we're going due east," said Young Chen. "I'm not sure, now. I don't know this swampy place."

"Rot! We're going south," said Old Yang scornfully.

Young Chen turned round uncertainly. "I don't know, I'm sure," he said dolefully. "It was meeting up with that gang that did it. I don't know which direction we started in after that dodging we had to do."

So we were lost, weren't we? I must say I was more than a little perturbed. Yang was grumbling away about Young Chen having made a mess of things, but I didn't feel we could very well blame him. It was a foul night for anyone to find their way in, and then we had that mix-up, which would have fairly muddled a ghost. Anyway, blaming the lad wouldn't get us out of it.

"Can't we see which way the wind's blowing and see if we can get an idea of direction from that?" I suggested.

But, believe it or not, the wind had dropped completely. The reeds were utterly still. We started to look around for trees, hoping we could tell by the feel of them what their tilt was and hence the prevailing wind; but there seemed to be none, only these interminable damned reeds! We could find no help. There was still no glimmer of light, and the thunderstorm had gone completely over. When we could have used the lightning we had none — we were just surrounded by intense baffling darkness in a seemingly endless swamp. I found myself taking great gulps of the humid air, longing for breath. I had a foolish thought that I should like to reach right through the clouds like a giant, and see the Dipper overhead.

Of course, the more you worry, the more lost you get. We seemed to be walking for ever in a sea of rustling reeds.

"Hold on a bit," I said finally. "Let's stop this fumbling around. If we're going in the wrong direction we're just making things worse."

"What's the alternative?" said Old Yang, with a snap.

"I think we should hold on a bit," I said again. "It must be going to get light pretty soon, and we can take our bearings then and make up our minds what to do. Don't let's expect the worst. We've still got a fair chance of making it." As a matter of fact I didn't feel so confident as I hope I sounded. I was as much trying to console myself as anyone else. You see, there was no blinking the fact that we were in the very heart of enemy territory, and we didn't stand a hope of remaining safe once daylight came. Even if by some fluke we were not spotted in the swamp, we had still not carried out our job. Who knows what the enemy would do that very day while we were losing precious time in that bloody swamp? However, we sat down for a bit and waited impotently for first light.

There was nothing to cheer us up. Water gurgled near us, and we could hear the occasional swish of grass snakes. The frogs seemed to be jeering at us, with their sardonic croaking. Old Yang, suddenly feeling irritated, picked up a lump of mud and threw it at the sound. . . .

Poor Young Chen sat silent. He seemed in despair. After a bit I realized he was trying not to break down. Poor kid! I was trying to think of the best way to cheer him up when Old Yang burst out: "Go on. Snivel!"

Chen didn't answer but blew his nose hard.

"Mess everything up, then bawl like a baby!" Old Yang was letting off steam properly. Poor Chen cried in real earnest.

I poked Yang. After all, I felt, it's not fair to blame Chen. If we hadn't run into the enemy we'd never have lost our way. And anyway, he's only a kid. If it hadn't been for the war he'd hardly have left home by now. I knew Old Yang didn't mean it all, but he was the sort who got angry as soon as he was crossed. He calmed down just as quickly. Sure enough, he pulled himself up, and lay

back again in the wet grass, saying: "It's all right, old chap. Don't take it so hard. Try and snatch a bit of sleep."

Chen did not utter a word, but I felt him stir as he looked round. No good! There was no glimmer of light.

Yang began to snore. I couldn't close my eyes, but fidgeted restlessly, too worried to keep still. It wasn't the first time I had been in such a fix, of course: I'd lain low in enemy-held territory many a time, sometimes for days at a stretch. But I'd never been in such a situation where so much depended on me. Our own danger was secondary to the situation across the river. And with this thought came the memory of the tragic loss of Ma and Liu, and the collapse of No. 1 Corps, the horrors wrought on the people by the "Return Home" bastards, the Kuomintang army on its way here, and the "mopping-up" operation they were planning.... My thoughts were as dark as the night which covered us.

4

I must have dozed off.

I woke with a jump to find Young Chen poking me, and opened my eyes. Still complete darkness, it seemed to me. Not far away a cock crowed. That was something, at least. Dawn must be near. Yes! There was a streak of dull light on the horizon.

"Commander! Commander!" Young Chen was pulling at my arm. "Look! That *is* the east, where I thought it was! I hadn't got my bearings wrong! We're not really far off the track — we can't be."

"It's the east, right enough," I agreed. "Does that really mean you know where we are, though?"

I felt him move unhappily. It was still too dark for him to be sure where we were.

The frogs ceased their row, and a strange quiet fell. Now we could hear the background noises of this countryside, the sighing of the breeze over the grasses, the water running in the ditches, the lowing of cows and the awakening cocks in the scattered homesteads. As these noises came to our ears we slowly became aware that there was



Lotus and Bird

by Huang Yung-yu

New Paintings



A Tibetan Girl by Liu Han



Just Hatched by Huang Chou



A View from Kulangyu by Wu Kuan-chung

an underlying sound which we could not place at once, a droning, persistent noise which seemed to come neither from the earth nor the sky.

"What's that noise?" I said.

Yang had awakened. "Sounds like waves on a shore," he said.

"It can't be that," said Young Chen. "We're a long way from the sea." He cocked his head on one side, the better to listen. Then he went rigid. "It's the river in flood! We're near the river after all!"

"Are you sure?" I said, unable to believe such good news.

"Get on!" said Yang. "You're dreaming."

"No, no! That's what it is, really," said Young Chen. "I've lived all my life on the river bank. D'you think I'd mistake that sound? That's the river in flood, sure enough. It always makes that noise as it comes down here."

By now daybreak had come, and the earth was throwing off its pall. Our surroundings began to take shape. First we could see one another and the details of the nearby reeds, and then, gradually, *kaoliang* fields and trees and villages took shape further away. We could see the size and shape of the swamp we were in, and where it ended. To the west and north were villages, to the south an orchard, and in the east was a long ribbon of moving white.

"Commander Yao! That's the Weil Ai, the river at last!" Young Chen's voice showed his relief. He turned and stared hard to the right, and then gripped my arm tightly. "Oh Heaven!" he cried, in an ecstasy of joy. "We're on the threshold of my home! D'you see that orchard? That's my father's, that's my home. We're close to the very place where all the underground workers cross from! And there's the place where we cross the river — there, where the willows are, see? There's a boat hidden there. Oh, we were lucky after all! I didn't lose the way, I didn't!" I could see his face now, lit up with his delight, pink with enthusiasm like a child. I wasn't far off being the same, nor was Old Yang. Yang showed his feelings more, I think. He clumped Young Chen heartily and fairly shouted: "You've done it! You've done it! Young Chen, you're the best little devil I know."

Chen grew business-like. "Time we were moving," he said briskly, getting up and tugging at us. We practically ran out of the swamp, splashing along in the grey light, all our worry and fatigue forgotten.

We reached the willows on the bank, out of breath. Young Chen parted the branches and gave a cry of dismay. "Aiya! It's gone."

It was true. There was no boat. It had been washed away by the rising water. The river was twice its usual width. Usually it flowed between its own banks, but now it was up to the dykes on each side, and turbulent at that. Midstream was a torrent of waves and whirlpools, and the current was booming against the dyke on the east bank.

Now I felt really in despair, encountering this last-minute danger.

"Can you swim?" asked Yang suddenly. I shook my head. Even the best swimmer, which I was not, would feel qualms today, looking at the river.

"Nor me," said Yang. "How about you, Young Chen?"

"Oh, I could get across," said Chen. "But what's the good of that? I can't tow you. The Kuomintang troops have taken all the boats and burnt them, all the way down the river. We went to no end of trouble, hiding this one! Oh, what shall we do now!"

We stood gloomily looking at the river. Then Young Chen looked at me and said, "Will you come up to my home and see my dad? He may be able to think of something. He took the last people across, you know."

"Good idea," I said. "We can't stay here, anyway. If we really can't get across we shall have to find somewhere for a hide-out."

We left the river bank and headed for the nearby orchard.

5

It was very quiet.

Last night's downpour had left all the leaves fresh and green, and ripening fruit gleamed among the branches, dripping still with rain-drops which shook off on us as we went past. We went quickly along a little path and well inside the orchard came upon a little cottage, with vines and gourds growing round it. As we drew near, a fierce

yellow dog sprang out, growling. He saw Young Chen, and his raging turned to a welcome.

Chen was as pleased to see him. "Good old Tiger," he said fondly, as the door of the house opened with a squeak and someone put his head out to see what the dog was barking at. He gave us a very hard look and then saw Chen.

"Dad," said Chen, half under his breath.

The old man had his wits about him. He gave one swift look round and then beckoned urgently. "Come on!" he said. "In here! Hurry!"

We went in. I was taken aback at once by the appalling state the place was in. Everything was upsidedown, furniture on the floor, the water-jar cracked, the cooking pots broken, the grain bin overturned and the floor littered with broken bowls, bits of food, and shreds of clothing.

Young Chen went white, and ran to look into the inner room. He turned back at the door, and said to his father, his voice showing his dread:

"Dad! Where's mother?"

There was a dreadful pause. The old man was sitting dejectedly by the door, his head low. Then he burst out:

"They took her away! It was those damned 'Return Home' bandits! They took her and Little Chia."

Chen slid down on to his heels by the hearth. He said nothing, but his breathing became short as though he had been running.

"When did they take them?" asked Yang, his voice showing his concern.

"Oh, it's five days now," said the old man sadly. He heaved a sigh, and then told us the story. One of the local men had turned traitor, and had informed on them; they knew now that Young Chen was working for the Liberation Army and had been getting people across the river. They had come and wrecked the house, and taken all three down to the Kuomintang sub-district office and beaten them up. They released the old man and told him to go back to his home and wait for Chen to return. Chen was to be made to give away the underground workers as ransom for his family. . . .

Yang and I went stiff. Young Chen sat rigid, biting his lip and for a moment said nothing. Then he looked straight at his father and asked, "So what are you going to do, Dad?"

"I was planning to call you back," said the old man sternly.

"Call me back! What for?"

"Ai! Your mother and your brother have been tied to the beam for five days and nights now. I tried to find you everywhere. . . ."

"You tried to find me. . . ." Young Chen sounded sharp.

"Yes!" A queer sound, half laugh, half cry, came from the old father. "What do you think? Do you have to be told? There's the lives of your father and mother and brother to be remembered, and the lives of scores of our workers and families of our fighting men. How many have those bastards murdered? Don't you expect me to look for you to avenge them? What did I agree to let you join the army for?" The old man was trembling with anger, his white beard shaking and his eyes scornful. It took me a minute to understand his meaning, but Young Chen had known. He looked at me proudly, with a little smile even, then ran over to his father, grasped his hand and said tenderly, "Yes, Dad. Well, here I am."

"Two days I tried to find you," the old man said, stroking his son's hair, "and never a trace of you. I couldn't wait like that, so I set off across the river the day before yesterday, to find Commander Ma. I knew where he was, but before I got there he'd been given away and his hide-out was surrounded. More than a thousand men it took to capture our Commander Ma! But he and his group held out all day, all day against a thousand men. They fought till all the ammunition ran out and then killed themselves with their own hand-grenades. When I got there their bodies were lying in the street. Ai! What heroes! Commander Ma used to bring his men over here, but now he's gone, and his brave men are gone. We've lost that whole section!" The old man's voice broke, and for the first time I saw a tear steal down his cheek.

I couldn't speak. By then Yang and I were both over near him. Yang grasped his hand.

"Old comrade," he said gently, "don't give up hope. That sec-

tion isn't lost, nor are all Commander Ma's men gone. We're sent to replace Ma, and carry on with No. 1 Armed Corps."

"Eh? What's that?" the old man's face lit up. "You're going across the river to that section?"

Young Chen chimed in, "Dad, it's what I was sent to do . . . to get them across the river. But the boat's gone — the high water's washed it away. How shall we do it?"

The old man got swiftly to his feet, and looked us up and down as though sizing us up. He nodded, as if satisfied.

"Good, good," he said. "But you've got to get there as quickly as you can, you know. The terror under the 'Return Home' bastards mustn't go on. Only yesterday two comrades who'd got separated from their detachment were discovered in the woods. Ah, they were fine men! They fought back nearly the whole day, and when they ran out of ammunition they smashed their rifles and jumped into the river. Thank Heaven you have come! We shall have our own defenders again to help us. Oh, it's good! You'll have to get across as fast as you can." He stopped and his voice changed slightly: "Now, about the boat."

"Yes, indeed," I said. "It's been swept away by the high water. The river's in flood, and the current's very swift. All the same we've got to get across today."

"Of course! But you're going to," said the old man.

"How? Have you got a way in mind?" asked Old Yang.

We got no immediate answer, but the old man got up and opened the door quietly and looked out, seemingly at the weather signs. He turned back and began to talk.

"Can either of you swim?"

"We can both swim a bit in the ordinary way, but not in such rapids as there are at present."

He said nothing more, but fetched a bottle from the inner room, took a long swig from it and then passed it over to us.

"Come on," he said. "Drink up, you'll need it. The water's very cold." We each drank. It was very strong spirit.

"Well, let's get going," he said. I looked at Young Chen to see what the plan was. Chen grinned and whispered, "He means just

that. He's a fine swimmer. He's going to carry you over himself right now."

His voice was full of confidence and pride in such a father. It was infectious and I felt a glow come over me. But then the memory of his mother and younger brother hanging roped to their torturers' beam came to me. What were we going to do about them?

"What are you hesitating for?" asked the old man.

"Your wife. . ."

I saw him clench his jaws convulsively. He turned away abruptly, motioned to us to follow, and said harshly, "Let's be off."

6

Full daylight had come.

The rosy glow of sunrise had broken through the heavy clouds to the east, and details of the neighbourhood could be clearly picked out. The wind had not dropped at all. When we got within sight of the river we could see the surface was whipped up into angrily frothing waves. The current was driving hard against the east dyke, surging against it and being hurled back with a thundering noise. Flecks of foam and scraps of flotsam were blown off on to us.

"Whew, what a gale!" said the old father, gasping as a gust hit us. "Now, let's see. I'll have to take you one at a time. I want you both to get this clear. Once in the water, you're not to mess around or struggle. D'you understand? Which of you's going first?"

I gave Yang a push. "You and Young Chen had better start," I said. "I'll cover you from this side."

"Come off it," said Yang. "Of course you should go first." He gave an appraising glance around.

"You, I tell you," I said.

Just at that moment we heard a shot, somewhere to our west. Old Yang opened his mouth to go on arguing, when the old man pulled him down with a splash into the river.

"Now you get along, Young Chen," I said, giving him a shove. Young Chen got angry, pulled himself away and dodged round up to the top of the bank. I followed him. To the west was a group

of seven or eight people near a village, coming along the road to the river, silhouetted clearly against the morning mist. They did not seem to be very purposeful and I reckoned they had not seen us.

"Better take cover," I said to Chen. There was a zigzag trench quite near, with a certain amount of undergrowth around it. We ducked into this, and Tiger followed us. I looked over at the river and saw that the old man was swimming strongly, towing Yang with him. The waves were big enough to hide them completely at times, but they were clearly visible when they were on our side of a crest. I looked back again to the enemy side and saw that the bandit group had left the main road and were following a little path which would take them up to the Chens' orchard. I glanced at Young Chen. He was biting his lower lip and breathing hard.

Obviously they were going back to pick up the old man again. My thoughts raced. When they got to the cottage and found it empty, as likely as not they would come straight down to the very spot where we were to look for him. It'd be up to us to keep them off and cover Yang's crossing. The main thing now was to see that he got across. He'd be able to do the job over there. But this was going to be quite a task for Chen and me: of course it was worth all we could put into it, because on it depended the survival of the No. 1 Armed Corps and the whole area east of the river. I looked again at Young Chen. He was keeping a sharp eye on the path from the orchard, and turning to look with impatience at the river. I knew his heart must be very heavy, and was trying to think of some way of giving him some comfort when he spoke. He was trying to relieve me of *my* anxiety!

"Look, Commander, they're nearly halfway already. My old man might have been born in the water, the way he goes! He'll be back to fetch you in no time, never fear."

Oh Young Chen! What a single-minded, upright soul you are! Tiger had heard something. He jumped up and looked out of the trench and began to bark furiously. I looked out and saw that the group had now emerged and were coming along the same path that we had taken, straight towards us. Tiger's barking increased.

"Stop it! Lie down!" Chen ordered, grabbing him and pushing

him down into the trench. Tiger whined, obviously feeling wronged, but subsided.

It was broad daylight now.

Smoke streamed from the chimneys of all the villages, as breakfasts were being cooked. Over the river an eagle balanced, now heeling in the wind, now soaring into the clouds. It seemed to be surveying the situation, until suddenly, as if affrighted, it went off with strong wing beats into the black clouds.

There was no peace anywhere. The wind was getting fiercer and it was obvious that another storm was brewing.

We could see the enemy group clearly now. A ramshackle bunch of landlords and their hangers-on, armed with a mixture of rifles and pistols.

"Look at that!" ejaculated Chen, clutching me. "The bloody traitor!"

"Which one d'you mean?"

"That short one in front. He was our village head. When the Kuomintang came he ratted. He's the one who gave me and my family away. . . ." He raised his rifle. I could see the man clearly now, a fellow of between forty and fifty, wearing a rather uneasy smile, and leading his masters fast towards us. We could already hear their footsteps and catch snatches of their conversation.

"Rot his mother!" the traitor said. "He must have got away to the Eighth Route Army." He turned to one of the others. "I told you we should have buried him alive when we had them before. But you would have it that if we gave him a long enough cord we should catch even bigger fish! Well, you've got no fish by it . . . even the bait is gone."

The one who seemed to be the leader let out a stream of oaths, mostly directed at the traitor. "What the hell do you know about tactics, anyway, you scum!" he went on. "All you're good for is running those damned speak-grievance mass meetings, or giving away our property."

"Respected brother," said the traitor cringing, "I beg you not to keep on about that! All the things of yours that have been shared out will be returned."

The other interrupted him harshly, "Shut your big mouth! We've been hearing that for a month and what have you returned? You'll be buried alive yourself, I can promise you, if we don't get our stuff back in ten days at the outside."

"Break it up there!" said another. "Let's get back to business. Our orders are to keep a stricter guard on this river route. They're expecting those damned Reds to try and get reliefs over. We'd better see to it that we carry out those orders . . . or we'll be in the soup ourselves."

"I'll do it, I'll do it!" said the traitor placatingly. "I'll personally stay on the bank night and day . . . oh! It's slippery here." He skidded as he began to scramble up the bank, and clutched at a bush with both hands.

"Come on, Chen!" I gasped. "Let 'em have it!" They were right on top of us. I stood up, waving at Young Chen. He rose, his gun at the ready and confronted them. The traitor's eyes nearly burst out of his head and he went green. Young Chen fired, his rifle almost touching his enemy's body. The wretched man gave a convulsive jerk, twisted, and slipped lifeless down the dyke into the ditch at the bottom. . . .

I got two of them with my tommy-gun — the one who had been swearing so at the traitor and the second speaker. The rest dived for cover, too frightened to try and return our fire. They scrambled down the dyke helter-skelter, scattering ammunition as they went. Tiger could bear it no longer. He had been restrained only with difficulty, and now he made off after them, growling, his ridge of hair standing up all down his back. He caught up with one, and dragged him down. The others got away in their rush, and made off through a *kaoliang* field towards the nearby village.

7

Quiet fell. The smoke from our guns dispersed.

I looked at the river again. Our two were fast nearing the eastern bank. They were so far away now that their heads were only tiny dots in the immensity of the tumultuous waters. They would get

there, though! I felt a great relief, as though a heavy weight had been lifted from me.

"They'll make it!" I said aloud. Young Chen nodded, but remained tense.

Over in the nearby village a cacophony of alarm-bells started up, which spread to the other villages, till the whole west bank seemed to be one alarm.

Another kind of storm was brewing for us, it seemed.

It did not look to me that Young Chen and I were going to get across. We must expect the enemy to come up with reinforcements from all directions at any minute. Of course we could put paid to many of them but better if we could have crossed the river and fulfilled the job we were sent to do. If it can't be done, well, we'll just have to follow the example of those brave men the old fellow told us about — use up all our ammunition and then throw ourselves into the river. I'd been in many a tight corner before, but never one quite as chancy as this. But what was the option? We were hopelessly outnumbered, and if we couldn't swim nor fly. . . . I felt curiously composed. I thought of Old Yang. He'd be over any second now, and he was a good chap who'd see that the east bank was reorganized all right. No. 1 Armed Corps would be in action again, and the struggle would be carried on. Our good people would not be left to the mercy of the Kuomintang and their jackals. The mission the Party gave us would be carried out.

I felt through my clothes to make sure that I was not overlooking any papers which should not fall into enemy hands, and tore up some notes which I had. Young Chen watched with interest. It suddenly came to me that there was no need for Young Chen to stay. There was no escape westwards, but he could swim.

"Hey, you," I said. "You'll please get away before the enemy comes back. Get along, you've got time to make it."

"Get away?" Young Chen looked at me with astonished eyes. "What d'you mean?"

"Don't pretend you don't understand," I said. "I spoke quite clearly, didn't I?"

Chen shrugged, and made no answer. "Didn't you hear me?" I said again, roughly this time. I knew I would have to use my authority and that just appealing to him wouldn't budge him, and I was quite prepared to use force if I had to.

The little chap still made no move. "Haven't you ever heard about obeying orders?" I said, as though I were really angry now.

This got an answer. "I do know about obeying orders," he said, very quietly. "That's what I am doing."

"Whose orders d'you think you're obeying, you young rascal?"

"My orders were to escort you across the river, not to run away and desert you."

I had not expected this young lad to get it all out as clearly as that. I was deeply moved, and could not keep back a smile. Chen wouldn't respond to this either.

He looked at me gravely and said very seriously, "Commander Yao, I don't think much of your steadiness nor of your attitude to the people."

"What!"

"I don't want to say any more. You humiliated me." He turned aside proudly, but not before I saw that tears had started to his eyes.

I could say nothing. My face burnt and I understood only too well the lesson this youngster had taught me. Too late to feel that only now did I understand the make-up of him and people like him! I looked across the river again. Yang was just scrambling up the dyke on the other side, and the indomitable old man had started his swim back. To the west I could see a lot of people coming out of the nearest village, and there was movement to be seen on the roads from the others. Shots began to whizz overhead.

"Young Chen," I said. "Forgive me. Let's get ready for the fight. How many rounds have you got?"

He still wouldn't speak, but he patted the cartridges he had picked up, and managed a grin.

The sound of gunfire increased.

One group had reached the orchard, and were behind a sand-dune, blazing away in our direction. Bullets whizzed into the dyke behind us like grasshoppers, kicking up mud and stones, and snapping twigs.



We held our fire, waiting for them to get closer. They were cunning, and didn't stir from behind their dune.

After a few minutes their fire died down, and a piece of red cloth was waved. Someone stuck his head up. It was one of the bandits we'd seen before.

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" he cried. "That you, Young Chen? Look who's here!"

There was silence and two figures were pushed out. Young Chen went white. They were his mother and his brother.

Old Mrs. Chen was bleeding and her clothing torn. Her hands were roped behind her back. The wind blew her bedraggled hair loose, and she swayed as she stood, trying to stand upright, looking towards us. The lad was not roped. He had been so beaten up he could not stand and he was quite colourless. He held on to his mother with one hand and held a stick in the other to keep himself up with. Tiger saw them, jumped out of the trench and ran over, wagging his tail. Two or three bandits came out using their captives as cover, and huddled behind them. One of them seemed to be a leader. The man holding the red cloth called again.

"Now you, listen carefully. Master Wu's got something to say to you."

The fat one who seemed to be "Master" Wu began. He had a thin voice. He pointed to the old mother and her son. "D'you see them, Young Chen? You've got two ways out of this. You can die right here — your mother and your brother will die first — or you can put down your weapon and go home with your family. The Eighth Route Army men you're hiding will be treated leniently, I promise you. That's quite clear, isn't it? Two roads. Choose now, die or live."

A white heat of rage burnt within me. I looked at Young Chen. He was holding himself back with difficulty, scarlet with fury. He took aim at the bandit leader, shivering with the intensity of his feeling. His gun hand shook. I pulled his arm and whispered urgently, "Keep your head, Young Chen. Don't fire yet. You'll hit your mother."

He gave a half sigh, half groan, and put up one hand to brush the tears from his eyes. Then he raised his rifle again.

The old mother began to speak.

"My son!" Her voice was clear as a bell, and she sounded quite calm. "My son, where are you?"

"I'm here, Mum," Chen shouted.

"Stand up, my child, and let me see you. No, no! Don't! Just call to me again."

"Mother!"

"That's my dear boy! My good, eldest boy! Can you see your brother?"

"Yes, Mother." Chen's voice was breaking now.

"Enough, my son! Shoot!" Chen's mother raised her voice. "Shoot! Take no notice of this dog of a traitor. Kill them. Shoot! My son, shoot at me."

"Yes, brother! Shoot! Quick!" It was the brother calling.

There was a sudden scurry on the sand-dune, as the bandits scuttled away in panic. Young Chen's submachine-gun cracked. The bandit with the red cloth crumpled and fell.

"Good boy! Good boy!" the old mother cried, looking down at the dead man.

There was another rifle crack. The mother called out in pain, swayed and collapsed.

"Oh, Mother!" Young Chen gave an anguished cry.

I too was in anguish, and the tears were pouring down my cheeks. I had my gun ready, but there was no one in sight. They had dragged away the little lad. I looked at Young Chen. He was standing rigid, his lip bleeding where he had bitten it, his burning eyes fixed on his mother's body.

Suddenly a head stuck up behind the dune. My finger was at the trigger but Young Chen was quicker. He got him. The next who showed I accounted for. We stayed like this for some ten minutes, shooting whenever we saw a movement. We suffered no damage. The bandits fired, but could not show themselves enough to take aim.

Then came another shout from them. "Don't shoot!" And the lad was pushed out again, being used as a shield, with several bandits rushing us. I was taken aback. My gun dropped slightly. I did not fire, nor did Young Chen.

They were getting near now, pushing the youngster along, his body facing us.

Behind the dune was more movement. They were obviously planning to rush us under the cover of the advance guard. The lack of rifle fire seemed almost frightening. We could hear the youngster's gasping breath, as he was manhandled forward, the shuffling of the feet of his tormentors, and the ever-present sound of the river. Then the lad's voice rang out.

"Brother! What are you waiting for? Shoot! Don't mind about me!"

I jumped, my heart pounding. I heard Young Chen's breath coming short, and he took aim. I pulled at him.

"No, Chen! Don't!"

"Shoot, brother! Shoot! Avenge mother! Quick, please. Get that beast who's holding me! Shoot him!"

He suddenly stopped. I saw that Tiger had run out and had got hold of the leg of the man holding the lad. He gave a yell of pain and let go. Quick as a flash, the lad turned and fell against the man, grabbed his hand-grenade, held it up and pulled out the pin. There was a horrified silence. The bandits were transfixed, looking stupidly at the grenade, with its little wisp of smoke. I felt as though my heart was bursting and closed my eyes. There was a ringing explosion.

I opened my eyes again to see a dense pall of white smoke, and a wounded bandit trying to crawl away. Young Chen and I opened up into the smoke, firing as fast as we could.

8

To be frank, I'd been in plenty of tough spots in my time, but I'd never felt so worked up as I did then. Even a few moments ago I'd been cool and was still remembering to conserve my ammunition,

and go on fighting for time, to let the old man get back. But now I forgot everything in my rage. I shoved the catch of my gun on to repeat, and let fly. We had kept one lot of adversaries at bay in front of us, but others were now getting up from each side. I never gave them a thought, but went on blasting away, burning for revenge. Revenge for the old mother, for the little lad!

I found time to glance at Young Chen. He was still as cool as you like, using his ammunition carefully, not firing blindly, and giving a sharp look towards the river every now and again. Suddenly he gripped my arm.

“Look! My father’s nearly back!”

I turned to see, and there he was, close to the shore, behind the dyke from the enemy. Young Chen stood up, with a loud shout.

“Dad! Hurry!” He stopped with a gasp, and clutched his chest. Blood trickled out from between his fingers. He sank down, and I threw myself down beside him. Oh, Young Chen!

He didn’t speak, but lay there, limp. I looked out. The enemy was coming up fast, now that our guns were quiet. My anger burnt up again and I started up, blazing away towards the dune. Suddenly I felt a powerful grip on my shoulder. I turned to find that the old man had climbed up the dyke.

“Come on,” he said. “Into the river, quick!”

“Shut up,” I said, firing away.

The old man squatted down beside Chen. He started when he saw that he was wounded, and clasped his hand. “My son!”

Young Chen opened his eyes. He smiled when he saw his father. “Father!” he said, his voice coming with difficulty. “Oh good! You can get him across, Father!”

The old man said never a word. His face was stern and pale. He looked at the bodies of his wife and son and a slow tear gathered in his eye. He rubbed his hand across his face, gripped my arm tightly and cried, “Come on! Don’t waste time!”

“I can’t,” I said. “I’m going to stay here with Young Chen.”

“No! You must go,” said Young Chen, struggling to sit up. “I’ll cover you!” He somehow managed to get his gun going again.

“I can’t, I must...” Before I could finish the old man had heaved me down the dyke and we were in the river.

“Oh, Young Chen, Young Chen...” My mouth was stopped with river water, and I lost my breath.

We were in the surging waves, and the noise of water and wind filled my ears.

I tried to turn and look back. I could only see the bright flashes of gunfire and the little puffs of white smoke above our trench. Tiger was howling, and barking angrily at every spurt of dust kicked up by the enemy’s bullets... Young Chen was there, staunchly holding out, covering my crossing. I jerked convulsively.

“Keep still, can’t you?” grunted the old man, wrenching at me. His grip on me was violent and I could feel the intensity of his feelings through it: how he was trying to suppress them, how he was unable to allow himself to look back. All his strength was to be used to get me across. We were nowhere near out of danger yet, and if the enemy reached our trench quickly we should never make it; we would be far too easy a mark for them. In the usual way I would have given little for our chances — one wounded man against a well-armed group — but now...

The sun had come through and was glittering on the ripples and waves. We were pitching along, now high, now in a trough. My head was whirling. I strove to look back. My body was being tugged through the river, but my heart was still in our trench. I suddenly went stiff. The noise of firing had ceased, and a shadow — a person was moving. It was Young Chen. He straightened himself and threw his gun into the river. Almost at the same moment one of the bandits appeared. Young Chen grappled with him, and the two fell into the torrent...

I could watch no more and closed my eyes. My old bearer was shaking. His arm was like a vice on me.

There were many figures now on the dyke above our trench, running and firing at us. So far their aim was poor. After a few moments, we heard shots overhead coming from the east side. That must be Old Yang, covering our crossing, I thought. I was going

to get over safely! But Young Chen, Young Chen! I struggled to look back again, but could see nothing but rolling waves.

I could no longer hold back my pent-up emotion. The tears rolled freely down my cheeks. For ten years I had been living and fighting among stirring scenes and could manage not to show what I was feeling. But now I could not restrain myself. Oh, if I could swim! I would have searched every wave, explored the riverbed until I had found Young Chen. What a great soul he had, that child of sixteen! He knew nothing about me, only the job I had to do. He didn't even know my given name. Yet without a divided thought he had given his life for me.

His life . . . all that he had. His young life, barely on its threshold. Was there anything more precious? Yet for ideals, for the call of comradeship, for duty, he had laid it down.

Can any man do more? Can any character show finer qualities? Oh Young Chen! What a people is mine, where such people as you, and your mother, your little brother show us how to live. And round me, saving me, was the arm of your father, who never faltered, even when his whole family fell round him.

My train of thought was suddenly broken. The old man jerked, and his grip loosened. My head went under water. I struggled wildly, and swallowed great mouthfuls. Everything whirled before me.

I surfaced again, spat and looked around. I was still being held. The old man had turned very pale, and the sweat was standing out on him. He was gasping for breath and his strokes were much weaker. When he heaved forward I saw blood was showing on his shoulder.

Ah! He's been wounded.

He seemed to be almost spent, and using his last strength.

Imagine my feelings . . . I was in a whirl of emotion. Oh Yao Kuang-chung, Yao Kuang-chung, I said to myself. What have you done for the people? What right have you to let Young Chen and his whole family die for you? What right? What right? I could not bear the impact of these thoughts.

"Old Chen," I cried. "Let me go! Let me go!"

"Keep still, you!" answered the old man roughly. "Keep still, you fool." He looked at me angrily. "You ought to be ashamed, talking like that!"

Immense strength seemed to return to him, and he pulled me on with renewed vigour, heading straight for the east bank.

The water behind us was coloured red with blood. . . .

Epilogue

Well, that's the story of Young Chen.

You want to ask me whether we got across in the end? And what happened to the old man? And was Young Chen drowned? Did I succeed in rallying our men across the river?

I agree that you should know all these things.

Yes, we got across. Old Chen passed out just as we got on shore. He was a month in one of our field hospitals. Directly he was better he came to look for me, to ask for a gun. What for? Do you really need to ask? I gave him my own treasured tommy-gun and that day No. 1 Armed Working Corps gained one of its best fighters. He asked for nothing for himself. In his tattered old sheepskin coat he was always in the forefront of the fighting, his white beard blowing in the wind and his eyes blazing.

Young Chen was dead. His body was washed up on a bank down river the same day. In death he was still gripping the bandit chief's throat. Not far off was Tiger's maimed body.

Yes, the struggle across on the east bank of the river was successfully resumed. It was difficult, of course. The men were scattered everywhere, and we were plagued with spies and provocateurs, so that for some time our own men were afraid to trust anyone. The people were uneasy and depressed. The "mopping-up" operation the Kuomintang started was terrible . . . killing and burning was everywhere. But the difficulties were surmounted. Young Chen and his family were always in my mind and when I thought of them the difficulties seemed as nothing. We regrouped and reorganized, and won a few successes along the main highway. We destroyed

some enemy convoys, did some successful raids on "Return Home" H.Q. and killed some of their worst and cruelest leaders. The people were roused to fresh courage and fresh determination, and our ranks increased. We managed to mount more and more successful guerilla attacks, and succeeded in pinning down the enemy division between the Wei and the Chiao, and preventing them from reinforcing the front on the west. This was a real service — we could say that we had won a victory. In November, indeed, we were commended for our part by the Sub-Region. They went so far as to confer a decoration on Yang and myself. At the presentation I was asked to go up to the platform and say a few words. I tried to get out of it, but when they made me, I said: "Comrades! You've got the wrong person in front of you. The real credit belongs to Young Chen and his family."

"Young Chen? Who's he?"

I told them the whole story from beginning to end, just as I've told you.

Illustrated by Chen Yu-hsien

The Distant Gobi

In the distance, by the white wall of a ruined temple, some yurts shimmered in the spring sunshine. Above their tops, plumes of smoke from burning cow-dung were carried off by the wind into the blue sky. A woman of about forty in a threadbare purple robe, a crate of cow-dung on her back, was trudging towards an old yurt at the east end of the village. Arriving there, she dumped her load on the ground and straightened up to flick her clothes with her dusty scarf.

"Stop that fighting!" she scolded the children in her courtyard. "It's unlucky, see? Aren't you fed up yet with fighting!" Then she went sullenly into the yurt.

A white-haired woman in her sixties sitting on a leather hassock by the fire in the northeast corner of the yurt was telling her beads. Hearing her daughter-in-law Sevjidma's voice, she called to her grandson outside, "Tuvsin! Stop playing at fighting. Just the thought of war or soldiers sets granny's heart palpitating. Ai, the naughty boy..." Then she turned to Sevjidma. "Didn't you see our caravan?"

"No, not a sign of them."

Crack! Crack! The children were still imitating shooting. Fold-



ing her hands as if in prayer, the old woman sighed, "What hard times these are, with fighting everywhere! Even the kiddies do nothing but play at fighting."

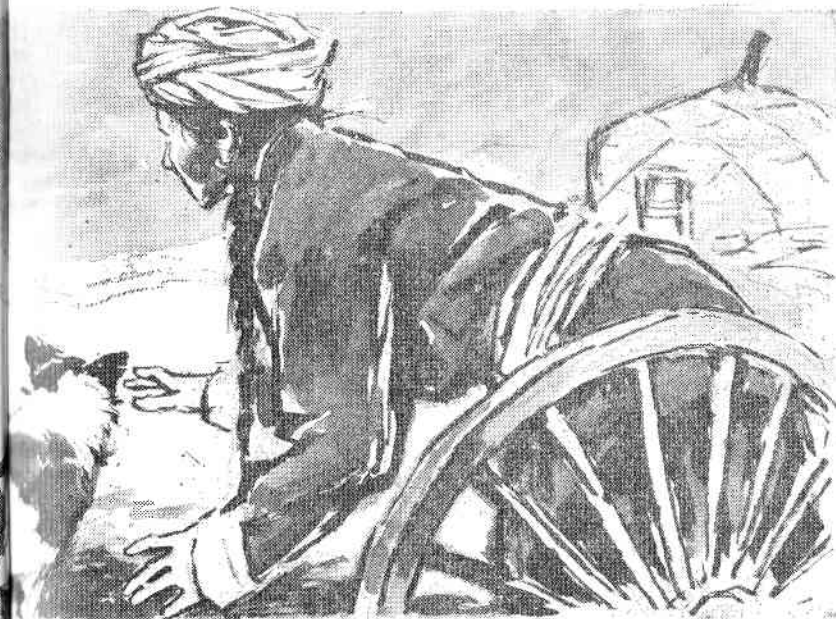
"We have only a little millet left, mother," Sevjidma said, putting some cow-dung in the brazier. "Shall we make do with thin gruel for supper?"

"Yes," her mother-in-law replied. "Our grain's nearly finished but my son's still not back. May Buddha preserve us and bring him back to us safely!"

Pouring some water into their cauldron, Sevjidma took out of their chest a leather bag, from which she ladled out a bowl of millet. About to pour it into the cauldron she heard the children outside crying:

"A troop of cavalry's coming, mum! Look, what a dust they've raised! How their rifles glitter!"

Sevjidma hurriedly poured the millet back into the bag and rushed out to see her boy Tuvsin running home.



"Look, so many!" he panted, pointing at the two files of approaching cavalry. "They must be bandits."

At once she ran back into the yurt, saying in a trembling voice, "It looks bad, mother! A big troop of cavalry's coming."

"Gracious Buddha... Heaven help us..." The old woman lost her nerve.

"Don't get flurried, mother! They're still a long way off," said Sevjidma soothingly as she removed the cauldron from the brazier. "And their ranks are so orderly, they don't look like bandits."

"Can they be the Mongolian Eighth Route Army?"

"Probably. I heard long ago they would be coming."

"Buddha preserve us! I'm told they smash all the images of Buddha, besides looting and carrying off cattle wherever they go. What shall we do? Where can we hide our Buddhas?" She was frightened out of her wits.

"Don't be afraid, mother. They're not likely to harm law-abiding

folk like us for no reason. But we'd better keep our millet and meat out of sight." With this Sevjidma carried their grain bag out of the yurt and hid it in a hole behind a corner of the ruined temple covering it with a slab of stone. When she returned, she found her mother-in-law wrapping up their statue of Buddha and sacrificial vessels in a tattered robe. Little Tuvsin, sitting near the brazier, was stuffing the remaining food in his bowl into his mouth. His mother snatched the bowl away and put it in the bottom of the chest. She had just swept some grains on the floor into the ashes, when she heard their dog barking and galloping hoofs closing in.

Sevjidma ran out to leash their dog as a dozen cavalry men led their sweating horses over to the yurt. Her heart sank at sight of these soldiers in their peaked caps and thick fur coats.

"How do you do? Is all well with your herds?" asked a tall soldier smiling.

"Yes, thank you." Her voice was scarcely audible. She gaped at him like a sheep confronted by a wolf.

"We are the People's Liberation Army." He held out his hand, but she fell back.

As the saying goes, "A Buddha seen for the first time is more frightening than a familiar devil." Sevjidma had never seen PLA men before. To her, soldiers of every sort were equally fearsome.

"I'm Meng Ho. Would you be so kind as to let us stay overnight here?"

Sevjidma could hardly believe her ears. Soldiers as well as bandits had always made free with the people's houses, food and other possessions. Why should he ask her permission?

"Have you any taboos that we should know?"

"No." She shook her head. "But my old mother-in-law suffers from nerves. Please, Your Lordships, don't frighten her."

Before Meng Ho could say anything, a young army man beside him burst out laughing. "What do you mean by 'Your Lordships'? We aren't lords, but the people's army."

Meng Ho checked his laughter with a severe glance. And Sevjidma turned to look at the thickset teenager with plump, rosy cheeks, barely taller than his rifle, who seemed a child beside the tall swarthy

soldier. At this moment little Tuvsin put his head out of the door to look. The youngster stooped to call laughingly, "Hullo there! Come on out, little chum." He caught hold of the boy's hand.

"Mum, mum. . . ." little Tuvsin screamed.

"Don't be scared." The young fellow let him go.

"I'm sorry, sir, but my son's afraid of soldiers." Sevjidma picked Tuvsin up and wiped away his tears, taking a few steps backwards.

"Pardon him, Your Lordships," called the old woman from the yurt. Then she came out to kneel before Meng Ho, who hastily helped her up.

"We're PLA men, old mother, like your children," he explained.

Trembling, with tears in her eyes, her lips quivering, the old woman stared at him.

"Here's Tuvsin, mother." Sevjidma led him over.

At once he clung to his grandmother's leg. She covered his head with her robe and withdrew a few steps.

"If you want to kill, Your Lordships, kill me! I've already turned sixty. I'm not afraid of death. But don't harm this child. There may be a law for putting people to death, but what has this boy done wrong? After living all these years I know what's what." By now she was quite incoherent.

"They haven't hurt him, mother. Let's go in." Supporting her, Sevjidma turned to Meng and added, "My mother was so frightened by soldiers in black before that she went crazy. Each time something scares her, her wits start wandering."

But the old woman, ignoring her, went on gesticulating and lamenting: "When the warlords started fighting, their soldiers in black killed my husband. But I didn't give them my son, however cruelly they beat me. . . . Later the Japs came. They killed both men and dogs. . . ."

The PIA fighters' hearts ached as they recalled those hard times, and Meng Ho took the old woman's trembling hand.

"Please go in, mother," he urged. "It's cold out here."

She brushed him aside and putting her hand on Sevjidma's shoulder went towards the yurt.

"Open the door, Chaganhu," Meng ordered the youngster.

Pulling open the door, Chaganhu, Meng and the others followed the women in. Then Meng explained to them the Party and Chairman Mao's nationalities policy and the PLA's discipline. Though a little relieved, the old woman still had her doubts and sat eyeing the soldiers in silence.

Soon Sevjidma had boiled milk tea. When she put bowls before the men she apologized, "Sorry, I've nothing to offer you but tea, because the bandits robbed us of all our millet and meat."

As they had eaten nothing since daybreak, the fighters drank their milk tea avidly. Seeing how hungry they were, the two women were on tenterhooks for fear they would demand food.

But Meng Ho, his tea finished, asked amiably, "Sister, we want to put up here for the time being, but we've brought very little grain with us, and the carts bringing more won't be here for several days. Can you tell me where we can find something to eat?"

"I'm telling you!" Meng's polite manner emboldened Sevjidma. "All the food we had was stolen by the bandits. If you don't believe me, you can search for it."

"Oh no! We're troops led by Chairman Mao, out to liberate the poor, and our discipline is strict. We'd never dream of searching — we shouldn't even have come in without your permission."

"I've seen all sorts of soldiers in my time," put in the old woman. "Excuse me for saying so, but they all come to a bad end. Sow the wind and reap the whirlwind. . . ."

"Don't talk nonsense, mother," Sevjidma cut her short. "They haven't bullied us, have they?"

After a while the fighters streamed out of the yurt, some to graze their horses, others taking forks and crates to collect cow-dung. This relieved the two women, and Sevjidma also went off to tend their own cows.

On the grassland, prior to this, when the herdsmen heard dogs barking they would ask, "Are there people coming?" And the children might answer "No, not people, but soldiers."

Indeed, at that time, there had been no great difference between "bandits" and "soldiers". No matter which they were, wherever

they went they spread death and destruction, killing off the cattle and plundering the people. Their arrival spelled disaster. However, these PLA men were not the common run of soldiers. They were so friendly that they wouldn't even use the villagers' cow-dung but went out to collect some themselves. Sevjidma was quite amazed. To satisfy her curiosity, after penning up the cattle she called on a neighbour to talk over the strange happenings of the day.

2

After surveying the terrain in the vicinity, Meng Ho was collecting cow-dung on his way back to Sevjidma's yurt when suddenly he bumped into a woman. The things she was carrying crashed to the ground, and a brass incense-burner, metal lamp, small bronze tripod and small Buddhist statues started rolling in every direction. Meng raised his eyes to see Sevjidma's mother-in-law gaping at him. Her hands were thrown out in dismay and her wrinkled face was ashen. Little Tuvsin was peeping at him from behind his granny.

"What's the matter, old mother?" Meng helped her pick up the statues and vessels and took them into the yurt, where he put them on the altar.

"I was taking them to the mountain, my lord," she faltered at last.

"Don't be afraid, mother. We Communists and the PLA believe in religious freedom," he assured her.

She remained standing there motionless as if she had not heard him. He helped her sit down, then patiently explained to her once more the Party's policy on religion.

"Is it true?" she asked.

"Of course. You are like our own mother. How can we cheat you?"

"You mean I may say my prayers as usual, do you? Oh, I've had my heart in my mouth since you arrived."

"Yes, the diehards spread rumours about us. The Eighth Routers smash statues of Buddha, rob you of your cattle, pressgang your men and rape your women, they say. But we are out to wipe out those reactionaries."

At this moment Sevjidma turned up. "We needn't have been so scared, mother," she said. "None of our neighbours' Buddhas has been touched. The PLA men didn't lay a finger on them."

Meng Ho was very pleased to hear Sevjidma put in a good word for them. Now that the old woman seemed reassured he left.

As soon as he had gone, the old mother sat down by her daughter-in-law and said softly, "These aren't like other soldiers. They're all good youngsters."

"I hear there's an officer billeted on our western neighbour. They told him they had no grain, and showed him some flesh from that horse of theirs which died of hunger. The officer said, 'That'll do — anything to stay out hunger.' So they cooked that carrion for the soldiers!"

"They must be mighty hungry," the old woman concluded. "That bandit who brought his woman here last time killed and ate our milch-cow though she was in calf, and beat and swore at us too. In comparison, they're Buddha's own troops — this lot. But what do you say, lass? Should we give them some of our grain?"

Seeing that her mother-in-law was sorry for them, Sevjidma thoughtfully stroked her child's head. At last she said: "We don't know when our boy's father will come home. If we eat up what we have now, we may have to go hungry later." She gave a deep sigh.

"They're soldiers all right, but human beings too." The soft-hearted old woman had forgotten her earlier fears. "Poor as we are, we have something to eat. How can we let them sleep on empty stomachs? It would really be too heartless!"

Sevjidma sympathized too and saw reason in her argument. But she remained silent, resting her chin in her hands.

3

The snow on the mountains had melted and was trickling down the slopes. Breezes redolent of spring carried over the humid fragrance of fresh grass thrusting up through the rich soil.

Meng Ho was having a smoke in front of a mound when along came some of his comrades who had eaten nothing all day and looked

famished. They lay down on the grass beside him, and he told them how the old woman had dropped her Buddhist statues on the ground at sight of him. His story raised a great laugh.

Suddenly Chaganhu asked, "Who were the soldiers in black? Why did they kill her husband?"

"My grandad used to tell me about the wars between soldiers in black and in yellow," said Meng Ho. "As you know, ours is a multi-national country; but all the labouring people were exploited and oppressed. The soldiers in black fought for the northern warlords, those in yellow for Mongolian lords. But there was no difference between them when it came to massacring the common people, whether Hans or Mongolians. We've seen the reactionary Kuomintang troops. Like those in black or in yellow, they oppress and exploit the Mongolian people as well. And in order to sully our PLA's reputation, they've invented many slanders. That's why we must carry out the three main rules of discipline and eight points for attention* in this newly liberated area. Let the people see what the PLA led by Chairman Mao are like."

Meng's speech reminded them of their past experiences. Some recalled their hardships in the pre-liberation days when they had been pressganged and beaten by henchmen of the puppet regime set up by the Japanese; others recollected how they had toiled and suffered under the Japanese imperialist rule. Only Chaganhu, too young to have been through much, listened to the rest open-mouthed.

The sun was setting, casting the shadow of the mountains over the plain. Blasts of chilly wind made the vast expanse of the grassland look desolate. A small herd of cattle filed slowly towards the village as the fighters, worn-out and famished, made their way back to the yurts.

*These were established by Chairman Mao for the Chinese People's Liberation Army. The three main rules of discipline are: 1) Obey orders in all your actions; 2) Do not take a single needle or piece of thread from the masses; and 3) Turn in everything captured.

The eight points for attention are: 1) Speak politely; 2) Pay fairly for what you buy; 3) Return everything you borrow; 4) Pay for anything you damage; 5) Do not hit or swear at people; 6) Do not damage crops; 7) Do not take liberties with women; and 8) Do not ill-treat captives.

Little by little, the villagers began to take to the PLA men and start chatting or joking with them. The old mother intrigued the fighters with tales of her own life over sixty years.

That night two men who had been out foraging came back empty-handed. The fighters stared at each other in disappointed silence. This was too much for the old woman, who glanced at her daughter-in-law as if to say, "Give them a few bowls of millet."

Strong-willed Sevjidma, who had never been cowed by the bandits' bluster or whips, now began to feel very put out and touched by the hungry look on these fighters' honest faces.

"Ai!" she sighed. "You've come all this way and are sleeping on empty stomachs — that makes us feel bad. But those vicious bandits killed off all our best cattle, leaving only a few feeble milch-cows and ewes still suckling their lambs. What's to be done?"

The firelight reflected the fighters' ruddy faces — faces that had braved bitter cold, violent wind and rainstorms. They now looked gaunt with hunger.

Going hungry was nothing new to these army men, but it was different this time because the next day they had to cross a desert. How could they do without food? Before long they lapsed into silence. Only Chaganhu went on playing with little Tuvsin.

"Suppose we eat a little of our rations, company leader?" a bearded man suggested.

"Hear, hear!" agreed Chaganhu. "We'll be eating them sooner or later anyway."

"No, nothing doing. No one's to touch his rations without permission from regimental headquarters," retorted Meng Ho firmly.

"So you have your own rations. Why don't you eat them now?" Sevjidma wondered.

"We're setting off to pursue the enemy through the desert for several days," Meng Ho explained. "We each have a bowl of fried millet. We're keeping that for an emergency, so as not to starve to death there."

"What a hard life they have!" The kind old woman turned to Sevjidma.

After a thoughtful silence Sevjidma went out. Presently she came back with their cauldron and put it on the brazier.

The old woman watched her approvingly and told the fighters, "We've had no word from our caravan which went out to fetch food, and we long ago ran out of grain. The other day we borrowed a bit from our neighbours, otherwise. . . ."

At this moment Sevjidma carried in a bulky black bundle. In one corner of the yurt she unwrapped it, eventually disclosing a little cloth bag which held some two litres of millet. When she was about to pour the contents into the cauldron, Meng Ho stopped her.

"What are you cooking so much for, sister?"

"For you. We can't let you sleep on empty stomachs."

"Is this all the grain you have?" asked Chaganhu.

Sevjidma nodded.

"Then we won't eat it, never!" the fighters cried.

Chaganhu snatched the millet bag from her and scolded, "What'll you have yourselves, if you cook it all for us?"

"Never mind. We won't die of hunger," deeply touched, Sevjidma insisted.

The PLA men's refusal moved the old woman to tears. As Chaganhu was still holding the bag, Sevjidma had to beg Meng Ho to let her cook a pot of gruel for all of them to share. When cooked, the army men ladled out the thickest portions for the old woman and her grandson, they and Sevjidma dividing up the rest.

That night the wind blew so hard, it seemed it might tear off the roof of the shabby yurt. But the fighters were so tired that they slept through the storm. Hearing Chaganhu murmuring in his dreams, the old woman gently put her padded quilt over him. "Ai, how about the boys outside?" she wondered. Going out, she found them covered with fur coats sleeping soundly with their saddles as their pillows.

4

It turned fine the next day. Some of the fighters went to tend their horses on the grassland. Others were sweeping the yard for their

hosts when they heard little Tuvsin crying. Chaganhu wanted to see what the matter was, then decided that after all it was none of his business. However, when the boy sobbed more loudly although his mother was doing her best to soothe him, Chaganhu could hold back no longer. He rushed into the yurt to find the tousle-haired boy, tears rolling down his pale cheeks, sobbing, "I'm hungry. . . ."

"There, there! Be a good boy. Don't cry any more," whispered Sevjidma. But little Tuvsin still wept, making his mother frantic. Chaganhu was deeply moved, but not willing — as a fighter — to shed tears in front of a woman, he hurried out of the yurt.

Though young, he was from a poor family and had experienced hardships. The year before Liberation his home district had had a drought. All his family's grain was stolen by the Japs, and for half a year they had to live on wild herbs. In the end his younger brother ate a poisonous herb and died within twenty-four hours. Before that, Chaganhu had carried him on his back in summer to the river bank to play. What a lively, lovable boy he had been! Every time he saw a boy of three, Chaganhu would say, "If my brother were still alive, he'd be just like that dear little rascal."

Running to his horse he untied his ration bag from his saddle. At this juncture, Meng Ho and some others walked past him leading their horses. Chaganhu promptly hid his bag behind his back, remembering the order that without explicit permission no one was to eat his rations. He hesitated. But again he heard Tuvsin whimpering, "Mum, I'm hungry." This cry cut him to the heart.

"When my comrades eat their rations, I won't ask for a share or tell anybody I'm hungry," he decided. Then he rushed into the yurt and taking a bowl from the table filled it with his fried millet.

"Look here, little brother, don't cry any more."

Little Tuvsin at once stopped weeping. Wiping his tears, he reached for the bowl.

"What are you doing?" Sevjidma and her mother-in-law hurried forward.

"You are going to go to the desert, aren't you?" Sevjidma added as she snatched the bowl from her son and handed it to Chaganhu,



who refused it and gave it back. But the two women also refused to take it.

The old woman grasped his sleeve with her trembling withered hand. "You've only one bowl of millet, but you're so kind you want to give it to us. Just pretend I've accepted it, sonny, and take it back. . . ." She was too moved to go on.

"We have food, so how shameful it would be to take a stranger's last bowl of fried millet!" Sevjidma reflected, her face flushing crimson, tears swimming in her eyes. She felt torn between gratitude, shame and distress. Now little Tuvsin left off crying as though he had understood their argument and ran and clung to Chaganhu's leg.

As they were saddling their horses, Meng Ho and his men overheard the commotion inside the yurt and went in. Sevjidma told them what had happened. Chaganhu bowed his head in silence like a mischievous boy caught out.

"You're right, Chaganhu," Meng approved. He then gave the bowl of fried millet to Sevjidma.

"We didn't give you anything to eat. How can we have the heart to accept your last bit of grain?" she objected, refusing to take it.

But after a long dispute, the old woman and her daughter-in-law accepted Chaganhu's rations.

After the fighters went out, the two women decided that they must give Chaganhu something. As they had nothing ready at hand, the best they could do was secretly return him his fried millet.

The PLA men were about to set out. Chaganhu hated to part with little Tuvsin. He let the boy mount his horse, then told him some jokes. At parting, he held him in his arms and kissed him. "When we come back, we'll bring you the black-bearded bandit who bullied you," he promised. "What do you say to that, eh?"

"Gracious Buddha! Do anything but bring back that monster!" his granny cut in. "I never want to set eyes on him again."

The fighters burst out laughing.

The whole village turned out to see them off. The old people prayed for them as though they were their own flesh and blood.

Red flags fluttering, the impressive cavalcade galloped off past the



clear lake towards the remote grassland. Dust eddied up behind them, rising up into the blue sky.

Long after the cavalry had left, the villagers who had given them a send-off still lingered by the road talking to each other.

"They're really good men!"

"Just like Buddha's own troops."

"I've never seen such a good army. One lives and learns!"

"They said the Mongolian Eighth Routers were bloody savages," put in Sevjidma. "That was slander spread by the bandits."

"Yes. No one believes them any longer," added an old man.

"No one could help liking those youngsters," chimed in the old woman. "All so honest and well-behaved."

"Who's their top man?"

"They say they're led by the Party."

"The Party? Who's he? A Han or a Mongolian?"

"The Party means the Communist Party. Its leader's Chairman Mao."

When they reached home, Sevjidma and her mother-in-law found little Tuvsin lying on the chest.

"Here, mum, look here." Smilingly he showed them his bowl. Going forward, they saw a bowl of fried millet.

"Ah! When did he return it?" exclaimed Sevjidma.

"When you were out, that PLA brother gave it me. He told me, 'Mum's the word.'"

5

A few days later Sevjidma was informed that an old man who had gone with her husband and the others to fetch food had been robbed by bandits and returned barefoot. The shocking news horrified her. To confirm it she ran straight off to see the old man. Not until midnight did she come home.

According to the old man, one evening their caravan pitched camp on their way home. At midnight a gang of mounted men rode up and surrounded their tent. They swore at them in Han and Mongolian, then trussed them up. But as the bandits were careless the wily

old man had slipped out from under the tent and crawled away through the deep grass and undergrowth. He ran for days and nights across the desert till finally he reached home. He did not know what had become of his companions.

The old woman hearing this lost her wits again and could neither eat nor sleep, but kept running out to see if her son was coming. Sevjidma's sunken eyes and thin, haggard face betrayed the depth of her worry.

All the villagers whose husbands or fathers had gone with the caravan hoped the PLA cavalry would capture the bandits. They longed anxiously for their victorious return and were prepared to offer them their salted meat and other delicacies.

One day a voice sang out: "Our PLA's back!"

Sevjidma hastened out to see a cavalcade galloping into the village through swirling dust. Without delay she and her mother-in-law put their cauldron on the brazier, cut up meat and took food from the hiding-place. The vanguard of the cavalry were already watering their horses by a well, after which they would ride west along the highway. The troops behind soon arrived at the well too.

Sevjidma flew to the well for news of her husband. Her mother-in-law tagged behind, holding her grandson with one hand, a staff with the other.

"How are you, neighbours? And your cattle and herds?" Meng Ho greeted them, striding forward, deeply moved. Strong and broad-shouldered as before, he looked thinner and older than a fortnight ago.

"We're all well, thanks," answered Sevjidma listlessly. "Did you come across our caravan?"

Meng Ho before answering gripped her hand tightly. "I know what you mean. Your husband Brother Jambol and his friends are all coming back, safe and sound. They'll soon be home."

"I heard they had been robbed by the bandits!"

"But we wiped the bandits out the next day, so they lost nothing."

"Hear that, neighbours?" cried Sevjidma, excited as a girl. "Our men are coming back, safe and sound!"

At this, all the villagers came running too and crowded round Meng Ho to shake hands with him. The old woman recognized him and drew him to her, brushing away her tears to kiss him fondly.

On seeing Tuvsin, Meng Ho picked him up asking, "Have you been missing your father?"

"Yes, I have. Where's Brother Chaganhu? Has he brought me the bearded bandit?"

"You didn't forget him, eh?" Meng Ho pressed his cheek to the boy's, pointing at the captives. "Look there, can you tell me which of them bullied you?"

Little Tuvsin immediately ran away. As she shook hands with the fighters, Sevjidma looked in vain for the young soldier with ruddy cheeks, so full of fun. "Where's Chaganhu?" she asked.

No one replied. She thought that perhaps, being short, he was hidden in the crowd. She then went up to Meng Ho who was watering his horse with some other men. Catching hold of his sleeve she said, "Come home with me. A meal's ready."

"Thank you very much, sister. But we can't this time, because we have to cross the desert today."

Many villagers also pressed them to stay to dinner, but they found it impossible to detain the PLA men with their strict sense of discipline.

Disappointed, Sevjidma silently stood there with mixed feelings.

The cavalry set out again, but still there was no sign of Chaganhu. "Where on earth can he be, that dear youngster?" the old woman wondered.

Just then, Meng Ho came to say goodbye to her. Wiping her tears she held his hand in hers. "Without you lads, my son could never have come back. I shall miss you just as much as my own son." She was too moved to go on.

"Where's Chaganhu? Tell me, please!" Sevjidma insisted. "I want to see him."

After a pause, Meng Ho replied, "He distinguished himself in this battle but got badly wounded — he's lying in that cart which has passed."

"May Buddha preserve him! I do hope he won't..." Tears sprang to Sevidma's eyes.

"Don't worry. He's too well-steelcd a fighter to die."

The old woman and her daughter-in-law felt relieved, as did their fellow-villagers although disappointed not to have seen Chaghanu. As Sevidma saw off the bronzed cavalry men so honest and unassuming, she shed fresh tears, while her mother-in-law and small son watched wistfully.

The horsemen galloped away, fading into the horizon. Only a pall of dust could be seen in the sky.

In the warm spring afternoon sunshine, the villagers seemed reluctant to go home. Suddenly someone shouted, "Hurrah! Our caravan's coming!" Turning their eyes to the east, they saw their caravan skirting the clear lake at the foot of the green mountain, the camels making great strides towards their village. In a twinkling, all was animation again. The children dashed off, cheering, to meet their fathers.

Sevidma followed behind, her heart throbbing fast at the prospect of this reunion with her dear husband whom she had loved since girlhood. At that moment, her happiness defied description!

Wild geese in arrow-head formation winged through the azure sky towards the cool, quiet north. From the mountain valleys floated the calls of cuckoos. All this indicated that dread winter was past and warm spring with its fresh burgeoning was at hand.

1957

Illustrated by Tung Chen-sheng

Poems

Hsu Pao-kuei

The Dawn

With the coming of dawn the cock crows
And, as the firmament grows brighter,
The morning sun emerges from the sea.
The breath of the balmy breeze grows warmer,
Unfolding countless blossoms on a thousand trees.

All eight hundred million of us Chinese rejoice,
Charging over the land like galloping steeds,
Or like ships braving the wind and speeding on,
Pointing to the red flag held high before us,
We see the brightness of our future path.

This poem was written to celebrate the convocation of the Fifth National People's Congress and the Fifth National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.

Chao Pu-chu

Hearing Chairman Hua's Report

Like a peal of thunder heralding the spring,
All over China people hail the convening of the congress.
We rejoice that all miasmas are dispersed
And everywhere the jade firmament is bright.
Ah! Our brilliant leader, Chairman Hua!
The whole army obeys your orders,
Galoping horses achieve great feats of valour.
As the east wind blows, the red flags fly,
Tachai is a vast ocean of magnificent crops,
From Panchihhua iron-ore and coal flow in an endless stream;
The whole universe re-echoes your clarion call,
Everywhere flowers vie with each other in splendour;
We shall soar like eagles over limitless miles.

This poem was written after the poet heard the report of Chairman Hua Kuo-feng on the work of the government at the Fifth National People's Congress.

After sailing through many a tempest,
We hail our glorious victory.
Following tradition, we'll open a new page of history,
And grasping the key link unfold our mighty plan.
Ah! Our brilliant leader Chairman Hua!
The clapping of hands, like the roar of a tidal wave,
Conveys the wishes of our people.
Continuing in the footsteps of past revolutionaries
We'll write a new page in the history of our land.
Our soaring ambition o'ertops the billowing sea;
Our fighters strive to scale the greatest heights,
Our people work unitedly to transform the world;
We shall uphold the law and improve morality;
Throughout our land a new spirit is flowing.



Jung Yi-jen

Hailing the People's Congress

With the melting of the snow magpies announce the return of
spring,
And flowers begin to blossom in the fresh east wind.
High mountains cannot deter those determined to remove them;
On stormy seas we rely on the ability of the helmsman.
All past evils have gone like clouds before the wind;
All over our land new heroes are appearing.
Unwilling to stay idle I long to make some small contribution;
May our great country remain red for endless generations.

This poem was written to hail the Fifth National People's Congress and the Fifth National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.

Hu Chiao-mu

Thinking of Premier Chou

You gave your last drop of blood to transform our land;
Even in raging storms your faith in the future never faltered.
As a great leader in both war and peace,
Your concern was for the nations of the whole wide world.
Our abiding regret is that through the tricks of evil gangsters
Your death should have been hastened; a premier unsurpassed!
A revolutionary model to the last you handed on the torch;
Our people's love and tears will remain an everlasting monument.
Your virtue and achievements will never be forgotten
Till seas run dry, earth crumbles and the heavens grow cold.

Besieged in His Palace

Chapter 33

Two months flashed past, during which the emperor received the news that Li Tzu-cheng had broken through the encirclement in the Shanglo Mountains and gone to western Hupeh. He angrily criticized Cheng Tsung-chien, the governor of the Shensi border regions, for allowing Li Tzu-cheng to escape. He ordered Yang Ssu-chang to send troops to prevent Li Tzu-cheng and Chang Hsien-chung from joining forces. Yet even as he wrote, the emperor knew that as his demands could not effectively be carried out, in addition to his money worries, he now had more problems.

Because of his severe treatment of the marquis, the emperor felt that none of the other imperial relatives would dare refuse if he requested a loan from them. Deciding not to discuss this matter further with his officials, he disclosed it inadvertently to a few trusted eunuchs.

When his intention became known, the imperial relatives were panic-stricken. The news reached the ears of the empress not through

the palace eunuchs but through her father. She had sent her eunuch, Liu, to her family with a gift and her father, the Earl of Chiating, secretly asked Liu if he had heard the news. Liu later reported this to the empress and, after confirming its truth with the palace eunuchs, the empress too became very concerned.

Another matter causing her anxiety was the affair of the disgraced concubine Tien. Part of her fears were for her own safety, as since the banishment of Tien to the Chihsiang Palace, the emperor had grown more morose. A month previously, he would occasionally visit the empress or stay the night at her palace, but recently he sought solitude in his own palace, brooding over reports, or pacing around his chamber, when he was not engaged at court sessions or talking to his officials. He rarely visited the empress' palace or his concubines, nor would he summon any of them to his palace. The empress was worried lest the emperor damage his health through his melancholy mood. He had to hold up the country which was falling to pieces. But what worried her more was the possibility that the emperor might decide to select more concubines. There had been some speculation in the palace concerning this, and the maids had remarked that the emperor was considering the idea. The empress was opposed to another beauty joining the imperial household. Tien, though beautiful, had been chosen by the empress herself in the first year of her husband's reign, so that the concubine was indebted to her. Spoilt and sometimes arrogant, yet Tien never dared offend the empress. A year older than Tien, the empress and the concubine shared the emperor's favours. Now thirty years old, the empress was afraid that a much younger, beautiful and accomplished girl would monopolize the emperor's favour, making her situation more precarious. The emperor's good graces were unpredictable as in the case of Tien, when in the morning he had promised eternal devotion yet by the afternoon she had been disgraced. Maids had reported how, enraged, the emperor had thought of having her killed or stripped of her rank, but had desisted and treated her leniently because of her children. Perhaps she might one day share Tien's fate. There were many such precedents in history of empresses being banished, dismissed or killed.

The news that the emperor was considering borrowing money again from the imperial relatives increased the fears of the empress since she suspected that her father would be asked to set the example. She had heard that when the emperor had first asked the marquis, people had grumbled that it was unfair not to start with a closer relative like the empress' wealthy father. Her father, being miserly, would never agree to a generous contribution, and should her father offend the emperor, not only her father, but also she herself might get into difficulties. If the emperor had a new young concubine, her position would be precarious and her son might be replaced as crown prince and heir. Tien, though arrogant, had never been ambitious for position, but a new concubine might try to oust both the empress and Tien. Thus the empress sympathized with Tien and supported her.

After two days the empress had decided both to warn her father not to offend her husband and that she must help Tien to effect a reconciliation with the emperor. She knew the emperor missed Tien, but as Tien had no one to speak on her behalf, he was not able to recall her and so had been toying with the idea of a new concubine. If she now interceded for Tien, he might be pleased and Tien would further feel in her debt.

It was a cool, cloudy, windy, summer's day. After breakfast, the empress ordered a maid, Liu Ching-fen, to take some things to the Chungtsui Palace to the crown prince and see if he was studying seriously. Then she called for her sedan-chair to go to the Yunggho Palace. Liu An, her chief eunuch, was surprised and bowing suggested:

"Although the flowers are in blossom there and the palace is cool, yet it may be too disorderly for Your Majesty to enjoy the flowers. Would Your Majesty postpone your visit until another day?"

The empress replied: "Don't bother to tidy it. I only want to have a quick look."

Since she usually asked the concubine Yuan to accompany her to see the flowers, Liu An suggested: "Shall I inform Her Highness Yuan?"

"No. I don't wish anyone with me."

Seated in her sedan-chair she left the palace escorted by a large number of her eunuchs and maids, who were astonished at her sudden decision and her desire to be alone.

At the Yunggho Gate, the empress left her sedan-chair and went to inspect the flowers, giving a few instructions to the eunuch in charge of the garden about rearranging some flowers according to her wishes within three days. Leaving the palace, she decided to visit the crown prince, whose palace was nearby, and ascertain if he was studying every day. Thus she did not allow her eunuchs to announce her arrival and sent most of her escort back. As she approached the Chungtsui Palace, her maid, Liu Ching-fen, whom she had sent there earlier, happened to come out. She knelt by the path. The empress asked her:

"What is the boy doing?"

The maid hesitated, then replied: "After his studies he went to play in the courtyard."

Saying nothing the empress did not allow her sedan-chair to stop but was carried through the inner gate. She had already left her chair before the eunuchs had time to announce her arrival, and her face was stern as she watched the crown prince, his eunuchs and maids hastily kneel down in the courtyard. After a moment's silence, she said severely to Liu:

"He has obviously been playing for a long time. How dare you lie to me!"

Although just a girl of sixteen, the maid knew the strict palace rules and that she could be punished with death at any time. Seeing the empress in such a rage, she prostrated herself on the ground trembling, too afraid to reply. The empress laughed coldly, her eyes on the crown prince, and then addressed her:

"Very well, since your mistake is not too serious, I shall be lenient. Slap your face!"

The girl slapped her cheeks with her hands with all her force. After ten blows her face was swollen. The empress, appeased, ordered: "Get up!" Hastily kowtowing three times and thanking the empress, she rose and withdrew. Seated on a chair, the empress then started to scold the crown prince:

"You are of imperial birth, a son of the emperor. As eldest boy and future sovereign and master of the empire how can you stoop to wrestle with slaves? Where is your dignity? Though you are still young, you should never conduct yourself in a manner unbecoming to your rank. Even untitled sons of the emperor should always remember their high status."

Not wishing to continue her scolding, the empress blamed mainly the eunuchs and maids. She looked at the young eunuch who had wrestled with her son and fallen on top of him, and told him to raise his head. He was a young, handsome, athletic, twelve-year-old, with an intelligent expression in his eyes. He was pale with fright. The empress asked him:

"Slave, were you aware with whom you were wrestling?"

The boy prostrated himself before her, saying: "Your Majesty, I was wrestling with His Highness. I deserve death! I deserve death!"

The empress snorted: "So you knew he was the crown prince! You slaves can play with him after his studies are over, but how dare you wrestle with him? And how dare you fall on top of him? Though he is but a child, yet he is master of this palace, heir to the throne, and you are his slave!"

The young eunuch kowtowed repeatedly: "I deserve death! I deserve death!"

The empress turned to Liu An who accompanied her and ordered: "Take him away and have him beaten to death!"

Hearing his death sentence, the young eunuch sobbed and begged for mercy, appealing to the crown prince to plead for him. As the crown prince, Tzu-lang, was fond of playing with him, he kowtowed and begged his mother's pardon:

"Your Majesty, please be kind to him. It was all my fault. He's just a slave and was too afraid to wrestle with me, but when I cursed him, he was forced to do so."

Glaring at him, the empress snapped: "Be quiet!" Then she urged the eunuch beside her: "Hurry! Tell them to take him away and kill him immediately!"

Since all the servants knew that the crown prince was telling the truth, they knelt down imploring the empress to show mercy and spare the boy's life. The empress, still angry, was inflexible and kept the crown prince kneeling also. The young maid, whose cheeks were still smarting from the slapping, knowing the young eunuch's innocence, surreptitiously tugged at the chief maid's skirt, pleading silently with her tear-filled eyes, in the hope that she would intercede. Though the chief maid, Wu, treated her like her own sister, she ignored the girl. Then Liu tugged at her clothes again until Wu responded by glancing at her, biting her lip and winking. Then Liu understood. Wu, who was trusted by the empress, had told her intimate friends that when the emperor spent the night at the empress' palace, she would always appear very meek and gentle. If on such occasions the servants made some suggestions, they would not be reprimanded. If, however, the empress was acting on her dignity, they should be particularly cautious with their words and actions. And when she was annoyed a careless remark or action could cause enormous repercussions. Wu advised them to remain silent even if the heavens collapsed around them. By recognizing the danger signals, servants could avoid trouble in the palace and might even live to leave such a dangerous place. Liu seeing Wu's look of warning shivered, knowing that further pleading would be useless.

The empress, however, hesitated because of the servants' intercession and then decided not to insist on her order. If the emperor should hear of this, it would not benefit either the position of the crown prince or herself. Yet she wished to remove the young eunuch from the palace, since he was handsome and intelligent. As a constant companion of the crown prince, he might later influence his master to neglect his state duties for pleasure, while he usurped the real power like the eunuch Wei Chung-hsien in the last reign. The empress announced that although she would spare the boy's life because of their pleas, he was to be dismissed and go to Changping to guard the imperial sepulchres, never to enter the prince's palace again. Thinking the young eunuch would be grateful for such leniency, the empress was nonplussed when the boy wept and cried:

"Your Majesty, please allow me to kill myself here. I do not wish to go to Changping."

Astonished she asked: "Why should you prefer death?"

Prostrating himself on the ground and sobbing, the boy refused to speak. He came from Hochien Prefecture which supplied most of the Ming-dynasty eunuchs. Three years earlier, his destitute father had taken the advice of some relatives and bound the boy. Though his son pleaded and screamed, he had had him castrated. Six months later a relative had brought him to Peking and through some friends who knew the palace eunuchs the boy had been accepted into the imperial service. For a year he had served the crown prince. Although a boy, he was nevertheless sensitive, proud and intelligent. After his castration at the age of nine, he had attempted several times to drown himself in a well, but had been saved and carefully watched by the adults. After entering the palace, he had slowly become reconciled to his situation. He began to understand that but for his family starving, his parents would not have been forced first to sell his sister and then have him castrated. He remembered seeing his mother weeping nights over this. He felt that by sacrificing himself, he could save his family from starvation. And he knew, after he had entered the palace, that many boys failed to be accepted and had to go to monasteries and work in the bath-houses attached to them as attendants for the palace eunuchs. Compared with such boys, he knew he was more fortunate. When he had been chosen to serve the crown prince, he had felt proud and wished to do his work well, behaving respectfully to all his seniors, hoping that if he had a successful career he could help his family. But banishment to Changping dashed all his hopes and so he preferred death. Seeing the boy's resistance to her order, the empress was convinced that he should not remain in the palace and so she said to her chief eunuch:

"Since the young fool does not wish to go to Changping, send him to guard the tombs in the Western Hills."

Liu An and the other senior eunuchs knew that this meant a demotion, watching over the lesser tombs of princes, princesses, imperial concubines and others. They hastily pleaded for him and criticized him: "Her Majesty has been most merciful, sparing you from death

and ordering you to go to Changping. For such beneficence, thank Her Majesty and go." The boy, knowing it was hopeless, kowtowed his gratitude to the empress, then kowtowed to the crown prince and chief eunuchs of both palaces. A eunuch helped him to pack his belongings and he left.

The empress told her son to rise and then addressed the maid who had watched him wrestling: "You are several years older than your master. I chose you to serve the prince because I thought you had more sense and were educated. Yet when he wrestled with the slave in such an unseemly way, not only did you fail to stop them, but you also clapped your hands in glee when the prince fell down. Do you think you deserve punishment for this?"

The maid, well acquainted with all the palace hypocrisies, intrigues and petty jealousies, knew that one could become a victim of them at any time. While the empress had been dealing with the young eunuch, she had made up her mind. When she heard the empress' query, she immediately kowtowed and replied:

"Your slave deserves a thousand deaths. I beg Your Majesty to be merciful and spare my life. I wish to go to the Takaohsuan Hall to become a priestess, where I shall offer incense and chant sutras to pray for Your Majesties' long life and happiness."

The empress had noticed that the girl was pretty and older than the crown prince and she feared that in a couple of years the girl might attract the prince and become his favourite concubine. She had wanted to remove her from the palace and so, using this incident as a pretext, she nodded and said:

"It is good that you wish to become a priestess, your request is granted. Go there at once. You are pardoned for your erroneous behaviour."

The maid kowtowed her gratitude to the empress and then to the crown prince, the other chief eunuchs and maids, before leaving to pack.

The empress then proceeded to criticize some other maids and eunuchs. The palace's chief eunuch, Wang Ming-li, a trustworthy and honest man, had gone to the emperor's palace with some of the crown prince's calligraphy, and so was absent during the wrestling

match. The empress warned him to be more vigilant, but did not punish him. Telling them not to inform the emperor of the incident, she returned to her palace.

The next morning, the emperor, bored with his surroundings, went to visit the empress, who accompanied him to the courtyard, watching the maids gathering jasmine and wondering how she could plead for the concubine Tien. Suddenly they both looked up hearing the pleasant sound of tinkling bells. In the clear blue sky, a flock of mainly white and a few gray or speckled doves, hovered over the palace and then soared higher and higher until they finally disappeared into the west. Although they had vanished the faint sound of the silver bells attached to their necks could be heard. They knew these birds belonged to the concubine Yuan, who had a platform from which she released the birds on a fine day. The empress smiled and said to the emperor:

"Your Majesty, you say you are bored in your palace and wish to amuse yourself, but that you don't know where. Since you hardly ever visit the concubine Yuan and others do not attract you, can Your Majesty think of somewhere you would like to go?"

Shaking his head, the emperor sighed. He really wanted to discuss the problems of raising money for the troops and of the insurgents in the Szechuan-Hupeh border regions, but he desisted not wishing palace ladies to interfere in affairs of state. The empress, not yet daring to mention the concubine Tien, began by talking about Yuan:

"Last summer Your Majesty admired a blue gauze dress worn by Lady Yuan on a moonlit night and mentioned it to me the next day. Since Your Majesty is too weary to deal with state affairs, why not visit her and she can wear the same dress?"

"No. I am not interested."

"Lady Yuan entered the palace at the same time as Lady Tien, both chosen by us. Though Lady Yuan is not such a beauty, yet her looks are distinguished. Because she is gentle, quiet and not vivacious, Your Majesty may find her uninteresting. Yet these are fine qualities." As she watched the emperor's expression, she smiled and add-

ed: "I know somebody else whom I am sure Your Majesty will find more entertaining. Shall I send a maid to fetch her?"

"Whom do you mean?"

Smiling ingratiatingly, she replied: "In the past she was too spoilt and arrogant, and she was wrong to speak for the marquis and his family. But after two months of banishment and seclusion, she has repented her faults. She is the most talented, musical and artistic, good in chess and calligraphy, as well as the most intelligent and sensitive of the imperial concubines. May I bring her to Your Majesty that she may apologize for her mistakes?"

The emperor, longing to re-instate Tien, knew that her punishment was common knowledge and felt he should not appear too eager to have her back lest the marquis' family and the other imperial relatives felt encouraged. After a silence, he said slowly:

"Today I am too busy. We can discuss that later."

Just then, Wang, the chief eunuch, came to report that several imperial relatives, including the prince consort Kung, had come to see the emperor and were waiting in the Wenhua Hall. The emperor inquired:

"Who else is there?"

"Liu Wen-ping, the Marquis of Hsinlo, Chang Kuo-chi, the old earl, and Jan Hsing-jang, the old prince consort."

"Are they here to plead for Li Kuo-jui's son?"

"Probably."

"Then tell them that if they came for that purpose, I do not wish to see them."

After Wang had withdrawn, the emperor thought of his sick youngest son Tzu-huan, child of the concubine Tien. When he was feeling depressed, he would have this child, whom he loved, come to play with him. The emperor had not seen the boy for a week because of his illness, and every day he had anxiously sent a servant to inquire after him, while the imperial physicians attended their young patient twice a day. The day before he had heard that his son's fever had dropped. He asked the empress:

"Is Tzu-huan any better today?"

"This morning Lady Tien sent a maid to say that after taking some medicine last night he is better, though he still has a slight fever."

Angrily the emperor swore: "Those imperial physicians are damn fools! What's the matter with them?"

Smiling the empress answered: "Your Majesty knows the popular saying that there are three kinds of fakes in the capital: the soups from the imperial kitchens; the weapons from the government armoury; and the prescriptions from the imperial physicians. Five physicians were sent in the past days to attend to Tzu-huan, but our best imperial physicians cannot measure up to doctors outside the palace, and our rules prevent us from consulting the latter."

The emperor smiled at the joke and then shook his head sadly. To amuse her husband, the empress told her maids to summon two musicians, Fan and Hsueh, to play the lute. These two girls had been taught by Tien and were her best pupils. After hearing *Autumn Moon in the Han Palace*, the emperor felt melancholy, so the empress seized the chance to ask him in a gentle voice:

"Your Majesty, since their playing is not as accomplished as Lady Tien's, perhaps I could call her here to play?"

The emperor shook his head, saying nothing. The empress ordered the musicians to retire and have some refreshments and then she told the servants to withdraw. She turned to the emperor:

"Your Majesty is not taking proper care of yourself, yet the fate of the state is in your hands. If you remain in this melancholy mood and your health is impaired, how can such a difficult situation be resolved?"

Sighing, the emperor remained silent.

Pressing home her advantage, the empress continued: "The flowers at the Yungbo Gate are in better bloom than in previous years. May I order the servants to prepare for our visit the day after tomorrow, when Your Majesty, Lady Yuan and I can go to enjoy the blossoms?"

Not wishing to refuse her, the emperor nodded.

After her husband had left, the empress wished to retire, but noticed that the chief eunuch of the crown prince's palace, Wang, was whispering something to Liu An in the courtyard. She sent a maid to

summon Wang to inquire about their conversation. Wang had come to report that the young eunuch who had been banished to Changping had drowned himself in the canal on leaving the Peian Gate, but Liu had dissuaded him from bothering the empress with such trifling business because she had so many urgent matters occupying her mind. Wang knelt before the empress and smiled ingratiatingly:

"I heard from the emperor's palace this morning that last night, His Majesty saw the crown prince's calligraphy exercises of the last ten days and was so pleased that he smiled. I therefore came immediately to report this to Your Majesty."

Thinking this was the truth, she smiled and told her maid, Wu, to fetch some satin, brocade and sweetmeats to give as rewards to the servants in the crown prince's palace as well as some gifts for her son.

Two days later, after breakfast, the empress was helped by her maids to dress in her new costume. According to Ming etiquette, palace ladies never wore white, and only the emperor would wear plain silk. Two years earlier, the empress had worn a gown of white gauze without any ornament before the emperor, who instead of criticizing her, was delighted and remarked: "You look like the Goddess of Mercy." Since then the empress had often worn white dresses and skirts in summer, setting the fashion for other palace ladies, and so the old tradition had been modified.

The night's rain made the trees seem greener. The empress, wearing a white dress and skirt, was without her tiara, but had instead a cluster of jasmine flowers in her hair and another pinned to her frock surrounded by pearls. Her maids in colourful costumes carried feather fans, round silk fans, yellow umbrellas and hampers to accompany the empress in her sedan-chair to the emperor's palace. At the Jihching Gate, the concubine Yuan awaited her. The empress entered the palace and greeted the emperor, and then both went by sedan-chairs to the Yungbo Gate. There the emperor slowly led the way into the garden followed by the empress, Yuan and a large number of servants. In the garden were all kinds of exotic plants and flowers, as well as bowls of rare species of goldfish. In one corner was a trellis with climbing beans shading a wicker table and four wicker chairs. On

the table were an Ihsing tea-pot made by some famous craftsman and four Ihsing tea-cups. This elegant, simple, rustic atmosphere was in accord with the tastes of the aristocracy and literati. The trellis was separated from the garden by a fence and a wicker gate, upon which were climbing plants such as morning-glory and dodder. This retreat had been designed by the empress in spring evoking her childhood impressions of her home in Ihsing. She had also ordered an ancient lyre and a sandal-wood stand to be placed by some rocks under an old pine tree, with an ancient bronze incense-burner and a blue-and-white porcelain stool.

Bored with all the elaborate ceremonies, the monotonous red walls and yellow glazed tiles and a desk laden with gloomy reports, the emperor exclaimed delightedly at the refreshing scene. Seeing this, the empress smiled and said:

"Since Your Majesty rarely comes here to visit the flowers, it is to be regretted that Lady Tien has not accompanied us. Her seclusion in the Chihsiang Palace has made her contrite and long to see Your Majesty again. May I send a maid to fetch her?"

The emperor neither consented nor refused. Smiling at Yuan, the empress immediately sent a maid with Yuan's sedan-chair to summon Tien.

She soon arrived, dressed plainly and without any ornament, save for a pink rose in her hair. After curtsying to Their Majesties, she greeted Yuan and then taking her hand went to stand behind the empress. Glancing at her, the emperor was struck by her beauty, but pretended to be disinterested. He could not however eliminate the faint suggestion of a smile that played upon his lips. Tien avoiding his eyes lowered her head and fought back her tears. The empress anxious to please the emperor suggested:

"Lady Tien, as His Majesty rarely comes here to enjoy the flowers, please play a tune for him."

Bowing Tien replied: "Your Majesty's wish will be obeyed." Then she spoke to a maid: "Please go to my palace and fetch my lute."

The empress interjected: "There is no need. In my palace I had an ancient lyre which once belonged to the Northern Sung

palace and which has an inscription on it by Emperor Hui-tsung. It is over there under that pine tree. Go and play it and since I have no use for it, I shall give it to you as a present."

"I thank Your Majesty for the gift." Tien broke down sobbing, the tears flowing down her cheeks as she knelt.

She then went to the rocks and tuned the lyre, sitting quietly to regain her composure and forget her sorrows. Though less skilled in playing the seven-stringed lyre than the lute, she still had no equal among the palace ladies. To please the emperor she started playing *A Visit to Fairyland*, a piece composed by the emperor himself some years before. Though dull, repetitious and colourless, after it was finished all the servants knelt before the emperor exclaiming: "Marvelous! Long live the emperor!" Then Lady Tien paused to retune the lyre and began playing *The Sorrows of Wang Chao-chun*, a tune about a palace maid banished by a Han emperor. Her audience listened raptly, without moving except to exchange meaningful looks with each other. Even the leaves seemed to have stopped their rustling. As Tien sat playing, a wreath of smoke from the incense-burner rose before her. When finished, she rose and bowing to Their Majesties said:

"My technique is poor and since my banishment I have not practised so that my fingers are less supple and I cannot play well. I tried to do my best, but it was not good enough. I hope Your Majesties will forgive me."

Smiling the empress asked her husband: "Your Majesty, what did you think of her playing?"

"Not bad, not bad." The emperor nodded, his heart full of mixed feelings of pleasure and sadness.

The empress knew that Tien had deliberately played the tune to move the emperor's heart, but she feared lest he became annoyed. Turning to Tien she said:

"I remember that His Majesty liked to hear you play *The Wild Geese Alight on the Shore*. Why not play that now for His Majesty?"

Kneeling Tien answered: "I should like to obey Your Majesty's order, but because of my child's illness I fear I am too troubled to

play such a serene tune. I could not give a good performance. I hope Your Majesties will excuse me."

Immediately the emperor asked: "Isn't Tzu-huan improving?"

Suppressing a sob, Tien replied: "One day he seems a little better, then the next he is worse. The medicine seems to have no effect. I'm fasting and praying for his recovery."

The emperor then decided to go and visit the sick child and leave the pleasures of the flowers and music. The empress, Yuan and Tien accompanied him to the Chihsiang Palace.

The boy's fever had broken and he had regained consciousness. After their majesties had both felt his forehead, they questioned his maids. Very worried, the emperor ordered that the monks and Taoist priests in the south palace, who amounted to over a hundred, and the priestesses in the Takaohsuan Hall should chant sutras and pray for the young prince's recovery.

That same evening, the emperor went back to see the boy and found he had made some slight progress and that he had only a low fever. He had eaten a little porridge with sugar and was able to call his father's name when carried to him by his nurse. A little relieved, the emperor ordered a eunuch to take many gifts to the five imperial physicians in charge of the case. He wanted to spend the night there, but since Tien was fasting, he had to return to his own palace.

Tien stayed with her sick son until about ten o'clock, when, satisfied that he was much better and sleeping peacefully, she retired to rest. Midnight came and the third watch was sounded at the Hsuanwu Gate. Apart from the few servants on duty, everyone else was asleep and the palace was quiet. The Ming court had very strict rules. If a palace lady was ill, the imperial physician could not visit the palace to examine the patient but instead he received a report of the patient's condition from a eunuch outside the second gate. Then he would write a prescription. Since the prince was a male child, the physician could take his pulse to diagnose his illness according to traditional Chinese medicine. Yet he could not enter the inner gate and so Tien had to bring the child to the West Hall outside the inner gate, where he would be attended by his nurse and four maids. All other maids would remain inside the gate. In the east hall the

imperial physicians would have their consultations and rest. On a wall was hung a scroll brought there by the physicians depicting the God of Medicine, riding on a tiger, a bag of medicines at his waist and a silver acupuncture needle in his hand. He was gazing up at the sky at a giant dragon, with its hind quarters hidden by clouds, as it descended to seek some medicine. Every day the nurse and maids would offer incense to its image. As most of the eunuchs stayed in the Chengchien Palace, only a few would go to the Chihsiang Palace during the day and return to their lodgings at night. Thus as usual only the nurse and two maids were on duty. The nurse asked one of the maids to go quietly into the courtyard to see if there was any movement from Lady Tien's chambers and that all others were asleep. Then the nurse made a sign to the two maids who melted into the darkness.

Though the courtyard was flooded by moonlight, the window was darkened by the shadows of the trees. Suddenly inside the room was heard the rustling sound of clothes and voices whispering. The wind shaking the leaves outside brought a sudden hush to the room. The atmosphere became sinister. After a while three people appeared by the sick child's bedside, not dressed as the nurse and two maids, but like a Buddhist bodhisattva and two fairies. They roughly shook the child to wake him from his sleep. In the dim horn lantern light, the boy opened his eyes to see three strange figures, wearing weird costumes, and staring menacingly at him. Frightened, he was about to cry out when one of the fairies threatened: "If you make a sound I'll bite you!" The child was too terrified to speak. Then the one dressed as the bodhisattva gazed sternly at him and said: "I am the Goddess of the Nine Lotuses, Goddess of the Nine Lotuses! The emperor has treated all his relatives so badly, that I wish all his sons to die, all to die!" She spoke slowly so that the sick child would remember every word. After she had repeated it three times, she asked: "Do you remember my words?" Her tone was so cruel and menacing that the boy shivered with fright and answered with a sob: "Yes, I remember them." Then one of the fairies demanded coldly: "What do you remember? Repeat it!" The child did so, his voice trembling. The other fairy then threatened him: "Re-

member this. 'The Goddess of the Nine Lotuses wants you to die and all your brothers will also die.' Unable to suppress his terror any longer, the child burst out crying. Quickly the red silk bedding was pulled over his head, and the boy too scared to peep out lay under the covers sobbing. After some time, the covers were pulled back and before the child stood his nurse whom he loved and his two kindly maids. Seeing them he screamed: "I'm frightened! I'm frightened!" He was drenched in sweat and was shivering. The nurse picked him up and asked him what was the matter, as the weeping child reported that he had seen the Goddess of the Nine Lotuses and repeated her warning. Terrified he kept repeating her words. The nurse hastily summoned other elderly maids, who all felt certain that he had seen the ghost of Empress Dowager Hsiao-ting. Everyone was filled with consternation and Tien, awakened by the pandemonium, sent a maid to inquire what had happened. The nurse quickly went with the maid to explain. Tien greatly alarmed rushed to her son's bedside with the nurse and maid.

Nothing Lady Tien or his nurse did comforted the boy. Despite all their attempts and vows to the gods, the sick child cried and kept repeating what he had heard until his voice grew hoarser and weaker. Finally he started to have convulsions. The medicine they forced down his throat was of no avail, and by dawn it was clear that he was dying. His mother sat in her chair weeping in despair. A maid, meanwhile, went to report the news to the emperor before the start of the morning court session.

The emperor, after prayers and a breakfast of bird's-nest soup, was preparing to attend the court session. His eye caught an edict lying on his desk written for him by the eunuch in charge of the secretariat, ordering the imperial relatives and other noble families in the capital to contribute money for the state. As he felt it should be more strongly worded, he had told the eunuch to leave it so that he could make the alterations himself so that no one would dare to resist it. He thought to himself:

"I challenge anyone to refuse this time!"

He was walking down the steps to enter his sedan-chair, when a maid ran hastily towards him from the Chihsiang Palace, and kneeling

reported the deterioration in the prince's condition and that he was delirious. Shocked, the emperor demanded:

"That's absurd! He was better last night. Why this sudden relapse?"

The maid replied: "His Highness had improved, but after midnight his condition suddenly became critical again. He was terrified and kept insisting that he had seen a goddess. His fever rose and now he is delirious and looks very ill."

The emperor swore: "What rot! How can a child know about such things!"

Refusing his sedan-chair, the emperor strode ahead followed by a group of eunuchs and maids, while one eunuch ran quickly in front to the Chihsiang Palace. Outside the Yuehchuan Gate, the emperor turned to a eunuch and said:

"Go to the Meridian Gate and inform them that the court session is cancelled."

Lady Tien was kneeling outside the inner gate of the palace to welcome the emperor. She looked haggard and in disarray, her eyes swollen from lack of sleep and weeping. Ignoring her, the emperor went directly to his son's room.

The child, racked by convulsions, was lying in a coma. His nurse and maids knelt as the emperor entered and dared not raise their heads. The emperor stared first at his dying son, and then questioned the weeping nurse how this had occurred. No one dared answer except Lady Tien, who sobbed:

"Your Majesty, yesterday evening the physicians said that after some more medicine the child would recover. His sudden relapse has shocked me. It was only after I saw him very much improved and sleeping peacefully that I retired at about ten o'clock. I was awakened by the sound of cries and the maids reported that he had woken up just after midnight terrified and babbling nonsense. I immediately rushed here and found he had a high fever and that his hands and feet were icy cold. Something had badly frightened him and he kept repeating strange things. Fearing he would have convulsions, I ordered the nurse to give him some medicine and acupuncture, but before dawn his condition became grave. . . ."



"Why didn't you inform me earlier?"

"Your Majesty works so hard each day for the state and retires late. Not wishing to disturb Your Majesty, I delayed till dawn. . . ."

Without waiting for her to finish, the emperor abruptly cut in, ordering a eunuch to fetch the physicians immediately. Then he reprimanded his concubine sternly:

"How could the child have such a sudden relapse! You fool!"

Kneeling hastily, Tien's voice trembled as she spoke: "I deserve death, I know. I think our son was so weakened after his long illness that when he saw an apparition which terrified him so much last night, he became icy cold and delirious."

"What did he babble?"

"I dare not say, Your Majesty."

"Tell me at once!"

"He kept saying: 'I'm the Goddess of the Nine Lotuses, Goddess of the Nine Lotuses! The emperor has treated all his relatives so badly, that I wish all his sons to die, all to die!'" Then prostrating herself on the ground, she wept bitterly.

The emperor's face turned ashen. In despair and horror he demanded: "You're sure you heard this yourself?"

Sobbing Tien replied: "The child was not speaking coherently, but I heard him repeat that many times."

Turning to the nurse and maids kneeling on the ground, the emperor asked: "Did you all hear exactly the same thing?"

Kowtowing, all affirmed they had. Believing that the ghost of Empress Dowager Hsiao-ting had appeared to avenge the marquis, the emperor smote his breast, stamped his foot and weeping declared: "I have wronged Empress Dowager Hsiao-ting!" Then he wheeled round and departed. As he passed the gate he ordered a eunuch to summon the physicians immediately and added:

"Tell them that if the prince dies, I shall not spare them."

Back in his palace, the emperor tore up the draft edict and spread out on his desk a piece of yellow paper bordered with black dragon designs about a foot wide and two feet long. Picking up his vermilion brush, he thought for a while before writing:

"I have lacked virtue since my succession to the throne. Though I have tried to follow the example of my ancestors, acting with reverence to the gods and fearing my mistakes, and though I have worked hard for thirteen years for the state, yet there have been portents in the heavens, increasing famine, insurgent bandit forces in the interior, Manchu incursions into our territory, people becoming homeless and dying, and villages for hundreds of miles being laid waste. Unable to sleep at night, my heart racked with anxiety, I withdrew from the world as a penitent, and yet I could not avert the will of heaven. The treasury bankrupt and with no other means of raising funds, I was forced to agree to the suggestion of my cabinet ministers to borrow money from my imperial relatives. I sought their assistance in solving this problem, never realizing the hardship they would suffer, and thus I have made another mistake. I am filled with grief when I think of the late Empress Dowager; I was profoundly shocked when I learnt of the death of my uncle. Let Li Kuo-jui's son, Chun-shan, henceforth inherit the noble title of Marquis of Wuching and the family retain it for ten thousand generations, lasting as long as our empire. Let all their confiscated properties be returned to the Li family. Misfortunes plague our state. My mistakes are many. May the gods observe and accept my sincere remorse."

In his panic to save his son's life, the emperor had forgotten that noble titles were normally only bestowed for one generation and that to be handed down for two or three was an exceptional favour. Yet he had made this absurd decree for ten thousand generations. Having read his edict once more, he ordered a eunuch to have the document embossed in the upper middle section with the imperial seal and then issue it immediately. Then he covered his face with his hands and wept, not so much for the loss of his most beloved son, but more for his defeat at the hands of the late Empress Dowager's spirit and his imperial relatives, and for the failure of his plans.

When he had calmed himself, he went to the Fenghsien Hall where he wept again before the shrines of his ancestors and the Empress Dowager. Then he hastened to the Chihsiang Palace, but as he passed the Tungssu Gate, the sound of people wailing inside the

palace signified that his son had already died. Sighing mournfully, he returned to his palace.

Since it was already mid-autumn, the acacia and plane trees in the Forbidden City had begun to shed their leaves. One day after lunch, the emperor summoned to the Wenhua Hall the minister of revenue, Li Tai-ko, to discuss the new measure of borrowing one year's house tax in advance. There had been many complaints against this in the capital. Since the eighth year of his reign, the government had been levying this tax in all the main cities, but in many it was not enforced. In Peking, however, the citizens had to pay the tax according to the size of their houses and the number of rooms. Now the new demand had angered the people. Afraid to report the true situation, the minister lied that all was well. Then the emperor had an audience with his minister of war, Chen Hsinchia, and asked about the negotiations with the Manchus. He was disappointed to learn that there was no progress in that or in the campaigns against the insurgents. Returning to his office, the emperor felt weary at the sight of so many gloomy reports. He called for his eunuch Wang Cheng-en and told him to inform the minister of ceremonies to bestow on his dead son a posthumous title and report on it immediately. Then Lady Tien, who had been back in her palace for a month, and the empress entered. While Tien kowtowed and remained kneeling, the empress said:

"Your Majesty, as something unusual happened today in the Chengchien Palace, Tien has come to report it and seek Your Majesty's decision."

Surprised, the emperor, his eyes on Tien, asked what had happened.

His concubine replied with a sob: "Because of my errors, the gods have brought much misfortune to my palace. Ever since Tzu-huan's death, his nurse has behaved in a strange manner, often weeping to herself. Finally she asked for sick leave and went home for a few days. This morning at dawn she hanged herself. After her family had reported this, two other of our son's maids also hanged themselves."

The emperor was shocked and puzzled. Nothing like that had ever happened in the palace before. He wondered what was behind it. Carefully scrutinizing Tien's face, he was certain she was not involved in the affair. Lost in thought he let her remain kneeling. What the emperor could not know was that one of the marquis' family and some other imperial relatives had secretly conspired with the nurse and through her with two maids to play the trick on the boy, for which the nurse was paid more than ten thousand taels of silver to share with her accomplices. The nurse had thought it would do the boy no harm and never dreamt that the child would die of fright. Rather she had imagined the boy a prince and her enjoying her position. The previous day, however, Tsao had sent someone to her house demanding five thousand taels or else the disclosure of the plot. The nurse therefore committed suicide and when this news reached Tien's palace, the two maids fearing the emperor's wrath also hanged themselves. Though Tsao had discovered their secret, he never revealed it to the emperor since the case involved several imperial relatives including Tien's family as well as one of Tsao's own eunuch protégés.

Rising from his chair, the emperor paced anxiously about his room. Should the public learn of this it would become a scandal. He stamped his foot and sighed. Noticing Tien still kneeling, he bade her rise and then said to the empress:

"That nurse had cared for the boy for five years and though she was but a slave, yet she was like a mother to him. She killed herself out of grief at the child's untimely death. She should be honoured. Issue an edict awarding her family some money and have a shrine built for her in the nurses' quarters. As for the two maids their action is commendable because of their loyalty to their dead prince. Instead of cremating their bodies, they should be buried beside the child's tomb like those maids who died with their late sovereign before the reign of Tien-shun. See that these orders are carried out."

The imperial ladies assented and withdrew. Though they concurred with the emperor's decisions, yet they had some deep misgivings.

That evening, Wu Meng-ming of the imperial police came to report to the emperor that Hsueh had been arrested and brought back to Peking that afternoon and was temporarily detained in the monks' quarters outside the Hsuanwu Gate. Grimly the emperor ordered:

"That is all. You can return to the imperial police and await my instructions."

Hsueh had been spending the past two months since his dismissal from court in his home district of Hancheng in Shensi Province. The emperor knew that the charge of embezzlement could not be proved and so he was punished for accepting nine thousand taels which were confiscated. With so much corruption in the court, that was a paltry sum and could not warrant the death sentence. But the loss of his son determined the emperor to have Hsueh killed to appease the spirit of the late Empress Dowager, and so he had ordered Hsueh's arrest and return to the capital.

That evening the wind rose, while clouds gathered and it rained. About ten o'clock the emperor issued an order instructing Hsueh to commit suicide. It was nearly midnight when the censor, Hao Chin, who had been appointed to witness Hsueh's death, arrived at the monks' quarters housing the former minister. Hsueh hurried out to meet him, wondering what brought him there so late and on such a wet night. He asked:

"Has His Majesty any orders?"

Hao Chin replied: "Wang Pei-yen has been executed by imperial decree."

Startled Hsueh asked: "And I? Am I to die like Wang?"

Hao Chin answered: "Not exactly like him, but an order will soon be issued."

At that point an officer of the imperial police arrived with some others. Holding high the decree he said in a loud voice:

"Let Hsueh Kuo-kuan receive the imperial decree!"

Trembling Hsueh fell down on his knees. Since the emperor could not accuse him of any great crime deserving death, he vaguely charged him with embezzlement and ordered that he should commit suicide and his properties be confiscated. Hsueh tried to look calm

as he heard the order, then he kowtowed to thank the emperor for his mercy. Smiling cynically he said: "I am indeed fortunate. Without confiscating my properties, the government would never know exactly how little I have." Since the real reason for his death was not apparent, Hsueh rose and told his servant to bring some paper which he spread out on his desk. Drawing up his chair, he wrote in large characters:

"The person who murders me is my accuser, Wu Chang-shih."

The police officers had fastened a silk rope to a beam and placed three bricks under it. Thinking the rope was rather thin, Hao Chin remarked:

"Since His Excellency is rather heavy, perhaps the rope will break."

Hsueh had at first been afraid to die, but now he was more reconciled to it. He felt that the emperor would meet with a violent end. Very calm, he got up from his chair and stood on the pile of bricks. He gave three hard tugs at the rope and said: "It will do." None present could guess what was in Hsueh's mind as he died. They only witnessed that he showed no signs of sorrow and that a last cynical smile was on his lips. Putting his neck through the noose, Hsueh kicked away the bricks beneath his feet.

Since ascending the throne, the emperor had condemned many of his officials to death, but this was the first time a chief minister had been killed. He remained at his desk reading various documents, waiting for the police report. Shortly after midnight, two eunuchs announced Hsueh's death and presented the paper on which Hsueh had written his last words. The emperor looked at it lying on his desk and asked: "What sort of person is Wu Chang-shih?" Although they were aware that he had the reputation of being a cunning and scheming character, the two eunuchs also knew that the emperor resented any interference in state affairs by palace attendants. Thus they replied that they knew nothing about the man.

Hsueh's death relieved the emperor regarding the appeasement of the ghost of the Empress Dowager and the avenging of his son's death. But there still remained the problem of raising money for the army since Hsueh's properties would amount to little. Rather depressed, the emperor regretted that Hsueh had not been as corrupt

as Yen Sung, the chief minister in the previous reign, whereupon he would have received several million taels of gold and tens of millions of taels of silver. Pushing aside all the petitions concerning taxation, the emperor wrote an order to the ministry of revenue to enforce the collection of all unpaid taxes throughout the empire without exception.

Then he decided to economize on all palace expenditure and thus save some money. But which? Food immediately came to his mind. He had read a report from the imperial kitchen that every month the cost of the emperor's food was one thousand and forty-six taels, not including the ingredients or the grain required for making wine. The empress' expenditure was three hundred and thirty-five taels and the ingredients amounted to twenty-five taels eighty cents. It was about the same for Empress Yi-an, the widow of the previous emperor. As for all the other palace ladies and princes, their total bill was considerable. After considering the problem, the emperor felt he could only justify cutting down on his own expenditure. He recalled that during the reign of Emperor Wan-li, food was more sumptuous than in all previous reigns and not a single tael was charged to the imperial kitchen. In those days, the wealthy eunuchs would supply the emperor's meals in turn, vying with each other in extravagance. The chief eunuch would also collect valuable paintings, calligraphy, jewellery and other gifts to present to the emperor on these occasions. Emperor Tien-chi's reign was also like that. But on his coming to the throne, the emperor had abolished this old custom because he wished to stop presenting gifts to the eunuchs supplying the emperor's meals and also because he knew they derived their wealth through corruption. He felt, however, he could now ask his eunuchs to supply his meals without lavishing gifts on them, since they knew of the state's difficulties. He therefore decided to tell Wang Teh-hua the next day to revive this old custom, that the chief eunuchs might demonstrate their loyalty.

He took some documents which he had not read back to his room. It was time for bed, but he was too restless. The failure of his plan

to borrow money from his relatives made him depressed. Sighing he muttered angrily:

"Hsueh Kuo-kuan deserved more than death!" Pausing he continued: "I wouldn't be in such a mess but for those bandits Chang Hsien-chung and Li Tzu-cheng!"

Later, after the emperor had gone to sleep, a maid removed the documents from his bed and placed them on the ebony stand. Then she tidied the yellow silk covers embroidered with dragon designs. As the door and windows were closed, the air was stale. Going to a window, she noticed the incense in the Hsuan-teh bronze censer was finished. She lit a coil of black incense specially made for the palace and as the smoke rose, the room once more became fragrant. She was leaving the room when she heard the emperor angrily cry out: "He has failed to suppress the bandits or make peace with the Manchus, and our state is endangered. Punish him severely!" Scared, the maid quickly glanced back and saw that the emperor was sound asleep. Holding the incense burner, she tiptoed out of the room.

To the continuous rumbling of thunder, the loud pattering of the rain was heard on the plane trees and marble steps. Drops of rain blown by the wind wet the painted corridors and window panes, while the iron bells hanging from the eaves made a tinkling sound. Unable to sleep soundly, the emperor's dreams were disturbed by these noises. As dawn approached, a thunderbolt exploded over the palace abruptly awaking the emperor. He heard a tremulous, sobbing voice amid all the sounds and, thinking it a ghost, he became afraid. When he listened carefully, he realized it was in fact a woman outside in the courtyard calling:

"The empire . . . at peace! The empire . . . at peace! The empire . . . at peace!"

Attached to the palace was a school for maids where some elderly, educated eunuchs were assigned as tutors. Maids who excelled in their studies could become scholars and work in the compilation of records. Those who failed would be punished, either by being beaten on the palm with a rod, or by being made to kneel before the shrine of Confucius. Another form of punishment was

to make them keep watch all night passing the various gates outside the palace with a bell and chanting: "The empire . . . at peace!" On this stormy night the cry of that unfortunate maid could be heard intermittently in the emperor's bedroom. Listening to it, the emperor sighed:

"Is there any peace in my empire?"

His eye caught the pile of reports and he started to worry again so that he became deaf to all the noises of the night. He worried about the famines and the campaigns against the insurgents and felt very pessimistic. Then the maid's chanting interrupted his thoughts:

"The empire . . . at peace! The empire . . . at peace!"

All his reign he had longed for peace and tonight this chant grated on his ears. Banging his fist on his bed, he called to the eunuch behind the curtain:

"Tell her to go and rest and stop chanting 'the empire . . . at peace'."

Illustrated by Fan Tseng

Lu Hsun was an active promoter of modern Chinese woodcuts who gave a great deal of help to young woodcut artists. Below we are publishing his *Preface to "A Collection of Woodcuts by Amateur Artists"* as well as two letters he wrote to woodcut engravers. Also in this issue is the article *Lu Hsun and Chinese Woodcuts* by the well-known artist Li Hua, now a professor in the Woodcut Department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, who started making woodcuts in the early thirties.

— The Editors

Preface to "A Collection of Woodcuts by Amateur Artists"

The production of works of art for mass circulation by means of a few engraving knives and a wood-block — this is the modern woodcut.

The woodcut art was indigenous to China, but it has long been buried underground. Now it is being resuscitated, but it is full of new vitality.

The new woodcuts are vigorous and clear-cut. This is a new, youthful art, a good mass art.

Of course these works are mere seedlings, but we need such seedlings before we can have fine blossoms and luxuriant forests.

So it is well worthwhile to put them on record.

March 14, 1934

Lu Hsun

Letter to Li Hua

Dear Li Hua,

It is many weeks since I received your letter of December 9 and your two collections of woodcuts, but as I have been ill most of the time I was unable to reply earlier. I do apologize. Looking through your works, I prefer those two collections *The Countryside in Spring* and *The Lofu Mountains*, probably because these are derived from the landscape paintings by literati since the Sung and Yuan Dynasties. To my mind, there was no painting worth mentioning apart from landscapes after the end of the Sung Dynasty, when the genre attained its zenith which no later artists could surpass; for even if they used different techniques and tools to create a novel effect, they could hardly achieve anything greater, as in one sense they were limited by the subject. Coloured woodcuts are also good, but I doubt whether there is much future for them in China, because we lack connoisseurs.

You mentioned in your letter that the greatest problem is technical training, and this is quite right. Many young artists nowadays often fail to express the content which they want to convey because they ignore this point. This is like the case of certain writers who fail to get their meaning across because they have never mastered language skills. However, if technical improvement is not accompanied by

richness of content, it is very easy to fall into the pit of simply displaying virtuosity.

This brings us to the other problem you raised — that of subject-matter. Nowadays many people think they should express our fellow-countrymen's hardships and struggles, and naturally this is not wrong. But unless the artist himself is in the midst of this maelstrom, he has in fact no means of expressing it. If he draws on imagination, the result can never be truthful and profound, and neither will it be art. So in my opinion an artist should simply express what he himself has experienced. Of course, he should go out of his studio, for even if he cannot plunge into some maelstrom it is all right for him to express ordinary social situations which he has seen. The Ukiyoe pictures* of Japan are not based on important themes; yet they have artistic value. And naturally, if social conditions change, an artist need not concentrate on one single point.

As for what constitutes the Chinese spirit, this is quite beyond me. Take painting, for example. After the Six Dynasties, when we were very much influenced by Indian art, our paintings ceased to be so traditional. Perhaps we can describe the ink landscapes of Yuan artists as essentially Chinese, but there is no need to resuscitate these, and even if we did we could not develop them further. So in my opinion, to produce better woodcuts, we should refer to Han-dynasty stone reliefs and Ming and Ching book illustrations, besides paying attention to the "New-Year pictures" appreciated by the people, and amalgamating these with modern European techniques.

With this reply I send you my best wishes,

The night of February 4 (1935)

Lu Hsun

*Paintings and colour prints of scenes from daily life between the 17th and 19th centuries.

Letter to Lai Shao-chi

Dear Shao-chi,

I received your letter of May 28 some time ago, and have since received your manuscript and the seven woodcuts.

Changes that are too great may be beyond our power to depict; however, this need not make us lose heart, for even if we cannot express them in their totality we can still express one corner. All great buildings are built of separate pieces of timber or stone; so why shouldn't we serve as one piece of timber or stone? This is why I often do odd jobs and little things.

Serial pictures can really benefit the people, but first we must see what kind of pictures they are. In other words, we must first determine what sort of people they are for, then vary the composition and method of engraving accordingly. Most of our modern woodcuts are still made for intellectuals; so if we use this method of engraving for serial pictures, the ordinary people will still fail to understand them.

It takes training also to appreciate pictures. We need not mention those late nineteenth-century schools of painting. Even the most ordinary drawings of animals and plants, when I showed them to

villagers who had never seen pictures before, were beyond their comprehension. It had never occurred to them that solid objects could become two-dimensional. So I propose that in making serial pictures we should adopt more traditional drawing techniques.

I cannot say how writing should be done, as I learned myself through extensive reading and practice --- I have no other formula or method.

That story *Tobacco Workers* is not bad, only a little too depressing; however, that cannot be helped as it is based on real life. I mean to send it in the next few days to the Liangyu Company which publishes "New Stories" to see whether they will use it, because recently the official censorship in Shanghai has become extremely strict. Then I have sent to *Literature* the two woodcuts *Jilted* and *The True Story of Ah Q*, and they should both get published so long as the censor does not recognize that face on the ink-bottle as mine.

I send this reply with best wishes,

June 29 (1935)

Lu Hsun

P.S. I enclose a letter to Mr. Tang Ying-wei which I hope you will forward for me, as I have lost his address.

Lu Hsun and Young Woodcut Artists
(woodcut) by Li Hua



Lu Hsun and Chinese Woodcuts

“The woodcut art was indigenous to China, but it has long been buried underground. Now it is being resuscitated, but it is full of new vitality.”

These words were written by Lu Hsun in his *Preface to “A Collection of Woodcuts by Amateur Artists”* on March 14, 1934. They make it clear that China’s modern woodcuts are quite different from those of the past.

As early as the seventh century, China had invented printing by means of wood-block engravings; and by the ninth century this form of printing had reached a high level. The sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries were the golden age of traditional Chinese woodcuts.

These were not what Lu Hsun advocated, however, but a new revolutionary woodcut art full of vitality.

The early thirties of this century were a period of national crisis for China when the Japanese imperialists invaded and occupied our north-eastern provinces, then proceeded to attack north China. The Chinese people indignantly demanded the formation of a united front

to resist Japanese aggression, but the Kuomintang capitulationists suppressed the people's patriotic movement. Left-wing writers and artists led by the Chinese Communist Party supported the people's anti-Japanese struggle, and this movement centred in Shanghai soon spread throughout the country. Lu Hsun took an active part in it while vigorously promoting modern woodcuts. He explained the reason for this in his *Preface to "Art in New Russia"* which he edited and published in 1930: "Woodcuts have a wide use during a revolution, for they can be quickly made even when time presses."

To supply progressive young artists with a weapon in their revolutionary struggle, Lu Hsun himself sowed the seeds of China's modern woodcut art. In 1929, he published four art albums through the Dawn Blossoms of Art Press, two of which introduced modern woodcuts from western Europe. The introduction of these woodcuts to China aroused the interest of progressive young artists, some of whom began to try their hands at woodcuts. Lacking teachers, however, they could not make too much progress. So in the summer

The Unemployed

by *Hu Yi-chuan*



of 1931, Lu Hsun organized a woodcut course in Shanghai and invited a Japanese artist as instructor, he himself acting as the interpreter. This was China's first woodcut school.

After that, the Chinese woodcut movement developed as a part of the Left-wing literary and art movement. Young woodcut artists formed many small groups to propagandize the need to resist Japan and save the country. They organized exhibitions and published their works in periodicals or woodcut albums. As their woodcuts reflected the people's strong resist-

ance to Japanese aggression and exposed the fascist rule of the Kuomintang, these groups were often banned, the artists arrested and their works confiscated. However, they carried on undeterred. When one society was suppressed, another would be set up. They fought on till 1933 despite the white terror. As Lu Hsun noted in his *Preface to "A Record of the Development of Woodcuts"* published in June 1934: "To the best of my knowledge, not a single woodcut organization remains today, but there are still individuals studying the art."

This was how the seeds of the modern woodcut art were sown by Lu Hsun in China and took root, growing apace.

No matter how frantically the Kuomintang censors tried to sup-



Which Way to Take?

by *Chang Wang*

press progressive woodcuts, the artists still battled on — thanks to the help of Lu Hsun.

Lu Hsun's help took three main forms.

First, he supplied material for artists to study, raising their morale and fighting power.

As the woodcut course he organized was for a limited period and not too many artists could attend it, he made the study material more widely available by organizing three woodcut exhibitions between 1930 and 1933. These exhibitions showed works which Lu Hsun had collected from the Soviet Union, France, Britain, Germany, Belgium and the United States, providing models for amateur artists and serving to popularize woodcuts in China. He often said that learners could only make progress when they had seen many good works by well-known foreign artists. So each time Lu Hsun organized an exhibition, he would urge woodcut artists to go to it and study the exhibits, and he would attend it himself to introduce these works and their artists. Even so, only young woodcut artists in Shanghai had the opportunity to go to these exhibitions. To give artists throughout the country material to study, Lu Hsun between 1931 and 1935 edited and published eight collections of woodcuts, some from ancient China, others from modern Europe, and for each album he wrote a preface or postscript, giving detailed introductions to the works of the different artists. These collections enabled Chinese woodcut artists at that time to study and master this militant art, playing an important role in the development of modern Chinese woodcuts.

Secondly, Lu Hsun corresponded with woodcut artists and gave them explicit advice and encouragement.

In the five years between 1931 and 1936, Lu Hsun corresponded frequently with woodcut artists. Eighty-five such letters can be found in *Lu Hsun's Collected Letters* published in 1976. These young woodcut artists considered Lu Hsun as their teacher. When they had finished a woodcut, or when they came up against problems in their work, they would write to ask his opinion, and Lu Hsun would always send them cordial replies no matter how busy or how ill he was. Lu Hsun's concern and help encouraged and enlightened these young artists. His replies to their letters, always frank and earnest, touched



Roaring in Anger

by Hsin Po

on various aspects of art and the woodcut movement. For instance, in his answer to my letter written on February 4, 1935, Lu Hsun dealt with three extremely important problems: the relationship between artistic creation and technical training, how art should reflect real life, and how to learn from our past heritage. In his letter to Lai Shao-chi written on June 29, 1935, he solved a problem which had long worried us, namely how to use woodcuts to reflect our great age. We shall always remember his warm-hearted guidance and help and his profound influence on us.

Thirdly, Lu Hsun consistently gave moral and material support to the woodcut movement.

Our main forms of struggle at that time consisted of holding woodcut exhibitions, publishing woodcuts in periodicals or putting out woodcut albums. But under the white terror imposed by the Kuomintang, it was dangerous to publish progressive work, and it was hard for young artists — all of whom were poor — to organize exhibitions or to publish art albums. When they had difficulties of this kind, Lu Hsun always offered to help. If invited to an exhibition he invariably turned up and would buy some of the works and give contributions. When some woodcut society prepared an art album, he would send a donation and write a preface for it. His *Preface to "A Collection of Woodcuts by Amateur Artists"* was written for two young artists. Lu Hsun also made a practice of recommending works by amateur artists to progressive magazines. All this constituted great moral and material support for us. In 1934, when the white terror in Shanghai was rampant, Lu Hsun compiled and published an album of woodcuts which he had collected during the last two years, entitling it *A Record of the Development of Woodcuts*. Towards the end of his preface he expressed his faith in the future of Chinese woodcuts, saying: "If these artists will continue to make efforts, so that this collection can be built up step by step, we shall see that my hopes are not too extravagant." This referred to his earlier statement: "By unremitting efforts to improve the quality of their work these artists have not only won favour in China but are gradually taking the first step towards world recognition."

Although in 1933 the progressive woodcut movement in Shanghai seemed crushed, that did not mean that the reactionaries had won. As Chairman Mao pointed out, the attempts at cultural suppression, just like the military campaigns to wipe out the Communists, also ended in defeat for the Kuomintang. As the nationwide movement to resist Japan and save the country made headway, the woodcut movement developed rapidly too and spread from Shanghai to other parts of the country. The ranks of the artists expanded, and militant woodcut societies emerged in all the big cities. To the dismay of

Who Has Given Us This
Fate?
by Li Hua

Words in the picture:
"We are almost oppress-
ed to death. We weak
nations must rise and
resist the imperialists!"



the reactionaries the progressive woodcut movement became nation-wide.

On New Year's Day 1935, China's first All-China Woodcut Exhibition was held in Peking, then the forefront of the national salvation movement. This marked a turning-point for Chinese woodcuts.

When this exhibition was taken to Shanghai in June that year, Lu Hsun was elated. He visited it and voiced whole-hearted support. He compiled an album of works selected from this exhibition and wrote in the preface: "This album is the first collection of the best woodcuts from all over the country. But it is a beginning, not a successful conclusion. It marks the advance of the vanguard. Let us hope that in future their ranks will be expanded into a mighty host with flying banners."

Lu Hsun's prophecy came true. The contingent of woodcut artists continued to grow and many new works of a higher level appeared. As the patriotic movement gained in strength, revolutionary woodcuts

spread throughout the country. In the summer of 1936, a second All-China Woodcut Exhibition was successfully held, showing the works of a great many new artists. When this exhibition was taken to Shanghai in October 1936, although Lu Hsun was mortally ill he went to see it on October the 8th. Upon his arrival, without sitting down to rest, he went round the exhibition making comments to the artists there, with whom he afterwards chatted very cheerfully for two hours. Asked for his general impression, he said with a smile: "Not bad! Not bad at all." Little did we think that only eleven days later our great writer, thinker and revolutionary, the standard-bearer of the new cultural movement, would leave us for ever.

But although Lu Hsun has left us, his spirit will always live on and inspire us to go forward. In New China, since the victory of the revolution, the seeds of the Chinese woodcut art sown by him have grown up into luxuriant forests.

Scaling the Heights (oil painting) by Chang
Shu-hung, Li Chen-hsien and Tan Yün-ieh



Yu Feng

“Scaling the Heights”

— *My Impressions of Chang Shu-hung's New Painting*

One day I received an unexpected telephone call from my old friend Chang Shu-hung whom I had not seen for more than ten years. He said to me jokingly with a strong Hangchow accent: “I haven't seen you for so long, I can't imagine what you look like now. Has your hair turned completely white?” Then, he burst out laughing.

“We'll have to be together to see whose hair is whiter. But where are you now?”

Chang Shu-hung is a veteran painter who has long worked in the Tunhuang Caves of Kansu. At the invitation of the National Science Conference, he came to Peking to paint an oil painting *Scaling the Heights* for the National Exhibition of Achievements in Science. After a month of hard work, he had completed the painting and wanted me to go and see it.

As I walked into his temporary studio, his wife Li Cheng-hsien and Comrade Tan Yun-teh who worked with him on the painting

came to meet me. Several newspaper men were busy taking photographs and my eyes were drawn at once to the striking painting, five metres wide, illumined by their strong lights.

Under a clear frosty sky tower jade-like ice-caps with undulating mountains looming in the background. At the foot of the mountains, a team of mountaineers are pressing forward towards the world's highest peak. What a magnificent and moving painting!

I at once congratulated the 74-year-old artist who, despite his age and the difficulties involved in climbing up and down a two-metre scaffold, had produced such a wonderful work within one month. But he said to me: Mastering science and modernizing China are the common wish of our 900 million people. It was this that encouraged him to overcome so many difficulties and carry out the task entrusted to him.

"There is no royal road to science, and only those who do not dread the fatiguing climb of its steep paths have a chance of gaining its luminous summits." This celebrated dictum of the great revolutionary teacher Marx is the theme of the oil painting.

In the forefront of the painting is a forest of ice-caps surrounding a glacier. Translucent and immensely realistic, they are challenging the mountaineers to explore their secrets.

In front of the climbers lies a deep crevasse. To pass it they will have to build a bridge, and it is hard to imagine the great efforts this will cost them.

Behind the forest of ice-caps towers a range of magnificent peaks with sheer cliffs exposed in places among the unmelted snow. The highest and loveliest peak in the distant background is tinged with reddish brown, as if at some time in the past it has belched out flames.

The Himalayas, known as the roof of the world, are believed to have lain at the bottom of the sea until, two billion years ago, the earth underwent a sudden cataclysm and they were thrown up as its highest mountain range. These mountains have appealed to many people, and since ancient times countless legends have been created to account for the tremendous changes in nature. But what strike us most today are the fabulous exploits which will be required to scale the heights of science and conquer nature.

Standing before the painting, Chang Shu-hung told me zestfully of his thoughts and feelings as he painted it. The old artist's face was ruddy and he was in high spirits, although his thick black hair was threaded with silver. And it seemed to me that his spirit coincided with the main theme of his work. For with boundless enthusiasm he had painted this vivid masterpiece to praise those who fear no hardships in scaling the heights of science.

Chang Shu-hung, well-known both at home and abroad for his study and paintings of the frescoes in the Tunhuang Caves, is in charge of researches into the Tunhuang relics and has worked at Tunhuang for more than thirty years. His high sense of responsibility and his indefatigable, painstaking work are a shining example for other artists in China. He studied painting in France when he was young and won a Salon gold medal in Paris for his outstanding achievements.

New Programmes on the Peking Stage

A number of programmes including new and traditional operas, dramas, music and dances appeared recently on the Peking stage. The new Peking opera *The Banner of Prince Valiant*, based on an episode from the historical novel *Li Tzu-cheng*, depicts this peasant leader who fought against the Ming rulers towards the end of the dynasty, and how he led his peasant insurgents to break through an encirclement by government forces in a campaign in southern Shensi. The principal roles were played by veteran actors Li Ho-tseng and Yuan Shih-hai and the famous actress Chao Yen-hsia.

There were also new modern dramas like *Loyal Hearts*, *The Newsboys*, *Mountain Spring* and *When the Maple Leaves Turn Red*.

Outstanding traditional operas appearing recently include: *Fifteen Strings of Cash*, *Women Generals of the Yang Family* and *Monkey King Subdues the White-bone Demon* as well as scenes from Peking operas such as *The Crossroad Inn* and *Autumn River*. Many famous Peking opera actors and actresses as well as young artists took part in these performances so that the audiences could enjoy the different schools and styles of Peking opera singing and acting.

The music and dance programmes include selections from western classical music and scenes from well-known ballets. Since the downfall of the "gang of four" in 1976 many fine traditional Chinese and foreign works are gradually being restaged.

Reprints of Chinese and Foreign Literature

Over one hundred works of Chinese and foreign literature have been republished in China in the last year. Among them are old favourites like the modern Chinese novels *Song of Youth*, *Red Crag*, *The Hurricane* and *Tracks in the Snowy Forest* which were banned for many years by the "gang of four".

Among works of Chinese classical literature republished there are *The Scholars* by Wu Ching-tzu and *Exposure of the Official World* by Li Pao-chia as well as some selections of classical poetry and prose with annotations.

Works of classical foreign literature recently published include Balzac's *Le Père Goriot* and *Eugénie Grandet*, Hugo's *Les Misérables* and *Quatre-vingt Treize*, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Dickens' *Hard Times*, Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, *A Thousand and One Nights*, as well as stories by Chekhov and Maupassant, plays by Shakespeare and Ibsen and others.

Another Underground Palace Opens

After the opening of the underground palace of the Ming Tombs, another underground palace — the tomb of Emperor Chien-lung is now open to visitors.

Yu Ling, the tomb of Emperor Chien-lung (1711--1799) of the Ching Dynasty is in Tsunhua County, Hopei Province, 125 kilometres from Peking. Its construction began in 1743 and was completed after 30 years. The tomb includes an arch, a sacrificial hall and wing halls which are connected by a twelve-metre wide brick-and-stone passage. The underground palace, 54 metres deep, occupies an area of 327 square metres. A stone construction, it has an arched roof. On its eight stone doors, each weighing two tons, are carved images of standing Bodhisattvas. The coffin of Emperor Chien-lung was placed at the far end of the palace. On the walls and ceilings of the halls are carved various Buddhist images and designs which show the fine craftsmanship of artists at that time.

The valuable relics in the tomb were all stolen before Liberation,

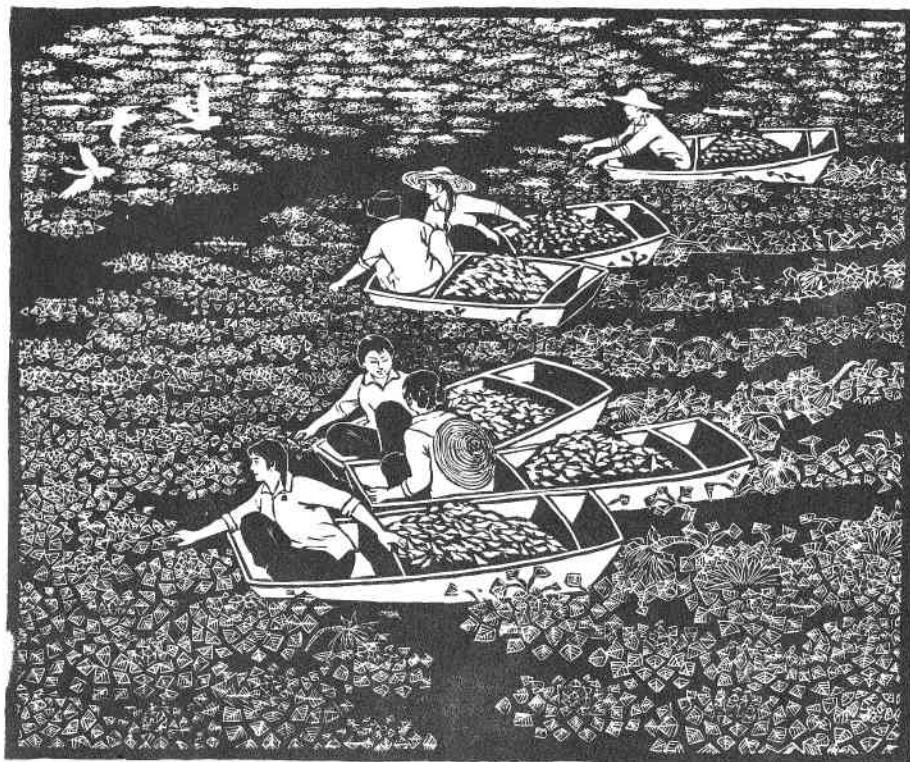
but after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 this underground palace has been carefully preserved as an important cultural relic. More repair work has been done on it recently.

A New Magazine "Calligraphy" Published in Shanghai

The first issue of the new magazine *Calligraphy*, a quarterly edited by the Shanghai Calligraphy and Paintings Publishing House, has been published this year. In this issue there are reproductions of the handwritings of Chairman Mao, Premier Chou and Chairman Hua as well as many works by outstanding calligraphers and amateur artists in various parts of the country. There is also a reproduction of some poems in the handwriting of the well-known Tang Dynasty calligrapher Chang Hsu with an explanatory article. There are also articles on the art of calligraphy and seal-engraving.

The Turkish Folk Dance Group in Peking

Recently, the Turkish Folk Dance Group visited China and gave performances in Peking. The Turkish artists performed such items as the folk dances *Halay* and *Bar* which have a distinctive national flavour. Their performances were well received by Peking audiences.





中国文学

英文月刊1978年第8期

本刊代号2—916

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CONTACT

CB *China Books
& Periodicals, Inc.*

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