

CHINESE LITERATURE



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Chairman Mao's Letter to Comrade Chen Yi Discussing Poetry

Comrade Chen Yi,

You asked me to polish your poems, but I am unable to as I have never learnt how to write *lu shih* in five-character lines and have never published any in that form. Your poems have power and range. Only I feel that in form, or metrically, they are not quite *lu shih*.¹ For it has strict tonal patterns, without which a poem cannot be called *lu shih*. In this respect, I think, both of us are still beginners. I have occasionally written a few seven-character *lu shih*, but none of them satisfies me. Just as you are good at writing unorthodox verse, I know a little about *tz'u*² with lines of different lengths. Chien-ying [Yeh Chien-ying — *Tr.*] is good at seven-character *lu shih*, and old Comrade Tung [Tung Pi-wu — *Tr.*] at five-character *lu shih*. If you want to write in these forms, you can ask for their advice.

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Journeying Westward

*I speed westward ten thousand li,
Riding the wind over infinite space;
Had not this giant roc spread its wings,
How could man traverse this void crossed only by birds?
The sea below ferments a thousand goblets of wine,
And mountains tower to great heights with onion spires.
Everywhere we find good friends,
As wind and thunder sweep the world.*

I made changes in this poem and am still far from satisfied with the result. I am afraid I cannot do the rest.

Another thing is that poetry uses images to convey ideas and should not communicate plainly as in prose. So we cannot dispense with *pi* (similes and metaphors) or with *hsing* (association). We may also use the technique of *fu* (direct statement) as in Tu Fu's³ *Northern Journey*, which may be said to "state in plain terms", but here too he used *pi* and *hsing*. "*Pi* means comparing one object to another", and "*hsing* means speaking first of something else to lead up to the main theme". Han Yu⁴ used prose techniques in poetry, and some people said he knew nothing at all about poetry, but that was going too far, as some of his poems like *The Rocks*, *Mount Hengshan* and *To Prefectural Official Chang on the Fifteenth Day of the Eighth Moon* are really not bad. We can see, therefore, it is not easy to write poetry. Most Sung poets did not understand that poetry must convey ideas by means of images, and they disregarded the tradition of Tang poetry, with

the result that what they wrote was quite flat. These random remarks all refer to classical poetry. To write modern poetry, we must use the method of conveying ideas through images in reflecting class struggle and the struggle for production, and must definitely not go in for classicism. But for the last few decades, poetry in the vernacular has not been successful. There have been some good folk-songs, however. It is very likely that the future trend will be to draw nourishment and adopt forms from the folk-song and develop a new type of poetry which will appeal to the general reading public. Incidentally, Li Po⁵ wrote very few *lu shih*, and Li Ho,⁶ apart from a few five-character *lu shih*, never wrote any in seven-character lines. Li Ho is well worth reading. I don't know if you are interested.

With best wishes,

Mao Tsetung

July 21, 1965

Translator's Notes

- 1) *Lu shih* is a traditional form of classical Chinese poetry. With a strict tonal pattern and rhyme scheme, it has eight lines with five or seven characters in each. It was very popular during the Tang Dynasty (618-907).
- 2) *Tzu* is a verse form which originated in the Tang Dynasty. It is sung to certain tunes each of which prescribes a fixed number of lines of a standardized varying length. Of the 39 published poems of Chairman Mao's, 25 are *tzu*.
- 3) Tu Fu (712-770) was a great poet in ancient China. Characterized by realism, his poems reflect the age in which he lived.
- 4) Han Yu (768-824), a noted prose writer and poet of the Tang Dynasty.
- 5) Li Po (701-762) was another great poet in ancient China. Highly critical in content, his poems are brimful of patriotism and romanticism.
- 6) Li Ho (790-816) was a poet who lived in the middle period of the Tang Dynasty.

A Forum on Chairman Mao's Letter

At a forum held on December 14, 1977 in Peking, more than sixty Chinese poets and literary critics studied and discussed Chairman Mao's letter to Comrade Chen Yi on poetry. All the speakers felt that in this letter Chairman Mao had summed up the rich experience of Chinese poets of past ages, made clear the artistic laws guiding the writing of Chinese poetry and pointed out the direction for its future development. Thus the publication of this letter had great significance for the development of China's socialist literature and art. Here we publish excerpts from two of these speeches.

— The Editors

Lin Mo-han (literary critic):

This letter of Chairman Mao's to Comrade Chen Yi shows us Chairman Mao's attitude to Chinese poetry and has solved important problems regarding the writing of poetry in future. Chairman Mao paid great attention to literary and art forms. Unless an artist does his best to achieve formal perfection, his work cannot move people or have much impact. In poetry, form is especially important. No matter how poetic forms have changed from classical

verse to the present vernacular, all poetry must have a poetic form. Poetic forms come into being and are renovated on the basis of the language's characteristics, social changes and developments in versification, but they show a relative stability. Without poetic forms there can be no poetry and the writing would be another kind of art. Of course this does not mean that form determines content, but it does set limitations to the content, enabling it to find full expression or, conversely, enfeebling its expression.

Literature and art use images to reflect real life, and poetry is no exception. Narrative poems have to create concrete images of people and things; lyrical poems also express the thoughts and feelings of real people. *Pi* (similes and metaphors) and *hsing* (association of images) both have to use objective images; so a poet in his writing must use images to convey ideas. Of course, thinking in terms of images and thinking logically are not incompatible. Literature and art use images to reach logical conclusions, while the social sciences use logical analysis to make people recognize the complexity of objective phenomena. If we admit the difference between literature and science and the effects they produce in people's minds, we cannot deny that artists and poets have different ways of thinking from scientists in their creative and research work.

Among ancient Chinese poets, Chairman Mao had a relatively high regard for Li Po and Li Ho of the Tang Dynasty (618-907). The romantic, original tendency of these two poets made them write very seldom in forms with strict rules, because these could easily enfeeble their thoughts and feelings. However, all the poems which Chairman Mao wrote were in set classical forms with strict rules, yet these were unable to restrict his mighty, revolutionary spirit. In this letter, Chairman Mao points out that Han Yu apparently used prose techniques in poetry, but not all his work could be written off as some of his poems were not bad. This teaches us that we should learn from poets with different styles, adopting their good points and avoiding their shortcomings.

The "gang of four" by broadcasting idealist and metaphysical ideas created great confusion in literature and art. They opposed paying attention to form and branded artists who did this as "forma-

lists" who "disregarded the ideological content". They also opposed paying attention to conveying ideas by means of images, and accused those who advocated this of "negating the guidance of Marxism". Because they negated the basic laws of literary and artistic creation, works of art and literature became shoddy and trashy; characters were created according to generalized ideas; they were stereotyped and unlikable. To oppose thinking in terms of images actually means denying the need for writers and artists to go deep among the masses; because it is only by observing, studying and familiarizing oneself with different kinds of people in real life that one can have a vivid mental picture of a variety of characters. The tree of life is for ever green. Not to start from real life spells death for literature and art. So this brilliant letter of Chairman Mao's is a sharp weapon which we can use to debunk the reactionary views of the "gang of four".

Tsang Keh-chia (poet):

Chairman Mao in this letter to Comrade Chen Yi says, "Poetry uses images to convey ideas." For poets, this raises the problem of how to find images, how to select and how to generalize them. I personally believe that this involves going deep among the masses. Because all the raw material of literature, all images of people and things can only be found in real life and struggle, and only by going to this source can a poet or artist think in terms of images in his creative work. The deeper and more extensively we go into the life of the masses, the richer our imagery will be; then when generalizing we can choose certain images and reject others, forming definite likes and dislikes. A poem like all works of art should be a flower created through the use of imagery, moving people with its distinctive fragrance and colour. Poetry, like all good works of art, should move people by means of images expressing the poet's deep love and hate instead of convincing them by argument. When the "gang of four" advocated "fixing the main theme first", they wanted writers to create "heroes" behind closed doors instead of going deep among the masses.



Chairman Hua Is Close to Us Liberated Serfs (woodcut) by *Ab Ko* (Yi)

Chairman Mao in this letter affirmed the realist tradition in Chinese poetry, and paid tribute to the romantic tradition as well. The poems of Li Po and Li Ho in the Tang Dynasty, untrammelled by the rules of *lu shih*, are highly original with vivid features. They are unconstrained, striking, fresh and rich in content. Poets of the Sung Dynasty (960-1279) who used prose techniques sometimes show more logic than feeling, and their poems are less evocative than Tang poetry. This style of writing actually originated with Han Yu of the Tang Dynasty, but in the Sung Dynasty it became the new fashionable style of verse. Thus Chairman Mao said, **“Most Sung poets did not understand that poetry must convey ideas by means of images, and they disregarded the tradition of Tang poetry, with the result that what they wrote was quite flat.”** These comments show that Chairman Mao thought it most important for poetry to convey ideas through images.

Regarding the problem of poetic form in modern Chinese poetry, Chairman Mao was always concerned about this and he pointed out the path for us to follow. He told us that modern Chinese poetry should be more concise and polished, as well as basically regulated and rhymed. He also urged us to develop modern poetry on the basis of classical poetry and the folk-song. In this letter he again points out, **“It is very likely that the future trend will be to draw nourishment and adopt forms from the folk-song and develop a new type of poetry which will appeal to the general reading public.”** Chairman Mao’s repeated emphasis that the folk-song would be an important factor in the creation of our new poetry brings up the problem of how to popularize poetry, how to produce new poems with a Chinese form and mass appeal. For the last sixty years, ever since the birth of our modern poetry, Chinese poets have been exploring this problem but so far we have not found the solution. This is something to which we must pay serious attention, especially those among us who are writing poetry. It is our responsibility to make more experiments and explore further in the direction pointed out by Chairman Mao.

**Main Characters in
"Battling South of the Pass"**

- Li Tzu-cheng *head of the peasant insurgent army after the death of Kao Ying-bsiang, who styled himself Prince Valiant. Li Tzu-cheng assumed the same title*
- Liu Tsung-min *commander-in-chief of the prince's forces*
- Kao Yi-kung *Li Tzu-cheng's wife's brother, an officer of the insurgent army*
- Kao Kuei-ying *Li Tzu-cheng's wife and Kao Ying-bsiang's niece*
- Ho Chin-lung *an officer in the insurgent army whose cousin Ho Jen-lung was a government general*
- Shang Chiung *the insurgents' physician*
- Liu Fang-liang, Yuan Tsung-ti, Hao Yao-chi, Li Kuo, Tien Chien-hsiu: insurgent officers
- Sun Chuan-ting *military commissioner of Shensi*
- Hung Cheng-chou *commander-in-chief of the border regions between Shensi and five adjacent provinces*
- Kao Chieh *an officer in the insurgent army who had an affair with Li Tzu-cheng's concubine, then went over to the government forces*
- Kao Chien *Li Tzu-cheng's cousin, originally an officer in the insurgent army, who later surrendered to the government*
- Tsao Pien-chiao, Ho Jen-lung, Tsu Ta-pi, Sun Hsien-tsu and Tso Kuang-hsien: government commanders

Battling South of the Pass

"Battling South of the Pass" is taken from Volume 1 of the long historical novel *Li Tzu-cheng—Prince Valiant* by Yao Hsueh-yin. The whole novel will consist of five volumes. The first volume was reprinted in 1977.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Ming ruling class with Emperor Tsung-chen as its chief representative cruelly exploited and oppressed the peasants, so that class contradictions were very sharp. In the north the Manchus were encroaching on the borders, yet the government's main concern was to squeeze the people dry; therefore peasants everywhere rose in revolt. Li Tzu-cheng was one of the most famous leaders of the insurgent forces.

This excerpt, to be published in two issues, describes a campaign in the southern part of Shensi. The insurgents were defeated by numerically superior government forces, but after stubborn fighting Li Tzu-cheng broke through the encirclement with a few followers and retreated to another region. We shall later be introducing other episodes from this novel. This issue presents Chapters 7 to 9 in the first volume.

— The Editors

At cockcrow, Li Tzu-cheng's army set off silently northwards under the waning moonlight.

Liu Tsung-min, Hao Yao-chi, Liu Fang-liang and Yuan Tsung-ti led the way at the head of the vanguard, with thirty or so lieutenants and over four thousand men. The rear was brought up by Li Kuo and Tien Chien-hsiu in command of some score of lieutenants and a force more than three thousand strong. Headquarters' defence was entrusted to Kao Yi-kung with a dozen or so lieutenants and over two thousand men, as well as the cadet corps of some two hundred. Prince Valiant with his bodyguards and a few officers advanced between the vanguard and main army corps. Liu Tsung-min's two wives, Kao Yi-kung's wife, Li Kuo's wife and his adopted son Li Lai-heng all rode ahead of headquarters with many other officers' wives and their guards.

For seven or eight years now, Kao Kuei-ying had followed her husband Prince Valiant, sharing all his hardships and dangers. She was a good horsewoman and archeress. On the march, she would gird on a red silk sash, sling an ox-horn bow over her shoulder and buckle on a sword. In these tense times she was seldom without this sword, not that she spent much time on military training or would have been expected to join in battles, but she was always ready to fight or—should it come to the worst—to kill herself with this sword rather than be captured. Today, knowing that it was going to be hard to break out of the enemy encirclement, she made her daughter Lan-chih ride with her to avoid becoming separated in a *mêlée*. She also urged Li Kuo's wife Huang-shih and Li Lai-heng to stay near her.

Her niece Huang-shih, though her junior by only one year, was much less robust. Two miscarriages caused by horses stampeding had undermined her health. Now she was four months pregnant again, and three of these months had been spent in the saddle. The last two days she had suffered from dizzy spells and palpitations of the heart which made it difficult for her to bear up. But she had kept this a secret, for fear of worrying her aunt and her husband.

Her adopted son Li Lai-heng, in striking contrast, was as full of energy as a young tiger. Though only twelve years old he was utterly fearless, always longing to be left unchecked in battle so that he could charge the enemy line with his foster-father or Uncle Shuang-hsi, to cut down government troops with his flashing sword. However, each time there was to be a pitched battle he was ordered to stay with his mother at headquarters, and whenever the enemy came close the guards protected him — much to his indignation. Why wouldn't they let him fight? It was too bad the way grown-ups looked down on him! Many of the cadets were only a year or two older than he was — at most three or four years. How he envied them!

Today he was wearing a suit of specially made quilted armour. On his back he had a small bow, at his waist a sword and a red lacquered quiver holding some dozen arrows. They were only a foot and a half in length, yet with these arrows he could hit virtually any target within sixty yards and in several battles he had drawn blood with them. The saddle and harness of his sturdy Mongolian steed had fine silver trappings. He sat erect, inclined slightly to one side, the reins in his left hand, a whip in his right, and with a solemn yet eager look on his face as he gazed at the hills in front, the far-stretching cavalcade, the sparse stars in the frosty sky and the commander's flag fluttering in the moonlight.

Since their withdrawal from northern Szechuan early that spring, fighting continuously the whole long way, they had lost more than half their strength and were short of supplies; yet these troops, still ten thousand strong, were in fine fettle, upholding the splendid traditions of those early days when they had been commanded by Kao Ying-hsiang. As Lai-heng rode among them he felt inspired by their heroic spirit. He was longing for a big battle today, one bigger than ever before, so that he would have a chance to break away from his foster-mother and the others safeguarding him, to charge the enemy like Lo Hu and the rest of the cadets.

Their guide, a hunchback riding a grey mule, was wearing the shabby dark brown felt hat handed down to him by his father, and the old padded gown given him the night before by Prince Valiant.

He had left this gown unbuttoned, fastened at the waist by a thick rope twisted from rags and knotted in places where it had worn through. As he had no other food at home, he had brought only two buns made of persimmon meal. Stuck in the rope on his left side was a big sickle, and at the back a short axe for chopping firewood. The striking thing about him was that, holding the reins with one hand, in the other he was grasping an oak staff a good five feet long. Judging by its polish he must have used it for years. Having grazed the landlord's horses as a boy, he looked thoroughly at home on this big mule. Ground down by the rich all his life, he had been treated worse than a swine or a dog. But this morning, riding this sturdy mule in front of Commander Yuan Tsung-ti and the troops of Prince Valiant, all of whom treated him so cordially, he felt — for the first time — that he was a man and that life had significance. His face had lost some of its grimness.

As Yuan Tsung-ti had been told that this hunchbacked peasant was a taciturn fellow, he did not talk to him. As they rode on, however, a donkey braying behind the hill made him ask:

"Friend, what's that place over there?"

"You mean where old long-neck is braying?" The hunchback turned his head, speaking rather slowly but not stuttering.

"Yes, what's that place called?"

"Chen Family Bay. Someone's got up at the fifth watch to grind corn."

"Have they militia there?"

"Not many. Further north there are more."

After a short pause Yuan asked with a smile, "What do you need a staff for, old fellow, when you're riding? Are you thinking of joining in the fight with us?"

"Fight?" The hunchback laughed, hefting the staff. "I've never been in a fight. This is good oak, strong and heavy. If we fight government troops I'll have to use it, as I don't know how to use any of your weapons."

"Fine, bash them hard with your oak staff!" Yuan exclaimed, intrigued by this honest old peasant and drawn to him. "Keep

close to me, uncle, when the fighting starts, and I'll see you come to no harm."

"Don't worry, commander. I won't lose out."

"Won't lose out?"

"Right. Killing one of them, I'll break even; killing two, I'll be one up. I won't be the one to lose out."

"Why, uncle, I never thought you had it in you!" Had they not had to keep their whereabouts secret, Yuan would have laughed aloud.

His friendly, unassuming ways encouraged the hunchback to confide that for ten years now he had used this staff to ward off dogs when begging, to help himself along, and to drive away wolves.

"Once when I went up the mountain two wolves came after me," he said. "I killed one of them with this oak staff and chased the other away. But so far I haven't used it on any man. Today I may have the chance."

"Did you kill that wolf with one blow?"

"I knocked it down with one blow, then gave it a few more to finish it off."

"So you're pretty handy with it."

"Well, folk living in the mountains know how to cope with wolves. The wolf has a head like copper but a weak middle. Hit it on the middle and you can send it sprawling."

"But government troops have to be smashed on the head."

"Of course. I can hit out at them with this staff and then, when they come closer, swing my axe. If I lose my axe, there's still the sickle."

"Well, who could have guessed you were such a tough old fellow! You'd better not go home but come with us south of the Yellow River. How about it?"

The hunchback looked back with a smile, then said regretfully, "My old mother is still alive and needs looking after. If not for that, officer, you bet I'd join you and to hell with my age!"

All the men around, impressed by this, hoped to recruit him to go south with them.

"Old fellow, do you know the road to Honan well?" someone asked.

The hunchback, slightly taken aback, countered, "Do you pay no attention, brother, to taboos?"

"Not us!"

"Well, it's still better not to use such words." He added, "I don't know that route too well. If I did, I'd certainly take you there, even if it meant travelling to the ends of the earth."

The others could not help laughing, pleased with his honest answer as well as amused by his scruples. For among the peasant insurgents in this and other localities, many expressions were taboo and substitutes had been found in their place which had been handed down from father to son as a kind of secret language. For example, the character *lu* for "road" has the same sound as the *lu* in "defeat", and therefore guides preferred to use "route" instead. As "food" and "prisoner" are both pronounced *fan*, instead of "eating food" they spoke of "adding pulp". As "cock" and "peril" are both pronounced *chi*, they called the cock "sharp beak" and cockcrow "sharp beak breaking wind". As "duck" and "arrest" have the same sound *ja*, a duck would be called "flat bill". And substitutes were also found for many other expressions, not merely those with unlucky connotations. Thus "dog" became "skin", "barking", "bursting skin"; a "river", a "belt"; a "bridge", an "entrance", and so forth. The first category was strictly taboo, the second less scrupulously so. Li Tzu-cheng's peasant army, notably the prince himself and his officers, had long since stopped worrying about these taboos. If they occasionally used the substitute terms, it was to conform to the local peasants' customs. The hunchback had assumed that Prince Valiant's army would observe these taboos like other peasant insurgents — especially at such a critical time. He had therefore been very careful on this score himself. Their laughter took him aback, then he reflected:

"They are not the usual run of rebels."

They talked a little more, until they heard the watch sounded in a mountain fort above and shouting from the enemy guarding it.

The lurchback felt rather tense, although not frightened. The next minute he relaxed.

"What's come over me?" he chuckled to himself. "I've never talked so much in my whole life before."

The vanguard scaled a pass which led them into a deep ravine flanked on either side with high peaks and dense forests. No moonlight could penetrate here and the path was dark. To their left loomed a mountain fortress, its gateway visible above the forest in the cold light of the moon. Shrouded in mist, it seemed to be peering down at their cavalcade. The guards up there were sounding wooden clappers, and cocks had started to crow fitfully. There was no light in the fortress: only a few frosty stars twinkled above one corner of the bell-tower. They watched it as they advanced. And now they heard the raucous voice of a watchman:

"The fifth watch, nearly dawn,

Beware of raiders!

Man your posts well!"

The last long-drawn-out cry re-echoed eerily in the freezing wind.

Then they heard the same watchman ask:

"Have you manned your posts, mates?"

Another man answered, "We have!"

"Is all secure?"

"It is!"

These echoing exchanges seemed thrown down to them like a challenge. Many of them muttered curses, some spat angrily, others made derisive comments. In a low voice Liu Tsung-min rapped out:

"Pass on the order: No noise!"

"Pass on: no noise!"

This order, passed softly yet sternly both forward and back, eventually reached Prince Valiant too, who passed it on like any common soldier. It spread swiftly through the rank and file, through the family dependants and headquarters, to the rear.

Then all voices were hushed. Not a cough could be heard. Nothing but the clop of horses' hooves, the tramp of marching feet,

the clang of weapons; and all these sounds were drowned out by the sougling of the pines in the valley.

After marching for more than ten *li* they emerged from the valley to a plateau interspersed with hills. By the time they had covered another fifty *li* it was growing light. Further north rose the plateau south of the Tungkuang Pass. All around were hills, none of them too high or steep. Li Tzu-cheng, Chang Nai and some bodyguards spurred ahead, bypassing the vanguard to overtake Liu Tsung-min and warn him to watch out for an enemy ambush. The prince pointed to a hill seven or eight *li* away.

"Halt when you reach that hill to rest the troops. If there is water, you can water the horses."

Then he, Chang Nai and their guards rode aside up a bluff to await the main force and the rearguard.

The morning sun, big as a cart-wheel, dazzling as molten iron, flashed through the mist drifting over the eastern ridges to shoot light in all directions. It shone on the white frosted plateau, on the infantry and cavalry advancing swiftly in silence. The prince's main army corps had a red banner; other detachments had different colours according to their positions. All these banners big and small, red, black, white, blue and purple, made a magnificent spectacle as they fluttered in the wind up and down the undulating hills, sometimes disappearing from sight.

The prince strained his eyes towards the distance, wondering where the enemy was lying in wait. Before him, the whole terrain south of the Tungkuang Pass lay spread out like a huge map. Experienced in mobile warfare, he was able to remember all local landmarks and the distances between the places passed. Each time they halted he questioned the local people about the region's topography and customs. The area around Tungkuang was very familiar to him, as during recent years his peasant forces had time and again crossed from Shensi to Honan and back, going by the Tungkuang Pass to avoid the county town and have forty *li* or so to its south in which to manoeuvre. Li had led his troops this way before. The hills on the plateau south of Tungkuang to Mount Huashan were too low to provide a natural barrier. Many of the roads through the valleys



led to Wenhsiang County in Honan, and the terrain as a whole sloped down towards the east. The prince knew that during the last year and more Commissioner Sun Chuan-ting of Shensi and Commissioner Ting Chi-jui of Tungkuan had constructed three big fortresses in these valleys, each ten *li* apart, garrisoned by two hundred soldiers, in addition to smaller forts or blockhouses every three *li*, each garrisoned by twenty men and equipped with cannons. However, these were all designed to repel attacks from the east by small bands of peasant insurgents from Honan. If attacked from behind by troops coming down from the heights, they would prove useless. What worried Prince Valiant was not these fortifications but the news that Commissioner Sun Chuan-ting himself had led out a big force to lie in wait for him here. Opponents of the calibre of Sun Chuan-ting and Hung Cheng-chou, who controlled all the border regions between Shensi and the five adjacent provinces, had to be taken seriously as they were among the emperor's ablest commanders. They had a much larger force and their men were fresh while his had just completed a forced march. The least negligence would be inexcusable.

As the prince was pondering the situation, a messenger galloped up and saluted him.

"General Li Kuo of the rear has sent me to report to Your Highness," he said. "The troops of Tsao Pien-chiao and Ho Jen-lung are following close behind us, only two or three *li* away, but for some reason they have not attacked. General Li hopes you will warn the vanguard to be vigilant."

"I already have." Prince Valiant appeared still deep in thought. "Tell General Li to put on a spurt and not lag too far behind."

"Very good!"

The messenger wheeled his horse round and galloped off.

Li Tzu-cheng knew that the pursuing troops must be waiting for the battle to be joined in front before attacking from the rear. But where had Sun Chuan-ting stationed his troops? Were they still some distance away, or close at hand? He looked at the hill half cloaked in mist which the vanguard had already passed, but could only catch an occasional glimpse of the white banner of Liu Tsung-

min, the blue banner of Liu Fang-liang and the black banner of Yuan Tsung-ti as they fluttered over the treetops.

"Go quickly," he ordered a scout. "Tell them in front to halt, not extend the column too far."

The sun rose higher, shining on Mount Huashan to the west. Its five magnificent, sky-aspiring peaks were an awe-inspiring sight. The sun shone on the prince's banner on the bluff. Its silver tip gleamed as it flapped in the morning wind. The sun shone on Li Tzu-cheng too astride his charger Black Dragon as he gazed into the distance. Black Dragon's ears twitched at the sound of distant galloping and neighing, as if he scented battle in the air. He sneezed excitedly, then let out a long whinny. And strange to say, at that whinny of his, all the other horses fell silent.

Fearing that fighting might break out in front at any moment, Li Tzu-cheng brandished his whip and galloped down the bluff with Chang Nai and his guards after the advancing column. They had ridden another two or three *li* when suddenly, ahead of them, a gun boomed. At once, from the distant mist, came the roar of battle cries and concentrated gun-fire.

"It's started," he said softly.

Knitting his shaggy eyebrows, he whipped Black Dragon forward away from the main army corps, while close behind him followed Chang Nai and three or four hundred experienced and intrepid cavalrymen. The swords they waved glittered coldly in the sunlight.

The horses' hooves beat a fierce tattoo on the rocky path and hard red earth, as they charged like an angry tide or raging whirlwind.

Chapter 8

As Liu Tsung-min advanced in command of the vanguard, he kept a sharp eye on the terrain ahead. Long years of fighting had made him shrewd and resourceful. Before them now he saw a small stream with both its banks densely wooded and hills around — an excellent position for an infantry engagement. Alert to danger, he promptly sent a guard to notify Hao Yao-chi, Liu Fang-liang and

Yuan Tsung-ti to halt and send out scouts to reconnoitre. But it was already too late.

After more than sixty *li* of unbroken travelling the horses were sweating. As soon as they reached the stream they raced to drink from it. The infantrymen were even more tired and thirsty. Icy cold as the stream was, they bent down eagerly to scoop up water to moisten their parched throats. As they broke ranks a gun opened fire; then the government troops ambushed in the woods raised deafening shouts and charged them. At the same time, a battery of gunners and a company of archers stationed on the hill rained down cannon-shells and arrows on the insurgents. Some riders and foot-soldiers fell, their blood reddening the stream.

But Liu Tsung-min did not panic in face of this onslaught. He was not only "extremely intrepid" in battle, in the words of the official historians, but like all famed generals in history he remained as steadfast as a rock in times of tumult and danger. Now, once again, he was being put to the test. His troops were engaged in close combat by the stream only thirty paces away; each moment more of his officers and men were falling; shells and arrows were whistling past him thick and fast. Yet he noted with relief that the enemy had blundered. Had they allowed the vanguard past, then cut off the main army corps, surrounding them from all sides, the position would have been even more dangerous.

Suddenly his sorrel steed, its chest transfixed by an arrow, gave a mighty leap then dropped dead. Liu jumped nimbly down and took a big chestnut mount, remaining in the same spot. Some government troops recognizing him as the commander came rushing to capture him. When they were barely twenty paces away, the men around Liu prepared tensely to follow him into battle. However, he hardly glanced at these attackers. When they were within ten paces he turned to his lieutenant Liu Ti-chun and jerked his chin as if to say, "Drive them away. I don't want to be disturbed." Like an arrow discharged from the bow, Liu Ti-chun shot forward at the head of a group of riders. Swords flashed, horses pranced, and in no time the enemy were put to flight, leaving behind them

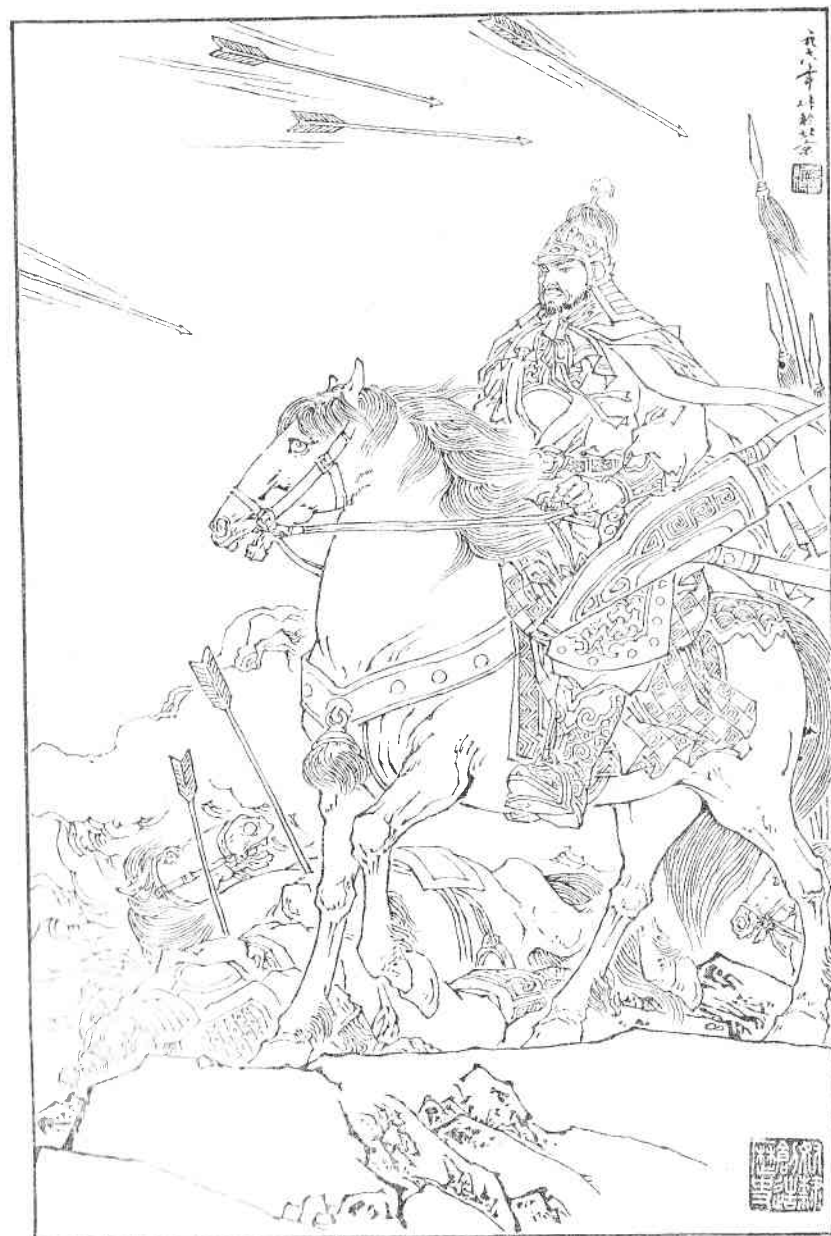
many dead and wounded. Liu Ti-chun would have pursued them across the stream, but Liu Tsung-min called him back.

Two of Liu Tsung-min's bodyguards were shot in succession, his own cape was pierced by an arrow; then his chestnut horse, shot too, reared up, whirled and fell to the ground. At once he took a grey remount. His men, though on tenterhooks, dared not urge him to withdraw. Apparently unaware of their concern for his safety, he noticed their impatience to join in the fray.

"Steady on," he said in a low voice. "Keep cool. Just wait."

He curbed his horse there by the stream, firm as a rock, straining his eyes to locate the enemy commander so that he could charge him. But in the billowing grey morning mist, it was hard to make out the commander's banner. And the enemy onslaught was so fierce that the fortunes of war were hanging in the balance. There was no time to be lost. With elation he watched Hao Yao-chi and Liu Fang-liang spur up the opposite bank; but then with dismay he saw them repulsed by the serried enemy ranks. At once he whipped off his cape and let out a thunderous roar. His grey promptly launched himself through the air and swift as lightning forded the stream to charge into the thick of the foe. Close behind followed some dozen officers and a few hundred cavalymen. They charged irresistibly through the enemy who far outnumbered them, veering now left, now right, breaking through their formation then turning back to search for the commander. Most of the government troops were foot-soldiers. Though they tried to encircle these riders and wipe them out, under this fierce assault their ranks broke up like walls swept away by a flood. Liu's horsemen leapt over or trampled on the government troops dead or dying on the ground.

While Liu Tsung-min headed this charge, Hao Yao-chi, Liu Fang-liang and Yuan Tsung-ti led their troops forward too without hesitation. They struck deep into the enemy formation and engaged in close combat, making the government gunners and archers powerless. Some retreated, others drew swords to resist. Hao Yao-chi fought valiantly and put one government company to flight. In his exuberance he left the field to pursue the enemy, not waiting for Liu Fang-liang and Yuan Tsung-ti. These two had first been fight-



ing shoulder to shoulder. Liu Fang-liang with his red-tasselled spear charged and killed many opponents, pinning some to the ground, knocking others off their horses. But by sheer force of numbers, the enemy succeeded in separating Liu's men from Yuan's—only some two thousand strong—and surrounding small groups of them. When Liu with less than three hundred lieutenants and men broke through one enemy cordon, another encircled them. For after several battles with Li Tzu-cheng's army, the government side did not have to see Liu Fang-liang's banner to recognize this handsome young commander with his red-tasselled spear and white horse. They hemmed him in yelling, "Get Liu Fang-liang! Take him alive!" But though they surrounded him and raised such a clamour, not one of them dared go near him.

When Liu Tsung-min discovered that Liu Fang-liang and his followers were surrounded by an enemy force four or five times their size, he galloped to the rescue. About a bowshot from Liu Fang-liang, however, he was halted by a deep chasm. Government troops lying ambushed on the other side leapt up, guns roaring and belching smoke as they charged forward shouting. Arrows rained down and many horsemen fell. Liu Tsung-min retreated a few steps, then looked around and decided to make a detour. He was about to lead his troops to the right when Liu Fang-liang broke through the cordon and headed his way. Liu Fang-liang had drawn his men up in a circle to resist the attack from all sides while awaiting a chance to break out. Seeing Liu Tsung-min only a bowshot away, halted by the gunners and archers on the bank, he waved his spear and called to his men, "Come on!" then charged like a tiger rushing down from the mountain. The enemy officer swung his great sword at him, but deftly parrying it with his spear he toppled the man from his horse and sent his sword flying. The government soldiers scattered in alarm, clearing a way for him. And the gunners and archers on the bank, when they saw him approach from behind, all turned and fled.

After Liu Tsung-min and Liu Fang-liang had joined forces they attacked the enemy again, rescued some comrades-in-arms who had been surrounded, and joined up with Yuan Tsung-ti.

By this time Hao Yao-chi was back with them too. After killing two enemy officers in swift succession, he was chasing another whose charger he coveted when he fell into an ambush and his men, coming under heavy fire, were thrown into confusion. Some enemy troops attacked them from the rear, while those whom they had been pursuing turned back to assail them too. So Hao was routed. He had now returned, lightly wounded, with little more than three hundred fighters left.

During the fierce fighting Liu Tsung-min, Liu Fang-liang and Yuan Tsung-ti had also lost four or five hundred men while many others had suffered injuries, some of them serious. Some although wounded several times fought on. Their heavy casualties put them in jeopardy. Bravely though they fought they were too small a force to defeat the enemy, who kept threatening to surround them. Liu Tsung-min perceived that the government had thrown at least twelve thousand men, picked troops at that, into this battle.

Despite their peril, Liu Tsung-min kept cool and did not lose heart. He felt confident that as long as they retained the initiative, attacking and putting the enemy on the defensive until the main force arrived, the prince would launch a surprise cavalry attack where the enemy was weakest, turning the tables completely. So he regrouped his men into two contingents which attacked sometimes together, sometimes from different directions, charging now east, now west. In this way he firmly kept the initiative, decimating and tiring the enemy whose ranks were in confusion, but no longer attacking their strong points.

Some time before this Li Tzu-cheng had reached the bank and concealed his troops in some thickets south of a hill. Standing on the hill, his right foot on a rock, he quietly watched the progress of the battle. When drums and shouts sounded a few li to the south as well, he turned his head to listen. He realized that the government had sent an unusually large force against him. In addition to a frontal attack they were harassing his flanks, commanded by Li Kuo and Tien Chien-hsiu. However, the prince showed no alarm or surprise, as if this were no more than he had bargained for. Chang Nai gazed up wide-eyed at his face, expecting him to issue

some crucial order; but Prince Valiant appeared so stern and composed that the boy had no idea what was in his mind.

Casually adjusting his old felt hat, the prince went on observing the fighting beyond the stream. When they saw Liu Fang-liang hemmed in, all the prince's officers and guards waited as tensely and anxiously as Chang Nai for the order to charge to his rescue. But when they looked at the prince, he still made no sign. When Liu Tsung-min came under fire from the ambushed gunners and archers, his brows suddenly contracted. When presently he saw that Liu Tsung-min was safe and that Liu Fang-liang had fought his way out from the cordon, scattering the gunners and archers to join up with Liu Tsung-min, though fierce fighting was still going on elsewhere the prince's eyes gleamed with relief and joy.

The prince could see that the government troops, though numerically superior, had certain weak points. First, their morale was not high and they would not fight to the death as did the insurgents; secondly, they had no unified, flexible command; thirdly, all but a few hundred of them were infantry. He was confident that it would not be hard to smash them. If he waited till their first impetus was spent, then struck where they were vulnerable he could rout them. But when through the light morning mist he caught sight of their banners, he muttered in surprise:

"So Hung Cheng-chou's taken the field!"

The banners showed that among the enemy troops in front were those commanded by Tsu Ta-pi and Sun Hsien-tsu, two generals under Hung Cheng-chou. That spring, when he was withdrawing from the north to southeastern Shensi, Hung Cheng-chou had sent Tsu Ta-pi to intercept him at Taochow; but the prince had defeated him and got through. Some ten days previously, he knew, Hung Cheng-chou had posted the troops of Tsu Ta-pi, Sun Hsien-tsu and others round Lantien, Weinan and Hsienyang to guard the approach to Sian. He had not foreseen that they would come all this way to the south of the Tungkuan Pass.

His surprise went unobserved by his followers, all of whom were waiting impatiently for his order to cross the stream. Glancing at

Chang Nai and the rest, so eager to do battle, the prince was well satisfied with their morale.

"Steady on," he said. "By and by we'll show them a thing or two."

His voice was quiet and casual as if he were speaking to himself. Yet this simple remark made a great impression on Chang Nai and the others, increasing their confidence in their coming victory, and serving as an order to make ready. At once they grew animated. Wang Chang-shun, a veteran of many battles, could never resist cracking jokes when things were tense. He whispered to a young fellow near him:

"Got your rope ready?"

"What do we need ropes for?" the youngster asked.

"Seems it isn't only Sun Chuan-ting ahead. Old Hung has shown up too. I've only one rope on me. We'll need another."

The young fellow smiled, his eyes still fixed ahead. And just then someone gave a low cry of dismay.

"Quick! To the rescue! Isn't that our guide?"

They saw the hunchback whipping his grey mule toward them, pursued by horsemen who were gaining on him. The mule leapt into the stream, but they still gave chase; and several foot-soldiers in front moved over to intercept him. They saw the hunchback raise his oak staff and knock down a soldier as his mule forded the stream, with the cavalymen close behind. The foremost drew abreast of the mule's tail and raised his gleaming sabre. One step closer and he could cut down the hunchback. At this critical moment a fighter, mortally wounded on the ground near by, suddenly heaved himself up and hurled a dagger at the cavalryman. The rider fell to the ground. A second later his horse was struck by an arrow loosed by Chang Nai. It reared up and whirled around, barring the way of the other pursuers. One of these, hit by an arrow, fell from his mount. The others turned tail and fled.

"Why are you on your own?" Prince Valiant asked the hunchback as he approached. "Have you been wounded?"

"I got cut off from the rest. Then a pack of soldiers chased me, wanting my big grey mule. But I refused to surrender!" The hunchback was panting for breath.

The prince noticed blood on his leg and on his staff. He asked again:

"Are you injured?"

"It's nothing. Just a scratch on the thigh."

The prince asked no further questions but sent him off to headquarters.

Now a messenger from Li Kuo came galloping from the south. Dismounting, he bounded up the hillock and reported to Prince Valiant that government troops behind them had begun to attack: Tsao Pien-chiao from the centre, Ho Jen-lung from the right and Tso Kuang-hsien from the left. Li Tzu-cheng nodded and glanced towards the south.

"Right. Go and tell General Li and General Tien that I'll be coming soon."

The messenger at once ran down the hillock, sprang to the saddle and with a crack of his whip galloped off to the south. Li Tzu-cheng remained there waiting for the arrival of his main army corps, at the same time working out a plan to defeat the enemy. He realized that when Tso Kuang-hsien had seen that he could not break through the Lantsaochuan Pass, Tso had concentrated his forces to attack him from the rear. Of all the officers under Hung Cheng-chou and Sun Chuan-ting, Tso Kuang-hsien was one of the bravest and ablest strategists. His well-trained troops, second only to those of Tsao Pien-chiao, were superior to those of other generals. As for Ho Jen-lung, he had courage but his troops lacked discipline. Li Tzu-cheng had worked out a plan to deal with him. This reminded him of Kao Chieh who had surrendered to Ho. A pang of shame made him grind his teeth with anger.

Soon the main army corps and headquarters arrived. The whole army corps, including the cooks, were horsemen. In this emergency all of them, not excepting the cadets, the cooks and the lightly wounded, were ready to go into battle. Even the old, the infirm and the womenfolk had armed themselves, prepared to sell their lives dearly.

The prince came down from the hill, surrounded by officers and bodyguards. Vaulting on to Black Dragon, he ordered Shuang-

hsi to stay behind with headquarters while he crossed the stream with Kao Yi-kung and five hundred picked troops from the main army corps.

"Prince Valiant, can't we go with you too?" pleaded Lo Hu, captain of the cadets, his breath coming in gasps, an imploring look in his eyes.

"No. You're to guard headquarters with Shuang-hsi," the prince ordered curtly. "Yi-kung, come with me!"

By this time the government army had discovered that Li Tzu-cheng's main force was behind a hill not far from the opposite bank. They quickly deployed some two thousand troops along the north bank to stop them from crossing the stream. The prince, coming to the bank, calmly took his bow from off his back.

"Let me, Prince Valiant!" begged Chang Nai.

Li Tzu-cheng threw him a glance and having full confidence in him said, "All right. First pick off that commander."

Chang Nai fitted an arrow to his bow and raised it without apparently taking aim. Twang! The enemy officer, waving his sword and yelling, fell headlong from his horse. Before his men had time to rescue him, another arrow toppled the standard-bearer near by. The banner tottered and splashed into the stream. Taking advantage of the ensuing confusion, Li Tzu-cheng brandished his glittering sword and pressed down on his stirrups.

"Charge!"

Black Dragon flew over the stream like a shooting star and in one bound was up the opposite bank, charging into the enemy. Chang Nai and Kao Yi-kung followed one on each side, with hundreds of officers and horsemen behind. Sweeping all before them, they smashed the enemy formation and pounded straight towards the commander's flag, round which most of the government cavalry was clustered. Wherever they charged, swift as a rushing torrent, the air was rent with deafening cries, the thunder of hooves, the clash of arms, the clang of swords striking helmets and coats of mail, and the thud of falling bodies.

Tsu Ta-pi and Sun Hsien-tsu had been confident that the insurgents, exhausted and outnumbered, could never withstand them,

little dreaming that these famished, worn-out troops would fight so bravely—each a match for ten. They had deployed several hundred cavalymen and some nine thousand foot-soldiers, including more than two thousand of Sun Chuan-ting's men, to surround and mop up the two thousand men remaining in Liu Tsung-min's vanguard, but had already found this task hard enough. The sight of Prince Valiant's banner filled them with panic. They were thinking of withdrawing when Sun Chuan-ting reinforced them with another one thousand, five hundred picked troops and ordered them not to retreat a single step but to capture both Li Tzu-cheng and Liu Tsung-min. This put fresh heart into them. They divided their forces into two: one contingent to hem in Liu Tsung-min's vanguard, the other to advance against Prince Valiant. Eager to win merit and fearing their stern commander, officers and men now began to attack more boldly.

When Li Tzu-cheng saw the reinforcements' arrival and the enemy's renewed attack, he quickly regrouped his forces and launched a fierce onslaught, leading the charge himself. He knew there was no time to be lost in routing the enemy; for if the battle dragged on and his army corps suffered so many casualties that they could not aid Liu Tsung-min, the situation would be dangerous. His officers and men knew this too; so they all fought like demons. They battled their way to the centre of the enemy formation, directly confronting General Tsu Ta-pi. But then just as victory seemed at hand—clang! —Li Tzu-cheng's sword broke in two, and the snapped off blade flew ten feet through the air. Tsu Ta-pi seized this chance to attack Li Tzu-cheng and his guards from all sides, yelling:

"Take the bandit alive!"

Prince Valiant was warding off their thrusts with his dagger when he heard Chang Nai call:

"Prince Valiant, here's Piebald!"

The prince took the boy's Piebald Sword from him and with a shout cut down several of his attackers. Then charging Tsu Ta-pi, he roared:

"Don't think you can run away!"

His sword flashed down like lightning. Tsu Ta-pi warded off the blow, but the sword struck again at his waist, forcing him to dodge. His lieutenants came to his rescue, joining in the desperate mêlée. When Tsu Ta-pi saw that he could not defeat the insurgents and his own losses were heavy, he withdrew his troops under cover of the cavalry. And Li Tzu-cheng did not pursue him but regrouped his men, meaning to join forces with Liu Tsung-min, Liu Fang-liang and Yuan Tsung-ti in order to give his army a brief respite. But then he discovered that Chang Nai, after passing his own sword to him and having only a dagger with which to fight, had been carried off in the affray.

High in his saddle, the prince looked ahead and saw the boy, trussed up, being carried off by two horsemen, one on each side, in the wake of Tsu Ta-pi's main column, already several hundred yards away. The government troops were forming a square, in readiness to attack again after resting. He could faintly hear Chang Nai cursing the enemy. At once he prepared to give chase and rescue the boy; but in view of the enemy's strength his officers thought this foolhardy. Old Wang Chang-shun seized hold of Black Dragon's reins. When he would not let go, Li Tzu-cheng rapped his hand with his whip.

"Get away if you're scared!" he cried. "If the lad hadn't given me his sword, he wouldn't have got captured. Even if it's a bit risky, of course I must rescue him!"

At this moment along came Yuan Tsung-ti with some troops. Li Tzu-cheng picked thirty of his own bodyguards and told Yuan to choose a dozen or so of his own, making forty or fifty in all. He made the rest stay behind while he and Yuan led this small band to charge the government formation. Before Tsu Ta-pi's men recovered from their surprise they had carried Chang Nai off. One of the prince's guards quickly cut the ropes binding his arms and handed him a fine sword snatched from the enemy.

When the prince and Yuan Tsung-ti charged the enemy, the other officers and men, a few hundred in all, rushed forward too with a shout. Tsu Ta-pi, seeing his troops scatter in confusion, wheeled his horse round to gallop off. Yuan Tsung-ti, eyes glaring, beard

bristling, raced after him raising his iron mace and with a roar knocked Tsu from his horse. His guards rushed frantically over to carry him away. Meanwhile Yuan Tsung-ti's lieutenant Tang Shou-su, already twice wounded in action, had galloped forward when Tsu was felled and with one sweep of his sword killed the signals officer, then dispatched a few others and captured their great banner. When Sun Hsien-tsu saw that Tsu Ta-pi had fled, he left off attacking Hao Yao-chi and galloped off too. Liu Fang-liang gave chase, felling his horse with an arrow; but before he could reach him Sun Hsien-tsu had found another mount and made good his escape. Sun Chuan-ting's troops, too, scattered and ran.

This put fresh spirit into the peasant insurgents to pursue and strike down their opponents. As the saying goes, a rout is like a landslide. Some of the soldiers whose commanders had fled put up a fight for their lives, but many were too demoralized to resist. Like sheep put to flight by a tiger, trampling each other they scattered all over the plateau. When fleeing horsemen knocked down foot-soldiers, these would curse them and hack at their mounts' legs or slash out at the riders. Since the infantry could not make off so fast, many of them were killed, forced to surrender, or captured.

Li Tzu-cheng did not let his troops go too far in pursuit, but sounded a gong to recall them. Assembling Liu Tsung-min and some other generals, he instructed them to pitch camp on the hill in front to rest and reorganize their troops. He was afraid that Liu Tsung-min, always hasty, might have all the prisoners put to the sword, especially as his lieutenant Li Yu was most bloodthirsty. The prince would have liked to put Kao Yi-kung in charge of the prisoners, but Kao was too urgently needed in the rear. After a little reflection he asked Liu Tsung-min:

"What shall we do with all these hundreds of captives?"

"Who has time to look after them now? Better kill them off."

"Watch that temper of yours." The prince eyed him repressively. "We mustn't ill-treat prisoners."

"But, Tzu-cheng, can't you see that Hung Cheng-chou has joined forces with Sun Chuan-ting? We're so short of men, we can't spare any to guard them."

Li Tzu-cheng said nothing, but looked at the prisoners and shook his head.

"Don't keep them. How are we to feed them?" asked Yuan Tsung-ti, fixing eyes round as bells on the prince. "Besides, when they capture *our* men, they never show any mercy. The devils cut out their hearts and gouge out their eyes!"

"Yes, kill the lot—make a clean sweep!" Hao Yao-chi chimed in.

Up galloped a messenger then from T'ien Chien-hsiu to report that the rearguard was hard pressed by large government forces, and they wanted the prince to send them reinforcements. Li Tzu-cheng ordered Hao:

"Take your men to help out, Yao-chi. Just hold the position, but don't fight pitched battles. I've a way to put the enemy to flight."

As soon as Hao had gone, Li Tzu-cheng looked sternly at Liu Tsung-min and Yuan Tsung-ti.

"Prince Kao was not like you!" he reminded them. "Prince Kao treated prisoners well and recruited enemy troops who had surrendered—and it paid off, didn't it? But you won't learn from his example." As this reference to their former prince silenced Liu and Yuan, he went on, "Go and tell them those who want to go back to their own folk can go home, but they mustn't rejoin the army. If we catch them serving the government again, we certainly won't spare them. Those willing to stay can join our ranks to fight together with us to save the country. But they must know their own mind. What rations we have we'll share with them. Send men to forage on the battlefield; the enemy must have dumped quite an amount of grain."

These orders issued, he crossed the stream with Kao Yi-kung, Chang Nai and a few hundred officers and men. Back at headquarters, he dispatched virtually all the cavalry of the central army corps as reinforcements, leaving only Shuang-hsi and some bodyguards with the non-combatant clerks and cadets to guard headquarters. Though the enemy forces at their rear were so strong, he was unperturbed, in control of the situation. He summoned his young

lieutenant Ho Chin-lung, as well as his own wife, and gave them certain instructions. Ho grinned and nodded.

"Right, right. This ought to work."

"Tell Brother Tien," said the prince, "we must defeat that lunatic Ho Jen-lung without giving battle, so as to concentrate on dealing hard blows at Tso Kuang-hsien and Tsao Pien-chiao." This said, he galloped off with the central army corps and his personal troops.

Kuei-ying promptly dismounted to carry out her husband's orders.

"When a wild dog attacks you, you mustn't begrudge a meat dumpling," she told herself. "But merciful Heaven, don't let Prince Valiant come across Kao Chieh!"

She hastily took out all her gold and silver, her silks and jewels and other precious objects, wrapped them up in small packages and gave these to Ho Chin-lung, as well as the dagger from her belt. Parting with her valuables did not disturb her, but she hesitated a little over the dagger of which she was very fond, and which she always carried. Recently she had thought of giving it to Hui-ying, but as her other foster-daughter wanted it too she had given it to neither, waiting till she found another gift equally good. Ho Chin-lung noticed her reluctance.

"Never mind that, madam," he said with a smile. "That's an heirloom. You'd better hang on to it."

Kuei-ying glanced at him, then made up her mind and handed over the dagger.

"An heirloom? Nonsense. Take it," she said crisply. "Hasn't the prince often told us that all true heroes from of old who want to do great deeds set store by people, not by precious things. I'd gladly give up something more precious than this if it would help us win victory and break through the encirclement, so that our men shed less blood. Off with you now, and work out how to carry out the prince's instructions. You're smart and persuasive. We are counting on you."

After sending Ho Chin-lung off, Kuei-ying led Hui-ying and Hui-mei up a height to watch the battle raging in the south. The hills and thickets in between obscured the view. But from the tips of

the banners flashing in the sunlight she could see that the enemy greatly outnumbered their force. From time to time the roll of drums and raucous battle-cries shook the earth, setting her nerves on edge. Her mind was in a turmoil. How she hoped that the prince's going there would save the day, and that she would soon hear news of their victory!

She waited anxiously, but no glad tidings came, no news at all. She could not make out from the banners which side was winning. Time dragged. A few minutes of waiting seemed a whole day. Why didn't Yi-kung send some word? Had Ho Chin-lung's plan worked? How worrying this suspense was!

She had reason for her anxiety: the fate of their whole army depended on this battle. She was worried too for her husband and her brother, especially Prince Valiant. Though he was a superb fighter and had many officers and men protecting him, she knew that in a battle even the greatest champion could be wounded. Whenever the prince took the field, she was always on tenterhooks till his safe return. And the peril this time was unprecedented. The government troops far outnumbered the insurgents, and they had good generals — Tsao Pien-chiao, Ho Jen-lung and Tso Kuang-hsien, as well as the renegade Kao Chieh. Reluctant to think of things coming to the worst, she could not dispel that contingency from her mind. She believed in a god above who knew all that was good and wicked in the world, so she kept praying to this god to protect Prince Valiant and bring his army safely through this danger.

While, motionless as a statue, she watched the fighting, her nephew's wife Huang-shih and her sister-in-law Chen-shih came up with the mothers and wives of some other generals and stood beside her in silence. A clamour broke out in the distance. Then Huang-shih saw the black banner of her husband Li Kuo withdrawing. She changed colour and could not help tugging at Kuei-ying's sleeve.

"Aunt, look! Look. . . ." she whispered tensely.

Kuei-ying's blood was running cold too, but she forced a smile.

"You've followed the army all these years and been through dangers of every kind," she said calmly. "How can you panic like this?"

"Somehow my heart won't be still. It feels as if it were in a seething cauldron."

"Don't worry. All our men are tried and tested. They'll rout the enemy."

A woman behind them put in timidly, "But we are so far outnumbered."

Kuei-ying glanced back at her. "Don't you know the saying: It's quality that counts in an army, not size. What use is a big army of second-rate soldiers?"

Horsemen galloping from the south left a trail of yellow dust on the other side of a wooded ridge, and Kuei-ying's heart beat faster. She was sure these must be messengers from the prince. As they drew nearer she recognized the foremost rider as Shang Chiung, the physician. Behind him rode one of his apprentices and four bodyguards.

This physician, a tall, lean man of about forty, had had no sleep all night and his deep-set eyes appeared more sunken than usual, his eyebrows and his nose more prominent. He normally stayed with headquarters on the march, but because some casualties had to travel slowly he had remained with the rearguard under Li Kuo. When the battle started, he had set up his small red banner emblazoned with the character "physician" behind Li Kuo and Tien Chien-hsiu's position and attended to the wounded brought back from the front. Now that the fighting ahead had stopped and he learned that many of the vanguard had been wounded, he had come to attend them, leaving two apprentices behind. Kuei-ying waved to him to stop, and hurried down to meet him. The physician signed to his apprentice and guards to go on, while he himself dismounted and came towards her.

"How goes it at the rear, physician?" she asked him softly.

"Don't worry, madam. As soon as Prince Valiant and Yi-kung arrived the enemy's morale sagged."

Kuei-ying felt relieved. She asked, "Are our casualties heavy?"

"In a pitched battle, of course there are bound to be casualties."

"Which officers are wounded, and which killed?" she asked in a voice too low for the other wives to hear.

Shang Chiung, holding nothing back, told her that many key officers including Ma Shih-yao, Ku Ko-cheng and his nephew Ku Ying had been wounded, some of them several times; but because the situation was desperate they refused to leave the battlefield. He was so moved as he reported this that his voice cracked, his sparse beard trembled. Kuei-ying felt a pang and tears sprang to her eyes.

"What fine officers and men. . . ."

She had to break off, choking. Shang Chiung raised his thumb.

"They live up to their prince," he said with a smile.

Unwilling to stop longer, the physician mounted his horse and galloped northwards while many officers' wives gathered round Kuei-ying to ask for news of the front. Concealing her anxiety she said with a confident smile:

"Don't you worry. Our vanguard has won a great victory, and the rearguard is winning too."

Her prestige, and the calm, confident way she spoke convinced them that she must have had good news, and they relaxed. To stave off more detailed questions, she waved them away, saying:

"You must take this chance to rest and have something to eat. After this battle we'll have to press on again."

She had just started back towards the height to wait for news from the prince when she saw Shuang-hsi approaching, an anxious, eager expression on his face. With him were some guards leading horses. She stopped, assuming that he had something important to tell her, perhaps some news to pass on. When Shuang-hsi came up, he pleaded like a child:

"Mother, I've nothing to do here. Let me go too."

"Go where?"

"F-father and uncle have b-been gone so long," he panted. "But the enemy still hasn't b-broken up. Things look bad. Do let me go!"

Kuei-ying could not repress a shiver. Staring wide-eyed at her foster-son she demanded:

"Why do you say things look bad?"

"With such a small force we need a battle of swift decision. The longer it's drawn out the worse for us. So, mother, do let me go! We can take the enemy by surprise, and a sudden attack may break their ranks." Shuang-hsi spoke urgently, no longer stuttering.

"Just you?"

"Yes, we must be bold and resolute to turn the tables on them."

"But . . . that's too risky."

"Even riding and sailing are risky, according to the proverb, not to say fighting. If you won't risk your child's life you won't catch the wolf. Nothing venture nothing win! Let me go, mother. There's no time to be lost."

Kuei-ying saw reason in this, but could not make up her mind. Eyeing the bandage on his left arm she frowned.

"You got wounded last night. You've only the use of one arm. How can you fight?"

"The right is my sword-arm, so it doesn't much matter if the left is wounded."

"But whom will you take with you? What can you do by yourself?"

"I'll take my bodyguards."

Kuei-ying glanced at the dozen or so fighters standing behind him. They were all determined and fearless, yet still she hesitated. For these few to throw themselves into the fray seemed to her suicidal, and unlikely to affect the outcome of the battle. All the family dependants at headquarters had their own bodyguards, but no more than ten each. Glancing round, she saw that they had all approached, eager to go to the front. Some had, indeed, openly expressed this wish. Still she could not make up her mind. Anything could happen at a time like this. What if a small enemy band broke through to headquarters and they had no guards to protect them? The responsibility was too much to take. As she was thinking it over, Lo Hu shot a look at Shuang-hsi, who nodded quietly and tipped him a wink. At once Lo Hu stepped forward.

"We cadets will go with Shuang-hsi!" he announced loudly.

Kuei-ying was startled. "You?"

"Yes, let us go!" cried the youngsters in unison. Without waiting for her consent, nimbly as monkeys they all mounted their horses.

Kuei-ying was too moved to speak. She could not bear to send these boys into battle. She knew which of them were orphans, which the sons of fighters who had fallen in action. She could call most of them by name, knew their pet-names too. During the last three or four years she had seen them grow from snivelling, puny urchins into sturdy lads of fifteen or sixteen. Some had been so timid that battle-cries had set them blubbling, but now they had toughened up, becoming brave young fighters with gallant deeds to their credit. It was she who looked after their clothing and nursed their illnesses, and they regarded her as their own mother. These last few months they had had several unexpected encounters with the enemy, and once headquarters had been attacked. In the fierce fighting over two hundred cadets had given their lives, and she had shed bitter tears for them. How could she let them go now with Shuang-hsi? Besides, Prince Valiant had expressly ordered that the cadets were not to be sent to the front unless the situation was desperate. Was she justified in sending them now?

"Let us go! Let us go to kill the government troops!" shouted the boys from their saddles, flushed with excitement. Their horses, eager for battle too, pawed the ground.

Still Kuei-ying said nothing. She gazed towards the distant battlefield, then at the worn, pink banner emblazoned "Cadets" and at all the boys. She could not reach a decision.

"Don't worry, mother," begged Shuang-hsi. "Let them come with me. I guarantee we'll win through and return in triumph."

Before he had finished they heard yells in the distance and the menacing roll of drums. A guard who had been keeping watch on a height darted over breathlessly to report:

"It looks as if our left wing is retreating."

Kuei-ying's heart contracted. She said incisively:

"All right, you can go. But remember to take the enemy by surprise and strike at his vitals. If you fail to do that, these extra two hundred youngsters can't do much."

"Don't worry, mother. We understand."

As Shuang-hsi turned to mount his horse, Li Kuo's wife, consumed with impatience, blurted out:

"Aunt, let him take my guards too. They're not needed here."

Kuei-ying nodded. "All right. We'll just keep a couple of men; the rest can go with Shuang-hsi." She turned to her own guards. "Chang Tsai, Chang-sheng and Erh-shuan, you stay here. The rest of you go."

Kao Yi-kung's wife and many others wanted to send their guards too, but Kuei-ying shook her head firmly.

"No need. We can't leave headquarters unguarded." Once more she impressed on Shuang-hsi the need for caution. Then she told Lo Hu, "Little Tiger, you must obey all Brother Shuang-hsi's orders. Though he's only two years older than you, he's much more experienced in fighting. He's your elder brother and your general, with full authority to decide who should be punished or killed."

No sooner had Shuang-hsi and Lo Hu mounted than Kuei-ying discovered that Li Lai-heng had taken off his cape, mounted his horse, and joined the troop of cadets. He would have escaped her notice had not the sunlight lit up his silver breastplate. In dismay she called out sternly:

"Lai-heng! What are you doing?"

"I'm going with them to fight the enemy."

"Get down! You're not to go!"

Her face was so stern that Lai-heng dared not disobey. With tears in his eyes he slithered down dejectedly from his saddle. Li Kuo's wife hurried over to pull him to her side.

"How could you give us the slip like that?" she said reproachfully. "That's really naughty."

Shuang-hsi gave the order to start. With him at their head, the thirty odd bodyguards and over two hundred cadets galloped off to battle.

Kuei-ying watched them cross the ridge in front, then summoned all the bodyguards and assigned a few to look after the families whom they served. The remainder, four hundred and more, she organized into one column under the command of her own



guard Kao Chang-sheng. She also appointed some of them as lieutenants, majors or sergeants according to their abilities, so that each man knew his own duties. Very soon these heterogeneous groups had become a well-organized armed force which could be relied upon in emergencies. Kuei-ying made these dispositions with the firm incisiveness of a seasoned commander. She knew every family's bodyguards so well that she assigned each the task for which he was best suited. This done, she noticed that young Lai-heng was pouting and brushing away tears with the back of his hand.

"You're still too young, child," she said kindly. "In another two years I promise to let you go into battle with them. Cheer up. To horse now, quick, and follow me!"

She mounted and rode with the boy up a nearby height to watch the battle raging in the south.

Chapter 9

Li Tzu-cheng had led the central army corps and the fighters directly under his command to speed to the support of the rearguard hard pressed by government troops. After crossing two ridges he saw the enemy banners all over the plain. Tsao Pien-chiao in person, brandishing his big sword, was charging Li Kuo's formation. Li Kuo, resisting stubbornly, was finding it difficult to hold his ground. What was happening to the right wing was obscured by the thickets in between, but the left wing had been thrown into confusion and many men had fallen back. The prince sent Kao Yi-kung and Chang Nai with five hundred horsemen to aid Li Kuo in front, while he himself galloped towards the left wing with a cavalry force one thousand six hundred strong. When the men retreating saw these reinforcements, they turned and plunged into the battle again. Some small groups of officers and men who had been surrounded by the enemy were fighting desperately with no hope of victory, but just to sell their lives dearly. At sight of the

prince's great banner, they cheered and cut their way through encirclement. Once more the initiative was in their hands.

Tso Kuang-hsien's nephew Tso Shih-hsiung, who served under his command, because of his ruddy complexion was nicknamed Red-faced Tiger. A general known for his courage, his uncle considered him invincible, a tower of strength in his army. He was furiously pursuing and slaying the peasant insurgents. At Prince Valiant's arrival he let out a roar like a tiger. His beard bristling, his eyes glaring, he hurtled straight towards him, determined to show new prowess by killing him. Li Tzu-cheng, with not so much as a shout or a word, spurred forward like lightning to meet him. His sword flashed. Tso Shih-hsiung, failing to parry it, was run through and thrown from his horse. The prince, having put his troops to flight, rounded on Tso Kuang-hsien's main force.

When Tso saw Prince Valiant charging him at the head of his cavalry, he led picked troops to meet him, and a fierce battle was joined on the plain between two low hills. Tso's horsemen from Kansu and Ningsia were good fighters, and Tso himself was an experienced general. In the last few years he had won quite a few victories over the insurgents. So, undeterred by his nephew's death, he was confident that he could wipe out Li Tzu-cheng's main force, win fresh glory himself and avenge Tso Shih-hsiung. This was his first encounter with Prince Valiant. After the battle had raged for fifteen minutes he had to admit that here was a truly formidable opponent. He had never before come up against a swordsman so intrepid, cool-headed and skilful. First they clashed in single combat; then others rushed forward to join in a general mêlée; then commanders and men paired off again to fight singly. Sometimes Tso's troops forced the insurgents back; then the prince's cavalry recovered the lost ground. The two sides were so well-matched that neither could gain the upper hand.

Through the heat of battle Li Tzu-cheng remained cool, always keeping the whole situation in mind. He knew that, for him, protracted fighting was disadvantageous. Firstly, because their force was too small to be able to afford too many losses in one engagement. Secondly, because his main opponent was not Tso but Tsao Pien-

chiao; and if Tso pinned him down too long Tsao's forces might break through their front positions. So after contending for nearly half an hour, he suddenly raised his sword signalling withdrawal and spurred his horse away. Tso's dismay at failing to defeat his opponent now turned suddenly to elation.

"So you've caved in at last!" he exclaimed.

He led his troops in pursuit. However, being an experienced general, when he noticed the prince's orderly withdrawal he suspected a ruse and dared not give chase too hard. Before long, sure enough, Prince Valiant whirled around and drew his bow. Tso knew then that he had been tricked. He instinctively ducked, cursing under his breath as — clang! — an arrow severed the tassel on his helmet, making him rein in in alarm. Another arrow whistling through the air made the standard-bearer next to him fall headlong, the banner collapsing over his prostrate form. Before Tso had recovered from his surprise, the insurgents wheeled round and charged.

Other generals in such a situation might have been unnerved and fled. And the least sign of alarm on the commander's part would undermine his men's morale, making them break ranks. But although Tso was very much shaken he showed great courage, shouting to his troops to fight hard and emboldening them. In fact, he no longer hoped for victory but only to withdraw in an orderly way, keeping his losses to a minimum until they reached some advantageous position which they could hold. He knew very well that if this turned into a rout it would not only wipe out his past prestige, but he might well be arrested by imperial guards sent by the emperor, then taken to the capital to be executed in the market-place after having all his property confiscated. So while withdrawing he tried to keep his formation and fought back from time to time.

Li Tzu-cheng, put out by Tso's stubborn resistance, was incensed at being unable to rout him forthwith. Just then, not far to the left, on the other side of a hill overgrown with young pines, a cloud of dust sprang up and some of Tso's foot-soldiers on higher ground yelled:

"The bandits have got reinforcements!"

These reinforcements galloped through the infantry, throwing them into disarray, whereupon Tso's cavalry wavered and their line broke. Li Tzu-cheng exulted, thinking that Liu Tsung-min must have sent Liu Fang-liang or Yuan Tsung-ti to his aid. As the enemy horsemen faltered, he felled two officers with his sword, ran through another, then charged through a gap in their ranks. Though the prince's cavalry had lost three or four hundred men, now that victory was in sight it became an irresistible force striking terror into the government troops. Thrown into utter confusion they fled for their lives, trampling each other down. Tso killed several who were escaping, but could not avert his army's complete collapse. He had to flee himself with a few dozen bodyguards, regardless of his army's fate, his own reputation and the emperor's anger.

After pursuing for two or three *li*, Prince Valiant called a halt. As the gong sounded to muster the cavalry, another body of horsemen swept like a whirlwind over the hill towards them. It was Shuang-hsi with the cadets, not troops sent by Liu Tsung-min. The prince rejoiced that Shuang-hsi had become such a skilled commander and that the other boys had turned out brave fighters — who had come in the nick of time. Though he had ordered them not to leave headquarters, he could hardly reproach them under the circumstances. Hastily reviewing his troops, he found that the cadets had suffered very few losses. He led them then in an orderly column to advance on Tsao Pien-chiao's troops.

Kuei-ying watching on horseback from the height had seen the government colours thrown into confusion by the left wing, some falling, others retreating, while the prince's standard pursued them. Though too far away to see his name on the banner, she could make out quite clearly the white tassel on its tip which gleamed silver in the sunlight. Before this the sunlight had seemed rather dim, making the withered grass and gaunt trees on the plain appear sere and desolate. But now everything had changed. The sun, brightening, cast a glow over the whole scene.

"Thank god we've won again!" she murmured with a sense of tremendous relief, then turned to the boy beside her. "Lai-heng,

go quick to headquarters. Tell your mother our left wing has won a victory!"

Tears of gladness and excitement filled her eyes and nearly brimmed over.

Liu Tsung-min, not knowing the situation in the rear, now led up three hundred horsemen as reinforcements. Upon reaching headquarters, he heard of the left wing's victory. Accordingly he halted his troops and mounted the height for a better view. He saw that the battle on the left side had ended: no movement of banners or troops could be seen. The central section was out of sight on the other side of a hill, but he could hear the din of drums and war cries. To his astonishment, there was no tumult of battle from the right wing, although judging by the colours there Tien Chien-hsiu was still resisting Ho Jen-lung. Apparently the government troops were gradually withdrawing while Tien's men pressed slowly forward, but there was no skirmishing. He asked Kuei-ying:

"What's happening over there?"

"Just now there was very fierce fighting, but then it let up." She smiled. "Prince Valiant sent Ho Chin-lung over there. His stratagem may have succeeded."

Liu Tsung-min, understanding, chuckled. Listening to the sounds from the central section, he said:

"Tsao Pien-chiao is retreating too. The prince has attacked from the left. Tien Chien-hsiu and I will attack too from the right and give him a good thrashing."

"Right. Don't miss the chance. I'll wait here for your victory."

Liu Tsung-min went on while Kuei-ying remained on the height watching with her bodyguards. She did not know if Tien Chien-hsiu had encountered Kao Chieh at the front, but could guess that the ruse of sending Ho Chin-lung had been successful. A faint smile lit up her wan face. She glanced at Lai-heng who had ridden back to her side.

"Remember, child," she said with a sigh, "war depends not only on courage but also on tactics."

While the battle was raging in the central section, Ho Jen-lung sent two of his best lieutenants, Chou Kuo-ching and Tung Hsueh-li, to attack Tien Chien-hsiu's position; but Tien's officers Chang Shih-chieh and Liu Hsi-yao repulsed them. As Tsao Pien-chiao had thrown five thousand men into a fierce attack on the centre, and Li Kuo was hard pressed, Tien had transferred half his forces to support Li; thus his right wing had to take the defensive and his men were forbidden to advance too far. When Chou Kuo-ching and Tung Hsueh-li launched a second attack, Tien would not join battle with them, simply ordering his troops to keep up a clamour and repulse the enemy with guns and arrows. Chou and Tung, forced back, sent a messenger to report to Ho Jen-lung; at the same time they sent Ho Kuo-ying to challenge the insurgents, hoping to enrage Tien into coming out to take the lists himself.

This Ho Kuo-ying, Ho Jen-lung's nephew, was only twenty-one, a hefty, surly youngster with bushy eyebrows. He had been a mischief-maker in his village, for ever fighting with the other boys, a dare-devil who never gave up until his opponent was beaten. He grew up tremendously strong and skilled in the use of weapons, and so became one of Ho Jen-lung's bodyguards. Within a couple of years, because he acquitted himself well in the wars, he was made an officer. As a boy he had given himself the grandiose title Vanquisher of Ten Thousand, and this was what the other villagers called him. After joining the army he still used this title in place of his real name. Even Ho Jen-lung seldom called him by his name. When someone was needed to challenge an insurgent officer, Ho Jen-lung would summon him and slap him on the back.

"Good fellow, here's a job for our Vanquisher. Go to it!"

Or he would pour him a big bowl of wine and urge, "Come on, drink this up. Go and show the stuff you're made of. Don't make me lose face."

Encouraged like this, the Vanquisher would fight with redoubled fury. So now Chou Kuo-ching, unable to rout Tien Chien-hsiu, thought it a good stroke of luck to have this fellow sent him by Ho Jen-lung. First, deliberately, he provoked him.

"You'd better not take the field today, Vanquisher. If you do, you'd better look out. Tien Chien-hsiu has quite a few champions who may prove more than a match for you."

"Shit on them!" swore the Vanquisher, already half drunk. "Don't talk to me about champions. Even Tien Chien-hsiu himself isn't good enough to lick my arse. Let him come to cross swords with me! If I don't capture him alive, my name's not Ho."

"How many men do you need to back you up?" asked Tung Hsueh-li.

"Not one. I'll go without even a bodyguard. If I took a single man with me I'd be a coward!"

Chou Kuo-ching and Tung Hsueh-li agreed to let him ride out alone to provoke the insurgent general to come out and fight. Chou who had always disliked this young braggart reflected, "If you get beaten, puppy, and taught a lesson, you'll have to stop swaggering." Tung Hsueh-li, however, was afraid that Ho Jen-lung might hold them responsible if this venture miscarried.

"Be careful, brother," he warned. "No man's invincible. Don't do anything rash."

The Vanquisher, ignoring this warning, raised his lance and galloped off to challenge Tien Chien-hsiu to single combat. But as reinforcements had not yet arrived and Tien had sent some of his troops to relieve the left wing, he decided not to enter the lists himself. He paid no attention to Ho Kuo-ying's curses and insults. His subordinates, goaded to fury, cursed back and volunteered to capture the Vanquisher. But Tien turned a deaf ear to their requests. He withdrew a bowshot from his camp, and relaxed with closed eyes in the saddle. It was at this point that Hao Yao-chi brought up three or four hundred men, to Tien's great delight. He promptly took Hao to a nearby hill to discuss their plan of action, pointing with his whip at the left wing and central battlefield.

Now one of Liu Hsi-yao's lieutenants named Li was a hot-tempered lad. He could not stomach the Vanquisher's shouted taunts. Riding up to Liu he fumed:

"Chief, since when have Prince Valiant's men put up with such

insults? Are we turtles hiding in our shells? Let me go and capture him!"

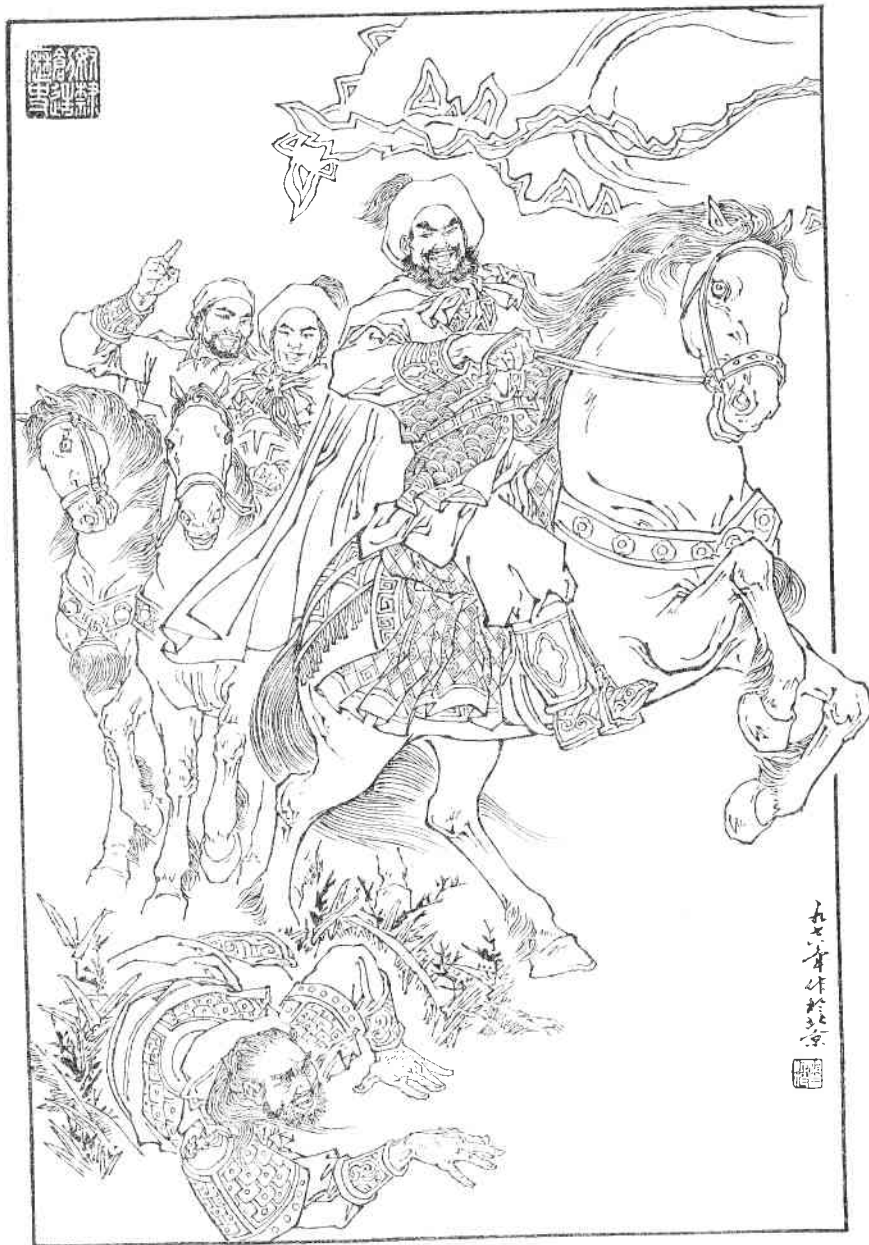
Liu Hsi-yao was furious too, itching to ride out to capture the Vanquisher, but as he was a general he had to obey Tien's orders and put up with the enemy's provocations. Reining in his horse just inside the camp, he was longing for Ho Kuo-ying to come close enough for their archers to shoot him down. But the Vanquisher was cautious. He kept out of range of the insurgents' muskets and crossbows. In his frustration Liu agreed at once to his lieutenant's request. He knew that Tien Chien-hsiu was a generous, lenient commander. If this young officer succeeded he would not get reprimanded, that went without saying. If he failed Tien would swear at him, but with Liu interceding young Li would not be severely punished. Still, he knew that the lad was no match for the Vanquisher.

"Take ten men with you," he advised. "Charge and take him by surprise. Another thing..." He glanced towards Tien and winked. "I know nothing about this. Off with you."

At once Li picked ten sturdy horsemen on fine mounts. The camp gate was flung open and out they shot like arrows towards the foe. But the Vanquisher, on the alert, was prepared for this. When Li and the others came within striking distance he wielded his lance swift as lightning and in no time felled several of them and wounded others, who had to retire from the battle. Li, though wounded himself, would not give up and fought on desperately with his three remaining comrades. As the Vanquisher laid about him, cheered on by the government troops, another rider on a piebald horse suddenly came galloping from the insurgent camp. Wielding a long sword he shouted:

"Brothers, go back! I'll capture this bastard Ho!"

The Vanquisher evaded his four opponents to turn his lance towards the newcomer, who warded off the blow. Ho whirled round and thrust even more fiercely at his breast. This time, instead of parrying the blow, with amazing dexterity the insurgent caught hold of the lance with his left hand, brandishing his sword with his right. As the Vanquisher dodged, the lance was torn from his grasp and



hurled away. Before he could draw his sword, he was seized by the belt and hoisted on to the other's saddle.

"Don't move, fat-head! One move and I'll chop off your head!"

Petrified, Ho could only watch the horse's hooves flash over the grass and pebbles. "This is the end," he told himself. "I'm done for." When they reached the insurgents' camp, he was yanked up and dumped on the ground. Luckily he fell on some dry grass or he would have lost his front teeth.

"Do you admit defeat, dog?" the horseman asked him.

"Are you Tien Chien-hsiu?" The Vanquisher rolled over and sat up, looking up at him.

"I am Hao Yao-chi. Do you own yourself beaten or not?" Hao Yao-chi bellowed with laughter, not waiting for an answer.

"Yes, I've heard of you..." his captive murmured. "Hurry up and kill me. What is there to laugh at? Twenty years from now I shall be a brave fighter again!"*

By this time Tien Chien-hsiu had come over.

"How about it, brother?" asked Hao Yao-chi. "Shall we finish him off now?"

"No hurry. Leave him for the prince to deal with." Tien told his men to bind the captive to a pine in the nearby forest.

Since the start of this battle Ho Jen-lung had remained in the background, leaving Chou Kuo-ching and Tung Hsueh-li to attack Tien Chien-hsiu. It was not that he did not want to win fresh laurels, but he had decided not to take the field until Tsao Pien-chiao and Tso Kuang-hsien had nearly defeated the insurgents, so that he could share in the fruits of victory without losing too many of his men. During the last half year, owing to various grievances, he had not fought as hard as Tsao or Tso. One reason was that they had long since been appointed full commanders, while he was still only a deputy-commander. The second was that Tsao had nearly five thousand men under his command, and Tso about three thousand

*A man about to die, believing in the doctrine of transmigration, often showed his courage by boasting that in his next life he would be a fighter again.

five hundred, whereas he himself had less than two thousand five hundred whom he regarded as his capital. If he lost too many of them he would not have enough troops to deploy. The third reason was that the government had issued no pay for the past five months, so even had he wanted to do more his troops might not be willing to risk their lives.

As he was waiting for news of victory from Tsao Pien-chiao and Tso Kuang-hsien, he was taken aback to receive Chou Kuo-ching's report. Instead of capturing a bandit chief, he had lost a lieutenant for nothing! He was certain to be reprimanded. Glaring at the messenger he roared:

"Tell Chou Kuo-ching and Tung Hsueh-li to go all out. If they fail to rescue the Vanquisher I'll kill them!"

In fact, he knew that rescuing Ho Kuo-ying was easier said than done. He would have to attack with his own troops as well.

"Bring wine!" he yelled. "Sound the drums! Fall in!"

Two of his bodyguards brought over a stoup of wine which they had ready, and having poured him a big bowl served him a steaming leg of boiled mutton. As the drums thundered, Ho Jen-lung craned his neck to watch his troops mustering, at the same time gulping down wine and mouthfuls of mutton. By the time he had tossed off two big bowls in succession and wolfed down most of the mutton, his troops were drawn up in formation in shining armour. Dropping the mutton bone and throwing aside his cape, he drew his sword.

"To horse!"

He mounted his horse followed by a large escort of guards and officers. Then together with several hundred riders and foot-soldiers they charged towards Tien Chien-hsiu's position.

After the capture of the Vanquisher, Chou Kuo-ching and Tung Hsueh-li had sounded drums and advanced against the insurgents. But having seen for themselves how he had been caught like a chicken pounced on by an eagle, and having learned that his captor was Hao Yao-chi, they were too intimidated to make more than a token attack. Hao Yao-chi volunteered several times to go out to fight them, but Tien would not consent, being sure that Ho Jen-lung would come

against them in person with his best troops. Sure enough, in less time than it takes for a meal, Ho Jen-lung came galloping up.

Ho Jen-lung, riding at the head of his troops, reined in and loosed off a loud flood of abuse. Tipsily confident that his was the superior force, he looked down on the insurgents. As Tien Chien-hsiu and Hao Yao-chi debated whether to answer his challenge or not, Ho Chin-lung arrived with a message from Prince Valiant. After hearing the prince's plan, Hao Yao-chi was still dubious. He wanted to attack in force and beat Ho Jen-lung in a pitched battle, then together with Li Kuo go to fight Tsao Pien-chiao. However, Tien Chien-hsiu reached a different decision.

"Yes, let's adopt the prince's plan," he said. "If it doesn't work we can still have a good fight with this lunatic. Our best course is to defeat the enemy without incurring any losses ourselves." Then he pointed with his whip at the pine forest and said to Ho Chin-lung:

"Brother, your nephew Ho Kuo-ying is tied up over there. Why don't you do him a favour and let him go?"

Next, Tien ambushed his main force, dispatching no more than two hundred horsemen to line up in front of the hill backed by Hao Yao-chi and some other officers, while he himself stayed by their colours. Ho Jen-lung had nothing but contempt for this small force confronting him. He spurred on his horse, brandishing his sword, and charged at Tien Chien-hsiu.

"Surrender at once, Tien Chien-hsiu!" he bawled.

Tien Chien-hsiu rode out slowly and calmly with only a few bodyguards. He saluted.

"General Ho, let's talk things over," he said with a smile. "We can have a trial of strength later."

"All right, but be quick about it."

"You come from Michih, Prince Valiant's home district, so you should have some consideration for him. Why press him so hard?"

"Bah! I'm a general appointed by the court; you are rebels. I'm mopping up bandits for the government. What consideration should I have for you?"

"You started as a poor scholar. It was only because you acquitted yourself well in the fighting against us that in less than ten years you rose to be a general. If you wipe out all the insurgents, you'll have no further chance to win credit. You are not very strict with your soldiers. Wherever you go you burn villages and slaughter, rape or rob innocent countryfolk, so the people are seething with discontent and hate you to the marrow of their bones. If once you defeat us, the court will have no further use for you. When all birds are shot, the bow will be set aside. When all hares are killed, the hounds will be stewed and eaten. When that time comes you'll not only have no chance to distinguish yourself, the court is likely to punish you for harassing and killing innocent people to boost your own position. It's because I know how straightforward you are, general, that I'm putting this to you bluntly. I hope you'll think again."

Ho Jen-lung reflected, "No wonder people say Tien Chien-hsiu is highly regarded by the rebels. He certainly knows how to talk!" What Tien had said made sense to him, as the same ideas had sometimes occurred to him too. However, not forgetting his own position, he swore:

"Stop talking nonsense! Dismount at once and surrender, otherwise I'll run you through!"

Not turning a hair, Tien Chien-hsiu went on, "Another thing. Even if you have no feeling for a fellow-countrymen, you should at least have some for members of your own clan. Many of your kinsmen have joined the insurgent forces. Two of our thirteen leaders belong to your Ho family. For example, the far-famed Ho Yi-lung is your cousin, and Ho Chin is your nephew. These two are now in Honan and Hukuang. In my own force I also have quite a few of your clan and kinsmen, all of whom would like to meet you. I shall never surrender, you can drop that idea. After you've met these kinsmen, I'll be glad to fight with you to the death."

This said, Tien Chien-hsiu withdrew. At once several dozen riders behind him came forward. The young officer in front saluted Ho Jen-lung from his saddle.

"Fourth brother!" he cried cordially. "We haven't met for years. Fancy seeing you here!"

Ho Jen-lung was taken aback. "Aren't you Ho Chin-lung?" he said, eyeing the officer. "I heard that you joined the bandits some years ago. So you're still alive and kicking. You should have died long ago, you swine!"

"That's no way to talk, fourth brother. All these years I've been dreaming of seeing you again and here's my chance at last. We're still brothers, not distant kinsmen. Why should you be so angry? Why huff and puff and glare like that? Do brothers have to hack each other to death, making our ancestors turn in their graves?"

"Stop talking nonsense!" roared Ho Jen-lung. "Execution is too good for a rebel like you. And don't call me your 'fourth brother'. For our ancestors' sake I won't kill you. Hurry up and tell Tien Chien-hsiu and your other bandit chiefs to come out and surrender. Don't stick to your dead end—wise up!"

"You're wrong there, brother." Ho Chin-lung smiled, quite unruffled. "We're going different ways and serve different masters. I'm not trying to persuade you to surrender, and neither should you try to persuade me. Brothers are brothers after all. We were born into the same clan. If we trace back a few generations, our ancestors had the same parents and ate from the same pan. You may be heartless enough to disown me, but I can't follow suit. And to call me a rebel isn't right. When Chu Hung-wu* fought for the empire, didn't the Yuan court call him a rebel too? When bad government drives the people desperate, what can they do but rebel? If I'd stayed at home farming, brother, my mother and I would have starved to death long ago, or I'd have been done to death by government troops. Of course, now that you've feathered your nest you don't care whether the common people live or die." He laughed cynically. "You started off as a poor scholar. Ten years ago you were forced by poverty to lay aside your brush and become a soldier. But once you rose to be an officer, brother, you forgot all about the sufferings of the poor. You let your soldiers run wild and kill

*The first emperor of the Ming Dynasty.

innocent people to win a name for yourself. Yes, it's the blood and tears of the common people that have won you promotion and made you pots of money. Well, these years I've been following Prince Valiant to fight the rich and relieve the poor, to beat the government troops and save the people. In life my heart is at peace, and after death I can face our ancestors. Just look into your own heart, brother, and compare yourself with me. How can you reproach me?"

"You farting bastard!" Ho Jen-lung turned to his men. "Tie up the swine! Quick!" he yelled.

Ho Chin-lung smiled coolly at Ho Jen-lung's followers. "Steady on," he said. "I've not finished yet." He turned back to say earnestly to Ho Jen-lung, "Fourth brother, you may have no family feeling, but I do. I can't follow your example. Just think, if you seize me to win credit at court, will our nephew Ho Kuo-ying escape with his life?"

"Where is Ho Kuo-ying? Send him back and I'll spare your life."

"We are gallant men. When the other insurgents heard that he was my nephew, they let him go." Ho Chin-lung turned and beckoned. "Kuo-ying! Go back now. Fourth brother won't reproach you."

Ho Kuo-ying emerged then from behind Tien Chien-hsiu's banner and sheepishly made his way towards the government troops. A desperado when cursing and challenging the insurgents, he slouched along now with lowered head. He had rejoiced at his unexpected release, but was now ashamed to go back to the government side, for fear of being punished.

The government troops were astounded by his safe return, and Ho Jen-lung himself was flabbergasted. Ho Chin-lung seized this chance to wave to two of Ho Jen-lung's lieutenants.

"Nephew Kuo-hsien! Nephew Kuo-yung!" he cried cordially. "How have you been? Well, this is a great occasion, a family reunion! I never expected to meet so many kinsmen here!"

He pulled on his reins, intending to pass Ho Jen-lung, but refrained for fear that the latter might bar his way. Instead he went on waving to the government officers and men.

"Come on over! Let's have a chat. What's there to be afraid of? Fourth brother can put any blame on me." He shot a glance at Ho Jen-lung. "Fourth brother, don't be angry. Even that old emperor of yours loves his own kith and kin, so why shouldn't we?"

Most of Ho Jen-lung's guards and trusted officers were from the Ho clan; the rest, if not distant relatives or old friends, were fellow-provincials or neighbours. And it was the same with the personal troops of Ho Kuo-hsien and Ho Kuo-yung. People said that investigations of the several hundred men in Ho Jen-lung's headquarters would reveal that they were either clansmen or distant relatives. From their commander's point of view, he liked to help his own folk and could trust them; from his subordinates' point of view, a general would always promote his own relatives first.

Now that Ho Chin-lung had greeted them, many officers and men came forward to chat with the insurgents and exchange family news. Quite a number of Tien Chien-hsiu's troops also came from Michih and they too greeted old neighbours. Though Ho Jen-lung tried to put a stop to this, he realized that under these circumstances it would be impossible to kill these rebels.

"You bandit, Tien!" he swore at Tien Chien-hsiu. "If you're too cowardly to fight, go and fetch your bandit chief here!"

He wheeled his horse around then and galloped off. And Ho Kuo-hsien and Ho Kuo-yung, not daring to stay behind, turned and left the field as well.

However, most of the government troops did not leave. After their commander had gone they relaxed and chatted more freely with the insurgents. Even those not from the same county discovered acquaintances from Yenan Prefecture in northern Shensi whom they asked for news of home and mutual friends. When they had talked for a while, Ho Chin-lung and his bodyguards produced their packages of gold and silver, trinkets, silk and other valuables and presented these to their relatives and friends among the government troops. Tien Chien-hsiu also told his men to distribute gifts. Finally, Ho Chin-lung took from his belt the dagger which Kuei-ying had given him and gave it to one of Ho Jen-lung's lieutenants.

"I found this precious dagger three years ago when we opened up the imperial sepulchre at Fengyang," he said. "Look, the handle is made of ivory inlaid with gold; the sheath is of shark skin inlaid with gold, jewels and mother-of-pearl. According to some experts, it comes from the imperial palace and is worth at least three hundred taels of silver. I'll trouble you to present this trifle to fourth brother as a small token of my regard. I'll find some better gift later to show my respect."

Since this young officer had already received a gift from Ho he agreed readily. Taking the dagger, he examined it, smiling all over his face as he admired the glittering blade, the gold, precious stones and mother-of-pearl on the handle and the sheath.

"Well, well!" he exclaimed. "I've never seen the like of this before!"

Seeing that his mouth was watering, Ho Chin-lung quickly took from his pocket a gold hairpin.

"Take this too, nephew," he urged.

"No, no. You've given me so much already, uncle, how can I take more from you?"

"This isn't for you. Just accept it and I'll explain." When the young man had put the gold hairpin away he continued, "I've heard that you're married. When you find someone going home, get him to take this hairpin to your wife as a little present from your Uncle Chin-lung."

All those government troops who had received gifts were delighted; the others who had not, though rather envious, were happy too. Both sides said goodbye cheerfully and returned to their camps.

As Tien Chien-hsiu knew that Ho Jen-lung could not attack for the time being, he secretly dispatched another three hundred horsemen under Liu Hsi-yao and Ho Chin-lung to reinforce Li Kuo in the central section.

There, because Kao Yi-kung and Chang Nai had joined in with a cavalry force five hundred strong and Tien Chien-hsiu had sent several hundred horsemen, Tsao Pien-chiao's fierce attack began to be repulsed. Tsao did not want to suffer heavy losses, so now that the insurgents had fresh reinforcements and Tsu Ta-pi and

others had been defeated, he ordered his main force to withdraw, leaving only a few troops to attack in turn while he waited for Tso Kuang-hsien and Ho Jen-lung to break through from the two wings. When he learned that Ho Jen-lung had not joined battle he was disconcerted, but he still pinned his hopes on Tso Kuang-hsien. When Prince Valiant routed Tso and Ho Jen-lung's troops fell back, he was dismayed. Fearful of being surrounded on three sides, he called for an orderly withdrawal southwards, fighting a rearguard action himself and using his archers and gunners to cover both wings.

Thus it happened that when the prince led his cavalry towards Tsao's right wing, he was halted by the archers and gunners. As Tsao's troops were in orderly formation and their morale appeared good, Li Tzu-cheng decided not to attack in order not to sacrifice any more men.

In this battle, nearly half of the three thousand men under Li Kuo and Tien Chien-hsiu had been killed or wounded, while Prince Valiant had lost some five or six hundred men. Although the government losses were much greater, as the insurgents had a much smaller force and no possibility of reinforcements these casualties badly undermined their strength. So in spite of their victory, the prince and his generals were heavy-hearted. Only when they spoke of the success of their ruse against Ho Jen-lung did a smile appear on the prince's face.

"It's a pity that only half your plan worked," observed Tien Chien-hsiu with regret. "We didn't manage to capture or kill Kao Chieh. I wonder why he put in no appearance today."

The prince made no comment, though he too regretted this deeply. He had hoped that Tien could confront Kao Chieh at the front and curse him roundly, for then while Kao was mortified and mentally unprepared Hao Yao-chi, Ho Chin-lung and their men could have charged to capture him, and that would have served as a warning to others who were thinking of going over to the enemy. As Kao Chieh had previously had the highest respect for Tien Chien-hsiu, this plan had seemed feasible. But where had that confounded traitor gone? Had he left Ho Jen-lung's camp?

Hao Yao-chi interpreted the prince's silence as displeasure at his failure to catch Kao Chieh.

"Tell us what to do, brother," he said. "We can take revenge on him later. Next time I meet that bastard, I'll see that he doesn't escape me!"

Li Tzu-cheng made his troops rest now and eat some dry rations, then issued the following orders: light casualties remaining with their own units and the badly wounded travelling with headquarters, they were to set out at once and march fast to the north. By now it was nearly three in the afternoon. He hoped they would not meet any big government force within the next three or four hours. Once darkness fell, they had nothing to fear from the enemy, and one night's swift march should bring them to Wenhsiang.

When Liu Tsung-min arrived with his reinforcements, the rearguard had already set off on the march. After being briefed he made ready at once to catch up with the troops in front. Before leaving he said:

"Prince Valiant, I've something to tell you. Let's ride together."

The prince sensed that this was important. He told Kao Yikung to accompany the main column while he, Liu Tsung-min and some bodyguards galloped ahead. After they had gone some distance and reached open ground, Liu Tsung-min who was riding abreast with him slowed down.

"Prince," he said in a low voice, "I've found out from a captive what Lo Ju-tsai's done, damn him!"

"What's happened?"

"He's retreated with his nine columns to the mountains near Chunchou and Fanghsien. And he's surrendering to the government!"

Li Tzu-cheng, astounded, turned pale.

"Is this true?" he asked.

"That captive was Sun Chuan-ting's follower. He was passing on Sun's orders when he got wounded and we captured him. He should know what he's talking about."

After a short silence the prince said solemnly, "All Lo Ju-tsai wanted was to preserve his own strength, not to back us up, and

that was bad enough. If he's surrendered now, even for tactical reasons, that's still more unpardonable."

"A slippery character like that will never amount to much anyway."

The prince whipped his horse forward. Liu Tsung-min and the others followed close behind. When they reached headquarters, Li Tzu-cheng leapt down from Black Dragon.

"Bring that spy here and execute him!" he ordered in ringing tones.

His men went at once to the forest by the roadside to fetch the messenger supposedly from Lo Ju-tsai but actually sent by Kao Chien. However, in the heat of battle when their attention was elsewhere he had escaped. The prince's face darkened, but he did not reproach the men assigned to guard the messenger. After a brief silence he gave a humourless laugh.

"All right. We'll settle scores with him when we meet Kao Chien again."

He knew that Hung Cheng-chou had taken all his forces to the pass to join Sun Chuan-ting, and that Lo Ju-tsai had surrendered in the south and would not be coming to his aid; yet under the circumstances he had no alternative but to force his way through. He waved his whip, and the central army corps and headquarters moved forward again.

The rearguard had just set out when Tsao Pien-chiao and Ho Jen-lung came up in pursuit. Tso Kuang-hsien, who had rallied his troops and reinforced them with a reserve from the rear, was following Tsao Pien-chiao. Prince Valiant ordered Li Kuo not to engage them in battle but to press on with all speed. Thus there were only occasional minor skirmishes at the rear.

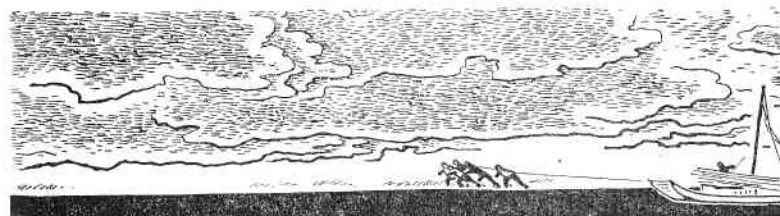
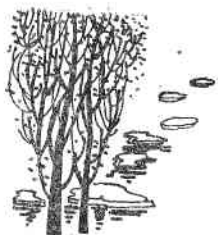
The insurgents now had no more foot-soldiers, for some had been killed and others were riding horses seized in the battle. This speeded up their march. Within a couple of hours they had covered nearly fifty *li*, leaving the enemy infantry more than twenty *li* behind, with only the government cavalry in close pursuit. In the tenth month the days are short, it would soon be dark. When the sun set over the hills, the insurgents relaxed. But just then a gun roared in front,

and ambushed troops from the hills on both sides leapt out, with a fearful din of shouting. The prince just in front of headquarters was taken by surprise. Glancing ahead and then to right and left, he drew his sword and muttered calmly to himself:

“So it’s starting again.”

(To be continued)

*Illustrated by Fan Tseng
and Chao Hung-pen*

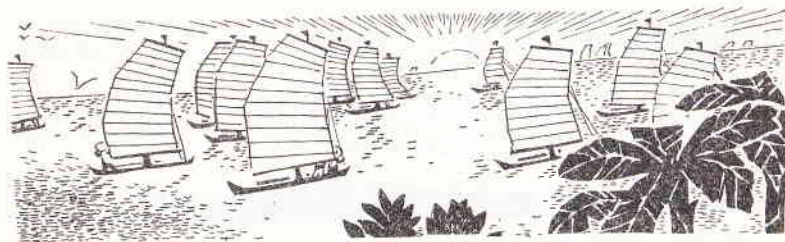


Lao Sheh

That Other Day

Born in poverty,
early bitterness remains with me;
then as I grew, troubles stayed on,
so that looking out on chaos around
I felt like a lost one in a dying land;
had it not been for the Communist Party
a wandering ghost would I have become.

These two poems were written in 1965 by the late Lao Sheh, a well-known writer.



And Now

In the eve of life, bright times surround
my days without cares to bow me down;
sons and daughters compete in toil,
sharing with workers and peasants, so that
my poems sing in the new, my pen
works to clear away the useless old.
Don't laugh at my walking stick,
surely will I catch up with the vanguard.

Translated by Rewi Alley

Willows (traditional Chinese Painting)
by Yao Yung-mao (Yi)



Ho Shu-yu

Sister Red Plum

According to the lunar calendar it was the 12th day of the eighth month. Counting on her fingers Third Granny found that a full month had elapsed since Red Plum, her daughter-in-law, had joined her family.

Tall and slim, with lively eyes, Red Plum had two black plaits which hung down to her waist. As well as her good looks, she was a hard worker in the fields and an expert at weaving and spinning at home. Since she could write and was good at figures, Third Granny decided there was no longer any need to trouble other people to write letters to her son. Her daughter-in-law was all that she had wished for. No wonder other old women in the village told her enviously, "You really are a lucky old woman. Your son's learned to be a driver and has found a good wife. What a happy life you're leading now." At this, Third Granny grinned from ear to ear.

It was the local custom that Third Granny's daughter, Evergreen, should call Red Plum her sister-in-law. But there was also a habit that "in-law" could be dispensed with if they hit it off well together. Evergreen was like Red Plum's shadow. When her Sister Red Plum

went to the field, she would follow her shouldering a hoe; when her sister weaved, she would sit beside her and spin; when her sister read books or newspapers, she would take up a textbook and learn how to read and write. Whenever her brother was away, she liked to sleep beside her sister.

They lived like sisters while Red Plum and Third Granny were like mother and daughter. Third Granny was overjoyed to have such a happy and harmonious family atmosphere.

So no one would have guessed that things could take a nasty turn. For two days Third Granny seemed rather unhappy. When Red Plum had been chosen as the women's team leader, Third Granny was very disturbed. She felt as uncomfortable as if some sand was in her eye. What vexed her most was that Red Plum said nothing at the meeting to try to get out of it. And as her mother-in-law, she did not dare to insist that her daughter-in-law refuse the responsibility. Besides, a sort of agreement had been made before the girl married. Red Plum had been the head of the Nine Girls' Cotton-planting Section in New Village, her mother's place. Prior to her marriage, she had asked her fiancé all about her future mother-in-law. Was she still deeply influenced by the old ideas or not? Was she up-to-date in thinking? She also asked the commune woman director to let her mother-in-law know that, after her marriage, she meant to organize the women in Pai Village to raise the same high-yield cotton as in her own village, and that she would take an active part in the work of the brigade, without any interference from her husband's family. Since her husband's death some years ago, Third Granny had lived alone with a son and a daughter whom she treasured. She was well aware that she should not spoil her son's marriage just because of her foolish ideas. Since her son, Chun-shan, was also a Party member, the young couple shared the same political ideas. So she had to accept Red Plum's conditions.

For all her agreement then, her face was very gloomy now. After the election, Red Plum glanced at her mother-in-law and asked smilingly, "Do you think I'll be able to manage it, mother?"

Third Granny spoke straight from her heart. "You can't begin to know just how difficult such work can be in our village," she

said. "You see, Yang-wa's mother was pretty shrewd. She was the women's team leader for several years but didn't get herself involved in anything. As far as official affairs were concerned, she dealt with them in name only."

On hearing her mother-in-law's words, Red Plum smiled but said nothing. From her expression, Third Granny could not tell whether she had understood her or not.

For two evenings, girls and young wives, including Tsui-tsui from the south end of the village and Ming-wa's wife from the north, shuttled in and out of Red Plum's room, even chattering until midnight. Third Granny overheard them from the next room. They discussed the high-yield cotton and a new variety. She wondered why they wanted to give up their present comfortable life for all this? Moreover, Team Leader Chou was a stubborn type of person. They might be creating a whole heap of trouble for themselves. This annoyed her. But in the next room the chattering and giggling was as merry as if a show was being rehearsed. She decided to tell Evergreen about her fears so that she could pass these on to Red Plum, but her daughter did not come back that night as she stayed with her sister-in-law. Early that morning, the two of them went to the fields together and, as soon as they had finished the cleaning after lunch, they left with the other women to pick cotton.

Now Third Granny sat on the *kang* spinning. The monotonous humming of the spinning-wheel set her mind in a tumult.

2

As Third Granny sat spinning alone in the house, Red Plum, Evergreen and the women of the Second Team, with crates and baskets, were on their way to the cotton field, chatting and laughing all the way. It was a pleasing sight to see the silvery cotton bolls, and Red Plum thought of the nine girls' high-yield cotton in New Village. Perhaps they were also picking the first cotton now. Every year at this time cotton bolls were bursting. Together with the other girls, she would be at the field from dawn till dusk. Now she was picking cotton with her sisters in Pai Village for the first time. Though

the cotton here was not as abundant as that in New Village, she was none the less delighted to be at the cotton field and see the blooms.

Just as she put down her crate, a harsh voice boomed out from behind her: "You'll mess up the job! Hey there! Start from the east end, all of you. Those picking from the west end come over pronto!"

Red Plum turned round to find a man, wearing spectacles, standing arms akimbo at the edge of the field. She shifted her eyes to the women. Sure enough, they had scattered in twos and threes over the field. So she called out, "Aunties and sisters, come over here. Each of you take a furrow from east to west. This comrade doesn't seem to think much of us."

Her words took effect and the women did as she instructed. They separated according to their sections, each section working on a plot and each woman taking a furrow. They looked gay and beautiful, moving among the furrows of green and white in their colourful clothes. Red Plum wore a lined coat with white flowers printed in blue. For convenience, she tied her plaits at the back, which made her look more demure and poised.

"Do you like our Pai Village?" Ming-wa's wife asked Red Plum.

"Yes, everything's nice — the people, the land, everything," replied Red Plum. Then she added, "No one could say otherwise."

"That's what you think!" interrupted Tsui-tsui. "Our brigade lags way behind the others, to say nothing of comparing it with that advanced one at your mother's village."

"Being advanced or not is a question of people," said Red Plum. "If we work together with one mind, we can easily catch up with the advanced brigades."

"I know what you mean," Ming-wa's wife teased. "The land and scenery aren't that important. The nicest of all the people here is your man Pai Chun-shan, who's educated, clever and good at his job. And if he hadn't been driving the car sent to take you, the expert on high-yield cotton, to attend the meeting at the county headquarters, the famous Red Plum wouldn't have come here."

"You said it," Red Plum replied taking up the challenge. "And if I hadn't known that there was a capable book-keeper, Pai Ming-wa,

who accompanies his wife beautifully on the violin, I'd never have come here either."

Her quip brought a roar of laughter. As they joked with each other, the rough voice barked out again:

"Do the job properly! Cut out all that joking!"

Red Plum turned her head. The man was still hovering around.

Her eyes fixed on the man she whispered to Evergreen in bewilderment, "Who is he?"

Shooting a glance at him, Evergreen replied, "Don't you know him? He's Yin-wang, and he's bone idle. During the past two years he went here and there doing black market business. This year at the meeting about summer crops our brigade leader criticized him and since then he's behaved a bit better. Now Team Leader Chou has assigned him to lead us to pick cotton."

"Why, is he in the team leadership?" Red Plum asked.

"Well, he's no cadre," Tsui-tsui answered. "He's Chou's nephew and people nicknamed him 'Mynah's Beak' behind his back."

Sensing their discontent, Red Plum inquired, "But why should a man supervise us women to pick cotton?"

"That's the sort of thing that is done in our village," grumbled Tsui-tsui.

While they were talking about him, Yin-wang yelled again.

After a while, Red Plum raised her head to see him sitting under a tree at one end of the field. She was disgusted at sight of such a lazy layabout. After giving some instructions to the women, she left her furrow and walked over to where he was sitting.

Leaning against the tree, Yin-wang sat cross-legged, eyes closed, humming a local tune and beating time with his pipe.

"What are you doing here?" demanded Red Plum angrily.

Yin-wang, taken aback, stopped humming. Opening his eyes he saw Red Plum gazing at him sternly. Everybody said Third Granny's daughter-in-law was hard-working, obedient and polite, so why was her tone so sharp the first time she spoke to him? He knocked his pipe against his sole and replied resentfully, "It's none of your business!"



Seeing that he was irritated, Red Plum said calmly, "You're fit and strong, so why don't you work? If you don't like to pick cotton, go and move some fertilizer. There are plenty of jobs to be done."

Every word from this woman's mouth was a provocation. Yin-wang rose to his feet and, his eyes ablaze, shouted, "Who the hell do you think you are telling me what to do? If you're so clever, go to the county headquarters and ask your husband to come back here. I'd like to see him dare to tell me what to do!"

Furious as she was, Red Plum still said quietly, "Enough of your nonsense! To be serious for a moment, we women have our own

team and section leaders. There's no need for you to keep bawling at us."

In an attempt to squash her, he threatened, "If you think you're so great, go and tell Team Leader Chou. And who's going to be responsible for your shoddy work if I quit?"

"Just buzz off!" Red Plum declared. "If our job isn't up to scratch, just tell Chou to look me up."

Yin-wang gesticulated and bellowed, "What a boaster! Don't think you can give me any orders without Team Leader Chou."

"Sis," Evergreen called, "save your breath. You just can't talk sense to people like him."

"Hurry up," Tsui-tsui urged. "It's just a waste of words talking to him."

Red Plum eyed Yin-wang scornfully and said, "Your yelling doesn't impress anyone, so carry on making a rumpus if you like." Having said this, she went back to her work.

Yin-wang was enraged and was on the verge of swearing at Red Plum, but she had already moved away erect and dignified. He could only follow her with his eyes. While working she called out to the women, "Aunties and sisters, do your work carefully. After we finish this plot, we'll stop for a rest and then start again from the west end."

"O.K.," Tsui-tsui answered in a determined tone. "We always listen to our own team leader. Carry on!"

"That's right," the women all agreed.

Yin-wang wondered why the women were so united. Then hearing them call Red Plum their "team leader", he remembered that a new one had been chosen to replace Yang-wa's mother on maternity leave. How awful to have chosen such an ill-mannered woman as this young wife! In a huff, he watched them work, their comments grating on his ears.

"Let him bawl. Don't pay any attention to him."

"He thought Red Plum was like Yang-wa's mother. But this time he's run his head into a brick wall and is learning that we're not just weaklings. He shouldn't be such a male chauvinist."

A fit of laughter ensued.

Yin-wang felt hot under his collar. After having smoked his pipe, he forced out a cough and yelled at Red Plum, "I know your kind. All right then, since you're so smart, you can take charge of the work. I'm off to see Team Leader Chou." He made off in a hurry.

Straightening up, the women saw him rushing away. Tsui-tsui shouted after him, "Since you're leaving, who's going to be responsible for our careless work?"

Yin-wang glared at her and quickened his pace. The women burst out laughing and Red Plum joined in.

"Sis," Evergreen whispered to Red Plum, "he's going to report everything to Team Leader Chou. There might be some trouble."

"We're picking the cotton by ourselves and we've liberated one pair of hands for other work," Red Plum said. "How can that cause trouble?"

"You're still too new here," Evergreen explained. "Team Leader Chou's rather selfish and hates to be criticized."

Humming to herself, Red Plum thought over her sister-in-law's warning.

3

When Yin-wang was supervising the women, he usually upset them, picking on them and ordering them about. But now Red Plum had sent him packing, they were very pleased. During a break, they rested in little groups at the edge of the field discussing the affair.

"She's usually so soft-spoken and sweet, but today she got the better of Yin-wang."

"Young as she is, she knows what's right and wrong."

"Third Granny said she was brave enough to get up and criticize the landlords when she was in her teens. Even an assembly of several hundred people didn't stop her."

"Oh — *aiyaya*. . ."

Under an old elm tree at the north end of the field, however, Team Leader Chou's mother was gossiping with some old women.



"Third Granny's too soft," said Chou's mother. "And with Chunshan away from home that little minx has got it all her own way. Now my daughter-in-law isn't like that. She doesn't meddle in things that don't concern her."

"Quite right," one of the old women agreed. "Nowadays these young wives and girls don't know their place, trying to be equal with the men."

Oblivious to these comments Red Plum was busy talking to some of the women sitting round her.

"Sister Red Plum," said Tsui-tsui, "the cotton yield here is only half that of New Village. Will you help us to plant several *mu* of high-yield cotton next year?"

"Good idea," Ming-wa's wife chimed in. Turning to Red Plum she continued, "You take the lead and I'll get the followers."

"It's not as simple as that," Evergreen cut her short. "Where can we get the seeds?"

"If the brigade will give us a small plot," Red Plum said, "there'll be no problem over the seeds. I can ask my mother for some. Next year we can first try to plant a few *mu* and, if it works, we'll suggest the other team do the same..."

Before she had finished, Evergreen gave her a nudge. Turning round she saw Team Leader Chou inspecting their work. She rose and walked over with the others towards him.

Bending down Chou picked up some cotton and pushed it under Red Plum's nose.

"Who did this?" he demanded.

From his surly expression and unfriendly tone, Red Plum knew that he meant trouble. She did not answer him, but instead asked the women beside her, "Was this plot done by Section Three?"

"It doesn't matter which section did it," glowered Chou. "Whoever does careless work will have her workpoints deducted."

"That's all you know. How to deduct workpoints," argued Tsui-tsui, poking her head out from behind Red Plum. "Why don't you behave like the advanced brigades and discuss the matter in a democratic way, and criticize and educate the person concerned?"

Staring at Tsui-tsui in a hostile way, Chou replied, "Ha! Some

democratic discussion you need. You can't even pick the cotton properly, and you're as stubborn as mules."

Stung, Tsui-tsui added, "It's got nothing to do with me."

"Team Leader Chou," Red Plum said moderately, "we should investigate the matter before making a criticism."

"All right," Chou said coldly. "You do that. I'll wait and see."

Tsui-tsui asked the women standing around, "Well, have you all lost your tongues, Section Three? Who did this furrow? Why don't you open your mouths?"

The women of Section Three looked at each other and then at Aunt Chou, who was sitting at the north end. They murmured, "It wasn't my job, whatever happens."

Evergreen smelt a rat. She rushed to the women of Section Three and demanded bluntly, "Was it Aunt Chou's work?"

Some of the women nodded hesitantly, while others whispered it was.

Alert and sharp-tongued, Tsui-tsui quickly challenged Chou, "Just look who's so stubborn? I'll wait while you deduct her work-points."

"Aunt Chou," Evergreen called out, "come over here!"

Chou's mother had in fact heard all the fuss but it had not bothered her. In response to Evergreen's call, she rose slowly to her feet and ambled over to them.

The situation was tense. Unable to wriggle out, Chou was forced to ask his mother, "Did you pick the cotton here?"

Pulling a long face the old woman flatly denied it.

Scrutinizing the women of Section Three and then casting a glance at Red Plum, Chou finally declared, "Since nobody admits it, I'll ask your leader to undertake responsibility for it."

Meanwhile Ming-wa's wife whispered to Evergreen, "It was Aunt Chou all right. Look, her crate's still over there."

Evergreen lost no time in fetching it.

"Is this your crate, Aunt Chou?" she asked in a loud voice. Then holding the crate in the air she showed everyone and threw it at Chou's feet.

At sight of their crate and his mother's guilty expression and tight lips, Chou was dumbfounded.

All the women were well aware that Aunt Chou, abusing her son's position, only participated in light work. Whenever there was hard work to be done she would excuse herself, pretending to have a back-ache. Nobody commented on her work however good or bad. As for Chou, when he discovered others' mistakes he would frown and glare, or fly into a fury. But when one of his own family did something wrong, he would shut his eyes to it and say nothing. Just how he would deal with this confrontation interested all the women. Some of them winked at each other, waiting to see what would happen.

Red Plum could read from their faces what was on their minds. If the situation continued, Chou would be unable to save his face. So she said, "Go on back to your work, Team Leader Chou. The section leaders and I will settle the matter."

Chou realized that he was in a tight corner, but he was not reconciled to defeat. Ashamed and trying to find fault with Red Plum, he flew into a rage: "You think you're the cat's whiskers showing off like this. I sent Yin-wang here to direct the women to pick cotton and yet you made him leave. Then I came to have a look at your work and you decide to have a showdown. Who gave you the right to poke your nose into the team's business?"

At such a distortion, Red Plum also got heated. Never taking her eyes from Chou, she retorted, "Since I'm the women's team leader, I ought to take an interest in their work."

"Some leader!" Chou scoffed. "Meddling in my team's affairs."

Red Plum was furious. She snapped, "It's my job. The commune members elected me and just anyone try to stop me." Then she raised her arm and said to the women, "Go on back to your work now. There's nothing to interest us here."

Many of the women were astonished, but they obeyed immediately.

Evergreen had never seen her sister-in-law in such a mood. Giving Chou a dirty look she blurted out, "You're just a bully."

Standing behind Red Plum, Tsui-tsui, Ming-wa's wife and the other women glared at Chou angrily.

Confronted with the stony looks of the women behind Red Plum and, since she had their support, Chou thought he had better leave things for the time being. So he growled, "All right, then. Carry on. Do as you please."

Red Plum looked steadily at Chou, and her unflinching manner disconcerted him. He said, "I can't control you women. Just wait till the cadres' meeting!" With this parting shot, he stalked off in a huff.

Tsui-tsui exclaimed at his retreating figure, "What an attitude! What kind of consciousness!"

Red Plum remained at the spot stiff and straight. Evergreen was so sorry for her that she wanted to fight on her behalf. Going over to her she held her hand and said affectionately, "Sis. . ."

As their eyes met Red Plum saw tears in Evergreen's eyes. She felt some in her own. With a long sigh and holding Evergreen's hand, they walked towards the furrows at the west end of the field.

4

After supper Red Plum retired to her room and lay down. The bright red scissor-cuts of double happiness, cocks and peonies pasted on the paper window-pane were still there and the fat baby in the picture on the wall was smiling at her as usual. Yet they seemed to be different. Yin-wang's malignant face would appear one moment, and then Team Leader Chou's fierce expression the next.

She had run into snags before as the leader of the girls experimenting with high-yield cotton in New Village, but had turned a deaf ear to all the carping remarks. Supported by Secretary Huang and other cadres of the brigade, nothing bothered her. She remembered the words her Party secretary had said to her the day before her wedding: "You've been taught by the Party for several years, so when you are in Pai Village, you must do things according to the teachings of the Party. It's up to you whether you can stick it out or not. For a woman, marriage and having children are two major events. It'll be quite a test for you, so let's see whether you can make the grade."

She had thought of women who had got married and had children, but who had still continued to make revolution. Why couldn't she do the same? As for two major events, even if there were ten of them, she would take them in her stride. So she said, "As Pai Village is only twenty *li* away and in the same commune, you can see what happens for yourself."

At home she had consulted Secretary Huang over any difficulties. Whom could she ask now? She hadn't even seen Secretary Wang of this brigade once. She knew Wang too was a newcomer, having been assigned to the village recently. The brigade leader, a cousin of her husband, hadn't spoken to her since she came to the village. As for Team Leader Chou, he was a male chauvinist. This was just the beginning and already there were problems. What would she do in the future?

She was in a quandary and there seemed no way out of it. She began to realize that problems would not only be personal or family ones, but also many and varied.

As it grew dark, she overheard the conversation between her mother-in-law and Evergreen in the adjoining room.

"Evergreen, Red Plum only ate half a bowl of gruel this evening. Is she feeling ill?"

"I don't know."

"You've been reading and writing with her every day. How are you getting along? Can you write a letter?"

"To whom?"

"To whom? To your brother of course! Ask him to come home on leave for a couple of days."

"But everything's all right here, so why should he ask for leave?"

"You silly girl! Do you know what day it is the day after tomorrow?"

"Of course! It's the Mid-autumn Festival."

"Well, then. All families should be united on that day. At festivals everyone thinks all the more of his loved ones."

"Then go and ask the one who thinks of her dear one to write the letter!"

"Really, you are a wretch!" The old woman heaved a sigh.

Red Plum smiled, her anger gone. She felt very grateful to her mother-in-law for her loving care, as well as to her clever sister for not saying what had happened in the fields that day in case it worried her mother.

She had got up and gone to the kitchen when she suddenly heard the loudspeaker announcing:

"Attention please, team leaders! Come to the brigade office after supper. There is something important to be discussed. Attention! Both the production team leaders and their assistants are required to attend the meeting...."

She was listening attentively when Evergreen came in and asked her anxiously, "Perhaps it's because Team Leader Chou...."

Red Plum cut her short, "Did you hear them ask the women's team leader to attend the meeting?"

The girl shook her head. "No, I didn't. They never ask women leaders to meetings."

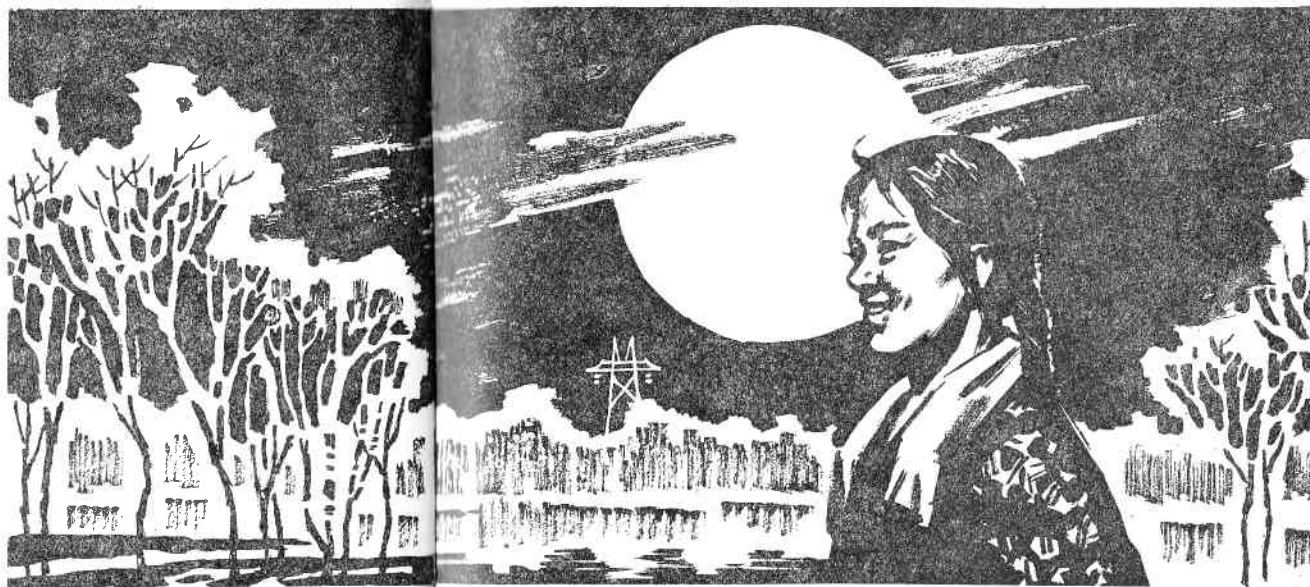
"If Chou had told them about today's trouble, the brigade would surely have sent for me. Let's wait and see."

So they waited. But after they had washed up, tidied the kitchen and boiled some water, still no one came for Red Plum.

Growing restless, she rose to her feet saying, "You go to bed with mother while I go to the brigade office and have a look."

"No. Don't go," the girl tried to stop her. "If Chou has...."

"Don't worry. I'm not going to have it out with him. I only want to tell them about our plan for high-yield cotton." So saying, she hurried out.



5

Red Plum soon reached the brigade office.

She heard voices and was not sure whether to go in or not. Then she heard the brigade leader saying, "We'll finish early tonight, so that you can tell everyone about the plan for the autumn harvest as soon as possible...."

There was no time to lose. Pushing open the door, she strode in. All the team leaders were present and she saw Chou in a corner. He shifted his position and turned his face to the wall to avoid meeting her eyes. This convinced her that Chou knew he was in the wrong and that he had not dared to mention their disagreement to the others. Everyone looked at her in astonishment, except one man in his forties, who smiled and invited her to sit down. She guessed that he must be Secretary Wang.

Then she heard the brigade leader ask, "Anything else you want to say, Old Wang?"

"Our women's leader, Comrade Red Plum, has come," he replied, "so let's hear her first."

The brigade leader forced an awkward smile. "She was elected only a couple of days ago, and I'm afraid I forgot to ask her."

"You forgot but she didn't," Wang said. "Now that she's here, we should ask her to speak."

Red Plum collected herself together a little before beginning, "We women of Second Team are going to plant several *mu* of high-yield cotton next spring. I've written to New Village Brigade, asking them to put aside some good seed strains for us after the autumn harvest. Please discuss this with your women leaders and tell me what you need."

"That's a very good proposal," Wang remarked. "The state's calling on us to increase cotton production."

"But how can we afford to buy the seeds!" asked the leader of First Team.

"Don't worry. We can exchange some of our seeds for theirs after the harvest," Red Plum assured him.

"If that's the case, then it's settled," several other team leaders agreed.

They went away slowly, talking to each other. Red Plum had intended to talk it out with Chou in front of the brigade leader and Party secretary. But Chou had cleared off in a hurry.

"Comrade Red Plum, do you remember me?" smiled Secretary Wang. "I've always remembered how you criticized me."

Red Plum stared at the man in surprise for a while and then started to blush. Last summer he had brought some women commune members to New Village to visit the nine girls' high-yield plot. During their inspection of the cotton fields, Red Plum had found a branch of a cotton-plant broken. Thinking it had been done by her girls, she reprimanded them. To her surprise, Wang admitted it was his fault and immediately apologized. She felt quite embarrassed at this and kept blaming herself for her hasty tongue afterwards. Now as Wang mentioned this episode, she lowered her head with a faint smile, feeling a little bit embarrassed again.

"No need to blush. You were absolutely right." Wang went on, "You're the women's team leader of Pai Village now, and it's all the more necessary for you to carry on your good work."

Red Plum complained, "It's very hard to be a woman cadre here. So many problems!"

Wang nodded. "There are still some people who have all the wrong ideas and look down upon women. As the leader of the women, you must set an example for the others. . . ."

Suddenly the door was thrown open and in rushed Third Granny in a flurry. Seeing her anxious look, Red Plum immediately asked, "Why, what's all the hurry for, mother?"

Secretary Wang helped her to a chair and joked, "Old sister, were you afraid your daughter-in-law was lost?"

Third Granny forced a bitter smile. "I thought perhaps you were going to pick holes in her at the meeting, so I came to back her up."

Wang asked with concern, "But what on earth is the matter?"

The old woman glanced briefly at him. "Haven't you heard about it? Humph! In our village, Yin-wang always makes a mountain out of a molehill. Go and see for yourself if you don't believe me. He's kicking up a hell of a fuss out there in the street. . . ."

Evergreen came dashing in at this point. She said angrily as she entered the room, "Yin-wang's a rotter through and through! We must hold a meeting to criticize him." Then she turned to her mother. "Never mind about their lies. It's Yin-wang and Team Leader Chou who are in the wrong."

The situation began to dawn upon Red Plum. She asked, "What sort of trouble did Yin-wang stir up?"

"Not just Yin-wang but also Aunt Chou and they're kicking up a row outside." The girl was hopping mad. "Tsui-tsui and Ming-wa's wife came to tell me and mother followed me there. Yin-wang said that Chou was going to criticize you at the meeting. Mother was so scared that she rushed here straight away."

"Are they still there carrying on?" asked Wang.

"No. They stopped when the brigade leader came past and gave them a good telling off."

"Why are they getting at your sister-in-law?" Secretary Wang inquired.

With tears of anger in her eyes, Evergreen told him all about what had happened in the fields.

"Truth will out. The masses always know who is right or wrong. Don't worry your head any more about it, old sister. After the autumn harvest and sowing is over we'll be starting our campaign to help cadres improve their way of work. We'll ask you to speak your mind then."

"No, you mustn't do that!" the old woman hastily shuffled it off. "I bear no grudges towards anybody."

Evergreen was cross with her mother and said, "You're as timid as a mouse. As for me, I insist that the backward ideas of Yin-wang and some others should be reported to the commune leadership."

"And in my view," Wang chuckled, "you should oppose their mistaken ideas just as you did today in the fields. You've made a good start. If we are going to get our brigade up to date, we'll have to fight old-fashioned ideas and follow Red Plum's example in leading the women to increase the grain and cotton production. Old sister, the young people are pioneers and we should follow them."

Though Red Plum was eloquent when she confronted Yin-wang, she felt uneasy and inarticulate at Secretary Wang's praise.

Seeing that the secretary was in favour of Red Plum and Evergreen, Third Granny was delighted. A smile crept across her face, but her words were severe. "Don't put them on a pedestal. The higher they go, the nastier the fall."

"No, that's not true," Wang protested. "Like an eagle soaring into the sky, these young people have just spread their wings. Yet you are trying to clip them. Don't you see the way things are heading at the present time? You'd better let them fly away freely."

Wang's words gave Red Plum strength. She made up her mind to increase production.

Evergreen went over to her mother and asked, "Did you follow what Secretary Wang said, mother?"

Third Granny pursed her lips, but her eyes betrayed her smile. "Oh, have it your own way. I understand everything." She pushed her daughter over to Red Plum. "I discovered a long time ago that you two are a pair of treasures."

Everyone burst out laughing.

Supporting her mother-in-law with one hand and holding Evergreen's with the other, Red Plum said goodbye to Secretary Wang and they left the office.

In the mid-autumn night, the full moon hung high in the sky, shedding its bright beams over the fields. The cotton fields to the north of the road were an expanse of shimmering white, while the fragrance of the maize was wafted by the autumn breeze. Red Plum looked up at the night sky, reflecting on Wang's words. She felt very excited, her mind a whirl of activity.

Illustrated by Hsu Hsi

“The Troublesome Dike”

It was well known that the dike along the Chiaoho River, except for one section, would drain as soon as rain let up. Chang Tsai-hsi, an old man of about fifty, who was in charge of the dike, called that particular section “the troublesome dike”. Because of a lack of sand and stone, the newly rammed clay soil on the dike did not drain water away. Vehicles crossed over it, leaving zigzag and wavy ruts in their wake, making anyone in charge lose face. In maintaining the dike, Chang was often at loggerheads with the drivers. Sometimes a driver, pressed for time, would be stopped by Chang. Unless he agreed to make a detour, the ensuing argument would inevitably lead them to lose control of themselves and shout at each other. Although Chang was firm, he could not guard both the ends at the same time. When some drivers found Chang absent from one end, they would accelerate to break through the dike. Chang at length hit upon an idea. With the permission of the flood-prevention headquarters, he set up barriers at either end, made of two concrete posts with a steel bar between them and a padlock at each side.

The day was fine after the snow. By the time dusk approached most of the dike had been cleared. Some slush, however, remained on the troublesome section. Chang could do nothing but padlock the steel bars.

As the sun began sinking behind the forest on the western side of the river, Chang's supper was ready. He was about to eat when he heard a vehicle hooting from the east end. He ignored it. Since the barriers were set up, there had been a lot of noise, the driver only wanted him to raise the barrier, which he would not do even if the hooting increased. If a driver knew that Chang was living in the store-room near the headquarters, he would get out and try to persuade Chang to help him. Bearded Wang, a driver of the county commercial bureau, was nine times out of ten stopped by Chang's barriers. Recently he and Chang had engaged in a hot dispute, when one morning Wang, driving a truck-load of supplies for the agricultural production brigades, was again stopped by Chang. Like an eagle swooping down on a chicken, Wang rushed at him.

“Don't you know that the Second National Conference on Learning from Tachai in Agriculture has been held in Peking? My car is loaded with supplies to support various brigades. How dare you delay me!” he challenged.

“So I suppose your breaking the dike, which is for flood prevention, helps agricultural production!” retorted Chang, his veins bulging on his neck. “Breaking the dike means destroying the crops.”

“So you think you can bully me! Just wait till our new county Party secretary Chang comes back from Peking, then I'll have you charged.”

Chang Tsai-hsi, however, was not afraid of Wang's threat, for he felt sure that the new secretary would support him, though he did not know him.

“Go ahead and accuse me,” Chang said as he pointed his finger at Wang. “And you can stop shouting. All you can do now is go the long way round.”

About to start his meal, Chang again heard a hooting sound, not so harsh and deep as that of tractors or lorries, but clearer and softer, a sound he seldom heard in these parts. Out of curiosity he put

down his bowl and went outside. In the dusk he made out a sedan pulling up at the eastern barrier. Near the car a man was gazing about. The previous spring Chang had seen some county or provincial leaders in such sedans surveying the dike, and they had approved of his barriers. He realized that this man must be such an official, though he wondered who he could be at such a late hour. Anxious to know he hurried to the barrier.

He saw approaching a pale young man of about twenty-five who from his appearance was no peasant or worker but an intellectual.

"Hello comrade, can you tell me who is responsible for this barrier?" the young man asked politely.

"I am," Chang Tsai-hsi admitted uneasily. "Do you want to cross the dike? I'm sorry but it is still wet." So saying he went over to the car where a plump driver sat behind the wheel. Chang was well acquainted with drivers' feelings and moods. But he wanted to know who the leader was in the back. To his surprise, he found asleep a thin, peasant-looking man in a padded tunic, with a grey scarf round his neck and a blue apron round his waist, topped with a raincoat over his legs. Beside him were straw-sandals, boots, hoes, a shoulder-pole, a bedroll, a field telephone and a mimeograph machine. It looked more like a lorry for labourers off to build a reservoir. Chang thought the driver might be seeing off his relatives. He decided not to raise the barrier.

Sensing Chang's hesitation, the driver asked in a low voice, "Are you in charge of the barrier? When can we cross the dike?"

"It's getting dark. Please unlock it," the young man gently urged.

"It's still wet so you'll just have to wait until it is frozen over tomorrow morning," Chang said loudly.

"Ssh!" the young man pointed at the comrade sleeping in the car. "Please keep your voice down. He hasn't slept for several nights. We had no choice but to hoot just now. Luckily..."

"Damn!" The driver knitted his brows with smothered anger.

Chang already felt an antipathy to drivers. "No need to frown or glare like that. It's a rule for this section. So long as it's wet, all vehicles are prohibited." He turned to leave.

"Comrade," smiling, the young man stopped him. "Please don't go. If you let us pass, we'll be responsible for anything that happens. Okay?"

"How could I find you again? No, nothing doing."

"Oh, let him go. We don't need him. I've got an idea," the plump driver said getting out of the car.

Chang Tsai-hsi knew that some drivers were very cunning and could pick any lock however difficult. Recently his steel bars had been unlocked and locked again. And he would have known nothing about it, but for the deep ruts left on the dike.

"Just you dare open my lock!" Chang yelled at the driver.

The man sleeping in the car was at last roused by Chang's loud protest. Sitting up, he rubbed his eyes then gave a great yawn.

"What's wrong?" he asked sleepily.

The driver made a face at Chang, got back into his car and lit a cigarette.

"Just go back to sleep, Old Chang. We'll soon get going," the young man said.

Old Chang, hearing the wind sighing, pulled his raincoat round his shoulders, took a torch from his bag and slowly got out of the car. Smiling at Chang Tsai-hsi, he flashed his torch at the barrier and caught sight of a couplet in red paint on the posts. Going over to them, he read softly: "To protect the dike is the duty of everyone. When it is wet, all vehicles are prohibited." Nodding, he flashed his torch over that section of the dike and saw it was still wet and covered in slush. Then he turned to Chang and asked in a friendly tone, "Are you in charge of the dike, old comrade?" His voice was hoarse from weariness, but he looked very intelligent.

"Yes. I'm sorry but as long as it's wet, no cars may pass. That's a rule." The wind was bitter, and Chang felt so cold that he hoped to cut short the matter.

The other man nodded. "But why has this section of the dike not been cleared of snow yet?"

"Because it was recently mended with clay and that doesn't drain the water away," Chang explained.

The man paused before continuing, "Is there a solution?"

"Of course. Just add a layer of sand and gravel to the top and that section will drain whatever the weather. The trouble is there's no sand or gravel nearby. We'll have to go to Stone Gorge which is about ten *li* away to fetch it. Right now the movement of learning from Tachai in agriculture is in full swing and the brigades are too busy levelling the mountains and harnessing the rivers to spare time and man-power to help us. That's the problem."

The stranger considered his words and then said seriously, "Your dike is the first line of defence in protecting the people, enabling them to learn from Tachai, so don't relax your guard. May I go and see that bad section, please?"

His remark was just what Chang Tsai-hsi had wanted to hear. He knew his work was important, but had failed to find the words to express it. Now this stranger had hit the nail on the head, to say nothing of his concern for the bad section. Chang was delighted and agreed to show him.

Then the man turned to his comrades. "Wait here for me for a moment, Old Li, Little Li."

"Let me come with you, Old Chang," called Little Li.

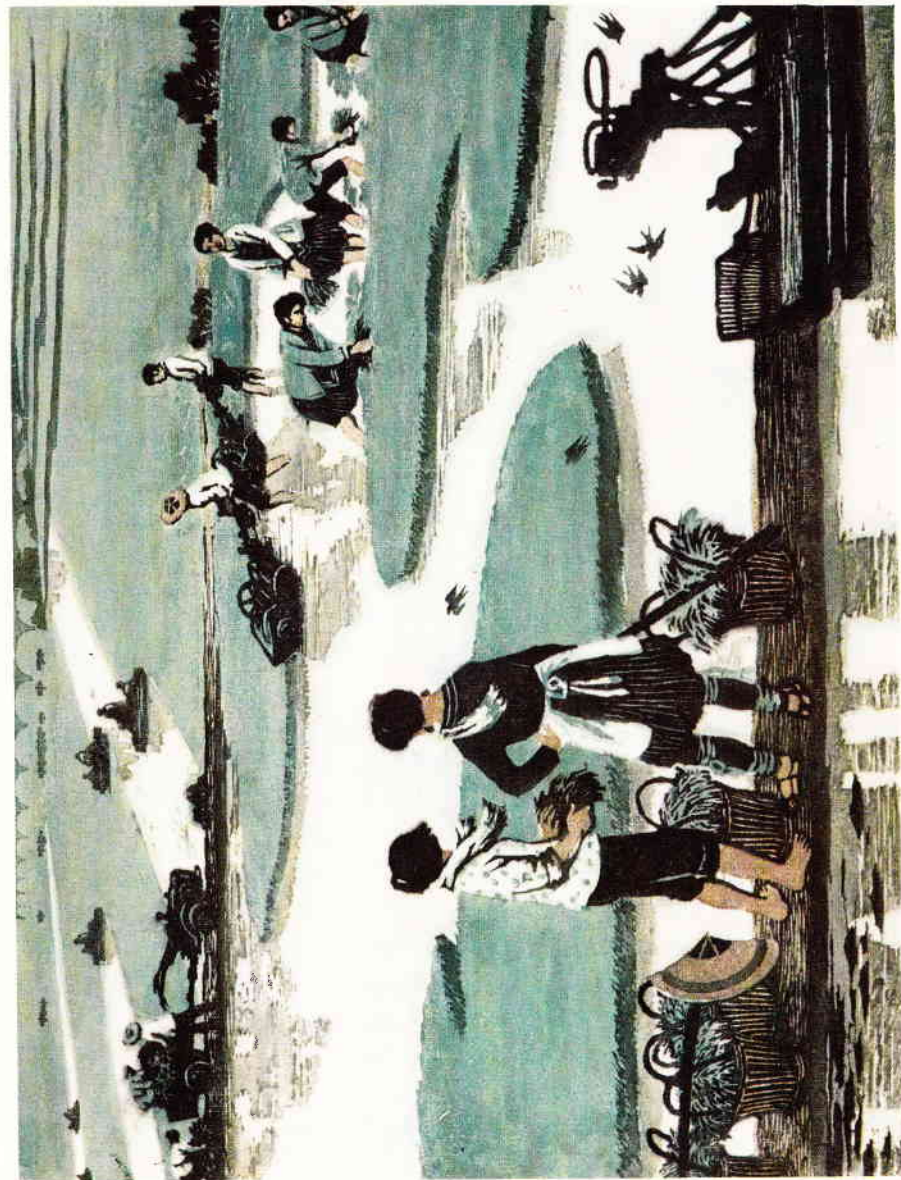
The mud and slush under their feet squelched. The stranger draped his raincoat over Chang Tsai-hsi's shoulders, saying, "You're older than me. Better put it on. It keeps out the wind."

Old Li, the driver sitting in the car, saw the three of them flashing their torches over the dike. He had thought of following them, but he did not want to leave his car. "It's always like this driving for him, I'll never get to bed tonight." He smiled to himself and started whistling a tune. Before long he was snoring.

"You look as snug as a bug in a rug!" Little Li woke up the plump driver who had not heard him return.

"Well, you kept me waiting so long," he rubbed his eyes, drowsily. Then he opened the car door and turned on the headlights. The steel bar was still between the posts. "What's the matter? Why hasn't the barrier been raised yet?"

"Hurry up! Help me with these things." So saying, Little Li took out of the car the straw-sandals, the bedroll, field telephone, mimeograph machine, hoes and shoulder-pole.



Old Li was bewildered. "What's going on?"

"Old Chang says there are no exceptions. The rule was made by the flood-prevention headquarters, and we've got to observe it like everyone else."

"So . . . we won't be going to Stone Gorge tonight, will we?"

"Of course we will," replied Little Li. "Old Chang'll preside over a meeting of ten thousand people there tomorrow morning to denounce the 'gang of four', after which the people will pledge to transform the dunes into fertile fields."

"Now I understand. You mean we're going to have to walk there."

"That's right." Little Li laughed. "Old Chang tells us that we should put all our energies into learning from Tachai, just like when we took part in the land-reform and co-operative movements before."

After Old Li had helped Little Li out with the things, the two Old Changs came back to the car.

"Why are you unloading your car here?" Chang Tsai-hsi asked in amazement.

"It was you who stopped our car. Are you going to stop us unloading our things as well?" said the driver.

Chang Tsai-hsi felt remorse, for although he had stopped many drivers, he had seldom met such a reasonable person as this stranger who had not only supported and shown concern for his work, but also had examined the troublesome section. From his appearance he seemed to be a peasant, probably a brigade leader. He was shy of asking him directly who he was. When he asked Little Li about the man's position, the young man told him that he was a new leader of the county, named Chang. Could this man be the Secretary Chang to whom Bearded Wang of the commercial bureau intended to complain? Secretary Chang was said to be on his way back from Peking, visiting the communes and villages. This man might be him. But why did he bring his hoe and straw-sandals with him? Whoever he was, Old Chang felt he should not stop their car tonight, as there must be a lot of work waiting for him. Otherwise they would have to walk in the dark carrying all their things. He went back to Little

Li, who was bending down fixing their luggage to the shoulder-pole.

"Since you've no time to lose," Chang Tsai-hsi said, "you may as well put all your gear back into the car and drive across the dike. If the dike breaks, I'll mend it myself." He began to take the key from his belt to unlock the steel bar, when he was stopped by the other Old Chang who was jotting something down in his notebook by torchlight.

"You want to let our car pass, do you?"

"Yes. Please get into your car, Old Chang," he answered.

"What about the rule?" Old Chang's tone was serious.

Chang Tsai-hsi was in a quandary.

"Headquarters made the rule you said, so you'll have to ask their permission before you raise the barrier even for an exceptional case." Then Old Chang said something to his driver, put his bedroll on his back and his hoe on his shoulder. He called to his young assistant, "Let's go. A dozen *li* won't take us long."

Saying goodbye to the driver and Chang Tsai-hsi, Little Li followed Old Chang along the bad section.

After some time Chang Tsai-hsi broke his silence. "Where'll *you* go, Old Li?"

The driver, who was smoking, stubbed out his cigarette and waving his hand said, "Jump in."

"Me?"

"Yes, yes. I'll stay overnight with you at your store-room and share your bed. I won't drive back to the county until tomorrow morning." The driver laughed.

"Fine." It was the first time Chang Tsai-hsi had got into a sedan.

Two days later, the lorry of the commercial bureau swished along the troublesome dike and suddenly pulled up beside Chang Tsai-hsi, who was trimming the embankment. It gave him a start.

It was none other than Bearded Wang. "Well, well! I never expected to find you so easily."

"Why? I haven't blocked your road today."

"Let's forget our quarrels." Wang laughed. "Tell me, where can I put this?"

Looking up, Chang saw a truck-load of glinting sand and gravel.

"Stop your nonsense," he said in disbelief. "That's for your bureau's project." And he carried on with his work.

Wang pulled off his gloves and wiped his face saying, "Right now we're so busy carrying supplies to help agriculture, who has the time to spare to play jokes on you? Secretary Chang doesn't allow my lorry to return empty, that's why I'm here."

His eyes twinkling, Chang challenged him, "Weren't you going to go and complain to him about me?"

"Now, now." Wang felt embarrassed. "Tell me quickly where I can unload this stuff as I've got to hurry to town to fetch some baskets."

"Is this from Stone Gorge?" Chang asked, thinking of Old Chang whom he had not forgotten.

"Yes. Didn't you know that since coming back from Peking, Secretary Chang's been at Stone Gorge leading the masses in learning from Tachai? They denounce the 'gang of four' in the evenings and in the daytime he works with them to level the land for fields of grain and cotton. He decided to remove the sand and stones from their land to your dike, and has asked us drivers to load every empty lorry coming east with them for your troublesome dike."

Chang Tsai-hsi clapped his hands in glee and asked, "You mean the new county Party secretary Chang is that slender man I met earlier?"

"Yes, yes. He knows all about you. But look, where shall I dump this load. Before long there'll be other lorries coming. Secretary Chang says that bad section will need about eighty truck-loads of sand and gravel."

"That's right because I took him to see it that night. Dump your load over here." Chang's eyes were moist. Wang and he climbed into the lorry and, opening the end, started shovelling out the sand and gravel. Then Wang said dumping it all at one point would mean too much work for Chang later but if he drove slowly along, Chang

could shovel as they went. Chang was surprised at Wang's thoughtfulness, and was sorry he had quarrelled with him.

After a while with lorry after lorry bringing sand and gravel, the troublesome section of the dike was properly paved and could be compared to a good road. It drained easily whatever the weather. Chang Tsai-hsi felt very grateful to the new secretary. He decided to go to Stone Gorge to pay him a visit. One fine day, he hitchhiked there and found tremendous changes taking place. Just a fortnight earlier, about a hundred *mu* of dunes along the dike had glistened in the sunlight. On windy days the sand stung people's eyes. When it rained, the sand washed away by the water would damage the crops. Now the dunes were like a battlefield where men transformed nature. Everywhere red banners and streamers fluttered, and slogans and big-character posters were posted to criticize the "gang of four". Everywhere peasants were wielding their hoes or picks. Teams of labourers, rumbling tractors and bulldozers were removing the dunes and stones for use in road construction, dams and dikes. But where was Secretary Chang? On the evening he had met him at his barrier, Chang had only seen that the secretary was a slender, middle-aged man with a hoarse voice, but he had not noticed his features. On inquiring, he was told that Chang was levelling a field in the east, while another said he was carrying sand in the west and still another that he was holding a meeting at headquarters.

Old Chang decided to go to the headquarters located in a peasant house nearby. When he entered the room, he saw the field telephone and mimeograph machine on a desk, beside a bed with the bedroll, reminding him of his encounter with Old Chang. On the desk was a stack of mimeographed leaflets to repudiate the "gang of four". He was just reaching for one to read, when Little Li turned up. The young man, who had got a good tan from working in the open air, strode in and smilingly shook hands with Chang.

"I bet your troublesome dike won't trouble you any more," he said laughing. "Secretary Chang has always been concerned about the first line of defence in the movement to learn from Tachai in agriculture. He says he wants to see you."

"I'm so grateful to him for his help," Old Chang replied. "The troublesome section has now been topped with sand and gravel and your car can pass over it any time you like." As he was talking, Chang gazed at Little Li's face. "It's only been a fortnight since we met, but you've got so sunburnt that I can hardly recognize you."

After pouring him a cup of water, Little Li picked up the leaflets and said, "Please have a rest here. I'll be back the minute I've given these out."

"No. I'm not tired. I want to see Secretary Chang. Where is he?"

"Why all the hurry? Okay then, come on."

Arriving at a field that was being levelled, Little Li called to a slender man with a blue apron and straw-sandals working among some peasants who were carrying earth. "Old Chang, the man you're always talking about has come to visit you."

Secretary Chang quickly carried his baskets of earth to its destination and dumped them. Turning he saw Chang Tsai-hsi beside him.

"You're busy working with the peasants, Secretary Chang!" exclaimed Old Chang.

The new secretary grasped Chang's hand in his and playfully gave him a punch on his shoulder, saying, "I've been thinking of you, Comrade Chang." Giving Chang a cigarette, he lit one for himself, then added, "Your job is very important. If the dike isn't strong enough or you don't do your work well, our fields and villages can't be like Tachai even if we transform them into fertile land. Don't you agree?"

"Yes. But the dike's strong now and can't be broken."

"Wonderful!" Secretary Chang was delighted. "I'm trying to find some time to come and talk to you about how to learn from Tachai's spirit in maintaining the dike." Suddenly they heard on the loudspeaker that construction headquarters was calling Secretary Chang to the telephone. "Well, let's go there together and talk on the way." With this the two Old Changs made their way through teams of workers to the headquarters.

The Assistant's Assistant

There was a banging on the door. It must be Brother Fang-fang. He came home late every night and every night he banged on the door.

"Hurry up and open the door. Are you deaf?" He would go on with this racket until his wife calling out rushed to the door. It opened with a squeak.

"The way you carry on it's as if you've got something exciting to tell us," Sister-in-law Fang-fang chided.

"I have, but it's not about me but about you."

"Come on in and have your food. Stop talking rubbish," she retorted.

"But I'm not kidding. Honestly, they were discussing nominating a model health worker at the commune office. Everybody spoke of you. . . ."

"That's quite enough. It's an honour just being the assistant's assistant."

Sister-in-law giggled. The door closed with a squeak and the sleepy village lapsed into silence again.

I tossed and turned on my bed, unable to go back to sleep. I recalled my first encounter with Sister-in-law Fang-fang.

I came some time ago to inspect the health work in this village. Eager to get there that same day I walked some twenty *li* in one stretch, arriving around noon time.

The June sun was like a ball of fire scorching the earth and everything on it. Sweat poured down my back, my vest stuck to my chest and my mouth was parched.

As soon as I entered the village I noticed someone drawing water at the well. It was a young woman. I dashed over, took the rope in my hands and offered eagerly, "Here, let me do it, sister-in-law."

She pushed my hands away. "No need. You see, this rope hook comes loose if you're not used to it." With a deft twist of her hand she made the empty bucket tip so that water rushed in.

"You've certainly got the knack, sister-in-law!" I was full of admiration.

As she pulled up the full bucket, she protested, "No, I'm just an idiot. I can't do much." Bent over the well, she seemed to be mumbling to her own reflection in the water.

"Is the water sweet in this well, sister-in-law?" I asked, after a short pause.

"Yes, it's sweet all right."

By then the bucket had reached the top and I stretched my head towards it thirstily. She fended me off with her arm. "What do you think you're doing, comrade?"

"I want a drink."

"No, no, you mustn't."

"Come on, it's all right. . . ."

"No, you mustn't. . . ."

She hooked the rope to an empty bucket. With another deft twist of her hand, she swung it down the well. I was so thirsty, I was dying to drink my fill. She realized this but insisted, "Listen comrade, you mustn't . . . please don't. . . ."

I was annoyed. It was roasting and she wouldn't even let me have a drink from her bucket.



"Are you angry with me?" she asked, with an impish smile. "You see, drinking unboiled water will make you sick. That'll mean you'll be absent from work, and then it's horrible being sick and medicines cost money, don't they?"

Since she put it like that, there was nothing I could say but, "Oh, sister-in-law, thank you for..."

"Don't thank me. I'm only doing my duty."

She picked up her full buckets and carried them away. I wondered why it should be her duty.

When I reached the brigade office, the door was locked but a few words were chalked on it: "If your business is urgent, you'll find the brigade cadres in the fields at the west end of the village."

Hot and tired, I plunked myself down in the yard under a trellis covered with leafy pumpkin vines and entwining bean stalks. A few minutes later, the woman at the well appeared with a thermos flask and a mug.

"On such a hot day comrade, you must be parched."

She placed the mug before me. I was so grateful that I didn't know what to say. Having filled the mug, she told me, "Take your time, comrade, and drink all you want. When you've finished, bring the mug and flask over to me, will you?" She turned to go.

"But sister-in-law... where... uh..."

She burst out laughing and slapped herself at her own stupidity.

"How silly of me! Of course you can't bring them back if you don't know who I am." She pointed to the left, "There, that's where I live."

"Won't you tell me your name, sister-in-law?"

She slapped herself again as she burst into another fit of laughter. "You want to know my name? Well, most adults around here call me Number Two's Wife; some old grannies call me Little Clown's Mother. The children call me Aunt Fang-fang. You see, my husband's a medical assistant, so over at the clinic they call me the assistant's assistant." Suddenly she stopped short. Clapping her palm again, she cried, "Here am I rattling on and there's someone waiting for me at home."

She turned round and left, her heavy footsteps pounding on the earth.

That night, the Party branch called all the brigade members together for a meeting in the village square.

Before the meeting began, those who had arrived early gathered in twos and threes to gossip and chat. Some discussed farming, others current events. The village's new bride was talked about; somebody's new baby admired... laughter burst out here and there. Amidst all this, Sister-in-law Fang-fang's husky voice could be heard

inquiring, "Third Aunt, have you been bothered by that pain in the stomach again?"

"No, not lately."

"That's good. You must take care of that stomach of yours. Only eat soft food. And keep off cold dishes."

"Hey! Stubborn Boy, why don't you listen to me?"

"My dear sister-in-law, who says I don't listen to you?"

"I've been told you're wolfing down your food again. They say you always finish your bread or buns on your way to work, instead of at the table. Now, is that so?" Stubborn Boy merely chuckled. Sister-in-law continued, "You've got to stop that habit, I tell you. Unless you take my advice, I shall make them remove you from the post of team leader so that you'll have to go home and look after the baby."

"Now, sister-in-law, a clever person like you shouldn't talk so foolishly," a plump young man cut in at this point. "His baby's not born yet so how can he look after one?"

Sister-in-law slapped her palm again and had another good laugh at herself.

At the end of the meeting as the people began to disperse, I asked the Party secretary, "Where shall I stay?"

He pushed his cap to the back of his head and tapped his forehead. "Now, let me see, perhaps you'd better stay at Sister-in-law Fang-fang's place. Since you've come about health work, it'll be an advantage to stay there."

What advantage I wondered? But before I could ask, she was calling me, "I knew he was going to let you come to us. I've got your room all ready. Come, comrade, let's go."

Early next morning, Fang-fang was off as soon as he got up. Sister-in-law Fang-fang bustled about like a whirlwind: she let the hens out of the coop, fed the pigs, cleaned out the sheep fold, swept the yard, filled the cauldron and started the fire. . . .

There was a noise of stamping feet. A big swarthy man appeared.

"Is Brother Fang-fang at home?"

Sister-in-law pushed the wood further into the stove and stood up, flapping her tunic. "No, he's not."

"I got up early specially to catch him at home, but I'm still too late." The stranger turned away in disappointment.

Sister-in-law stopped him, asking, "You want him for something?"

"Fifth Aunt's child has diarrhoea. . . ."

"I'll have him come over after breakfast."

After the man had gone, a stout short man came in. Before he could say anything, sister-in-law called out, "Have you come for the medicine, Little Lin?"

"What a wonderful memory you've got, sister-in-law."

Suddenly sister-in-law slapped one palm in dismay. "Fang-fang's just awful. He's gone and forgotten all about it. He didn't bring it home."

"I don't believe you. He wouldn't dare."

"Why? What would you do to him if he forgot?"

"Oh, he's not afraid of me. But if he forgot, sister-in-law would. . . ."

"Shut up and don't talk nonsense." Sister-in-law poked a finger at his forehead, went inside and brought out a packet. "Be sure to give your mother this, starting from tonight. Don't be careless about it again. I might just come over to check up on you."

Little Lin was leaving but sister-in-law called him back. "When your mum's taken the medicine, be sure to keep her quiet in bed."

Fang-fang came back when sister-in-law had laid the table.

He was in his late thirties, tall, with broad shoulders and a dark face. He looked alert and full of beans. A smile on his lips all the time, he kept humming a tune. Today he came in singing merrily.

Sister-in-law was disgruntled. "Singing, singing all the time, that's all you're good for. Here I am, rushed off my feet. . . ."

"Will madam please forgive her humble husband! Never again will he dare. . . ." declaimed Fang-fang like an actor, but suddenly his tone became serious. "Did Little Lin come to fetch the medicine for his mother?"

"Who knows!"

"You've passed on the notice about preventive medicine to West Hamlet, haven't you?"

"Who knows!"

Fang-fang knew through experience that "who knows" meant that it had been done. He smiled with satisfaction.

"Anything new?" he asked.

"Of course."

"Tell me."

In one breath sister-in-law rattled off all the names of those who needed their help or who had come to ask about health work. "When you've been to Number Six's house, go over to Spring Plum's and see if her stomach is bothering her again. . . ."

After breakfast, Fang-fang took a packet of medicine out of his bag. Laying it on the table, he said, "This packet is for Fifth Aunt's child. . . ."

"Have you been there already?"

"Yes, I've seen the child."

But quickly sister-in-law's smile disappeared. Returning to her dishes, she said casually, "Who cares whose medicine it is. Why tell me about it?"

"I want someone to take the medicine there."

"Go and find someone then."

"I've got my hands full. Sorry to make you run errands, but. . . ."

"I haven't time."

"But isn't it your day off today?"

Sister-in-law ladled some water into the basin. "So you remember that! I've got my laundry to do." She left with a petulant toss of her head. When she returned with an armful of clothes, her husband was gone. The packet of medicine was lying on the inside table. She soaked the dirty clothes in the basin, wiped her hands and went in to fetch the packet. I smiled at her with amusement. "Ah, all these errands to run, I'm never done. . . ." she mumbled, half to herself and half to me. Though her words seemed to be complaining, I could see she really took pride in what she was doing.

"Comrade," sister-in-law called out from the yard, "will you do



something for me? If anyone comes for something, please note it down."

When I'd been five days in the village, I'd more or less got all the data I needed except for a final check on my investigation of case histories. I went over them with Sister-in-law Fang-fang.

"I suppose Sister Chang-hsiang's stomach trouble is rather serious," I began.

"Not at all," she corrected me. "She's just lazy and fond of good food. But she's always moaning and groaning."

"What about Sister Chang-lu?"

"Yes, she's often poorly. Menstrual trouble."

"Tiger seems very tough."

"But he's always neglecting his meals. It might turn into real stomach trouble one day."

"Sister-in-law, why don't you tell me all about everyone's complaints?" I begged her.

That got her. "But where shall I start?" Then she said, "All right, I'll just tell you everything, all that I know."

She rambled on. There were more than five hundred inhabitants and over one hundred households in the village. Starting from the east end, she went over all the households, commenting on every single person. This one was never sick, that one was only ill occasionally. One was a chronic case; another had only just fallen sick. She knew all about them.

"How come you know all the details?" I was amazed.

"That comes from being an assistant."

I praised her for being such a good one.

"I've not much education nor any talents. I can't make much of a contribution. But if I can help my husband with his work so that he can be a good medical assistant and keep our people in good health, then they'll all be able to do their work better. Well, that's my way of helping with socialist construction..."

One day Fang-fang told me how he came to be an assistant. Their hamlet together with East Hamlet and West Hamlet makes up a village

which stands in an out-of-the-way part of the commune. It was difficult for their members to reach the clinic. Yet, the commune found it was not possible at the moment to set up a separate clinic for them. Since Fang-fang knew something about medicine, he was made a medical assistant, responsible for the health work in the three hamlets. For over a year now, he's done very well in preventive medicine and treating simple cases. He's become well known throughout the county.

"Now, do you know why I'm a success as a medical assistant?" Fang-fang asked me, then provided the answer himself. "It's because this assistant's got an outstanding assistant — my wife."

"I thought you were talking seriously and now you're off again talking nonsense." Sister-in-law poked a finger at her husband and slipped out.

I burst into laughter and Fang-fang joined in.

Illustrated by Chao Shib-ying



Bren Bik

Wind in My Home-town

Where is the yellow wind people used to talk about?
Through the weeping willows as they sway
A light green breeze now drifts over.

The wind in my home-town is green.
The wind in my home-town is green.

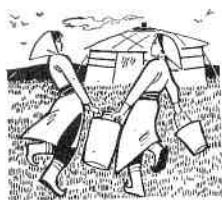
Where is the dry wind our folk singers lamented?
From the rippling waters of the reservoir
A moist wind now blows over.

The wind in my home-town is moist.
The wind in my home-town is moist.

Bren Bik is of Mongolian nationality.

Where is the bitter wind the traveller dreaded?
Along the streets of our new grassland town
A fragrant breeze now floats over.

The wind in my home-town is sweet.
The wind in my home-town is sweet.



Shih Hsiang

Camel Bells

Jingle, jingle,
Is it the gurgle of spring water
Or the chirping of sparrows,
That wakes this sandy plain from slumber,
Breaking the solitude of the long night?

Jingle, jingle,
Our camel bells ring rhythmically as our caravan
Rolls over the vast sandy stretches,
In the teeth of the dust-laden wind,
Under a new crescent moon,
And the star-studded sky.

Jingle, jingle,
Long icicles hang from the necks of our camels,
But no frost can silence our tinkling golden bells,
Whose resonance floats high in the cold air
Above the howling wind, the hissing sand,
And sharp cracking of the stones.

Jingle, jingle,
Like a barometer recording
The changing seasons on our borderlands
While accompanying our motherland's mighty strides,
Our bells ring militantly as we advance.



Chang Pao-hsin

On Yao Hsueh-yin's Novel "Li Tzu-cheng — Prince Valiant"

On March 19, 1644, a peasant leader who had been a shepherd boy, after fifteen years of bitter fighting against government troops finally led his insurgent forces victoriously into the Ming capital. He was then thirty-eight years old, still wearing the felt hat and plain white clothes of a peasant. The last emperor of the Ming Dynasty, Tsung-chen, fled from his palace at his approach and hanged himself on Coal Hill. Thus the Ming Dynasty which had ruled China for two hundred and seventy-six years was finally overthrown. This peasant leader was Li Tzu-cheng.

Since then more than three hundred years have passed. A long historical novel describing that peasant revolutionary war has now become a bestseller.

Li Tzu-cheng — Prince Valiant is a novel in five parts, the first two of which have already been published. Li Tzu-cheng (1606-1645) lived for only thirty-nine years. The peasant revolt in which he joined started in 1627. However, instead of writing about Li Tzu-cheng's whole life and the whole course of this revolt, Yao Hsueh-yin has concentrated on the important events that occurred between

1638 and 1645. Though this was only a comparatively short period of history, the life reflected in this novel is very rich, showing a wide panorama of Chinese society. The author does not restrict himself to depicting the career of a single individual or isolated incidents, but through the actions of a wide range of characters he reveals to us Ming society in its last stage.

The story begins one night in the winter of 1638. Cannon-fire can be heard outside the cold and desolate city of Peking which is threatened by Manchu tribesmen from the north. The beleaguered emperor Tsung-chen is helpless. By starting off with the imperial capital, the political centre of China, and the Ming emperor, the supreme ruler of China, the author shows us the whole situation in a nutshell — a tremendous storm is about to break.

Li Tzu-cheng first appears in this novel before his campaign south of the Tungkuan Pass, described in this and the next issue of *Chinese Literature*. He is putting up a great fight against encirclement by government forces which are numerically much superior, although they lack co-ordination and some of the generals are at loggerheads. Sometimes the author gives a bird's-eye view of the whole campaign, at others he depicts pitched battles between the two forces. Finally, unable to break through to the north, the insurgents have to escape along two routes, one group led southeast by Li Tzu-cheng's wife Kao Kuei-ying, the other led southwest by Li Tzu-cheng himself.

After the breakthrough only fifteen insurgents are left. They flee along lonely mountain paths, wounded, hungry, exhausted and with heavy hearts. Li Tzu-cheng who brings up the rear keeps asking himself, "Is this the end?" For this is the worst defeat he has suffered in the ten years since the revolt began. By describing the desperate straits in which he and his comrades find themselves, with their army virtually wiped out, the author is able to show their indomitable spirit. Li Tzu-cheng is not down-hearted, nor does he waver. He immediately sets about rebuilding his army, in order to regain the initiative and continue the revolution.

The mid-seventeenth century was the stormy period when the Ming Dynasty was ousted by the Ching Dynasty. This novel gives us a picture of the complex relationships between various classes,

political and military factions and social forces, depicting a number of representative characters and showing how they acted in this period. The revolutionary force with Li Tzu-cheng as its chief representative fights against the reactionary force of the big feudal landlords with Emperor Tsung-chen as its chief representative. The mortal struggle between these two forces manifests the main contradiction of that time and forms the main thread running through the novel.

An important but subsidiary factor is the struggle between the Ming Dynasty and the Manchus, the powerful national minority, which founded the Ching Dynasty. As for the peasant insurgents, apart from those commanded by Li Tzu-cheng there are contingents led by Chang Hsien-chung, Lo Ju-tsai and others, and these have their own contradictions and different aims. The novel deals in some detail with the relationship between Li Tzu-cheng and Chang Hsien-chung who, throughout the whole revolt, sometimes clash and sometimes work for the same goal.

Thus both on Li Tzu-cheng's side and that of the ruling class there are contradictions, which are revealed through the portrayal of a wide range of characters; peasant leaders, insurgent officers and men, scholars, physicians, artisans and peasants; the emperor, his concubines, princes and barons, their maids and eunuchs, high officials and generals; renegades from the insurgents' ranks, landlords, local gentry, bandits, monks, priests and witch-doctors... Some of these characters keep reappearing, others appear only in one or two incidents; but all are vividly drawn and true to life, especially Li Tzu-cheng and his arch enemy, the arrogant and suspicious emperor. By creating all these characters of different types and describing their lives and actions, the author eulogizes this seventeenth-century peasant war and ruthlessly exposes the corrupt forces of reaction of that period.

Virtually all past records of Li Tzu-cheng's revolt in official histories and the anecdotes of private individuals were written from the standpoint of the feudal ruling class; so these insurgents were described as bandits or traitors. Certain descriptions were also falsified. Yao Hsueh-yin made a serious study of all these records and analysed them from a Marxist standpoint to show in his novel that

peasant revolts and peasant wars were the true moving force in Chinese feudal society to impel history forward. He has succeeded in giving us a lifelike description of society in seventeenth-century China. This is not simply a biography of Li Tzu-cheng the rebel leader, nor does it just describe historical characters and events in isolation. The author makes these historical characters live again in the appropriate setting and re-enact historical events so naturally that we breathe the atmosphere of those times and are carried back more than three centuries.

China's feudal society had long been stagnant and made very slow progress; so although this novel deals with the middle of the seventeenth century, life in this period was not very different from earlier feudal times. And this novel sheds light on various aspects of Chinese feudal society such as the imperial court, the feudal land system, the life of the peasants, diverse ceremonies and customs, as well as astronomy, geography, astrology, military tactics, divination, medicine and other branches of learning.

Fiction-writing has a history of one and a half millennia in China, if we reckon from the tales written in the third and fourth centuries. Yao Hsueh-yin has inherited the fine traditions and techniques of classical Chinese novels, besides using certain techniques of modern western fiction. His long historical novel has distinctive Chinese style and shows artistic talent of a high order.

The author is an old writer born in Tenghsien, Honan Province in 1910. When he was twenty-three and unable to find a job, he used to frequent the Honan Provincial Library, reading mainly works of literature and history. His interest in Li Tzu-cheng dates from that time. Later he taught in universities and made a further study of the history of Chinese literature and classical Chinese novels. During the War of Resistance Against Japan, he published *Half a Cartload of Cornstalks*, a story which became well-known and was translated into several languages. Before starting work on this novel, he spent dozens of years in preparation and assiduously collected material. He is now sixty-eight years old, but he works hard at this novel every day. The third part will be published next year, and the last two parts are also being planned.

Art Exhibition of Minority Nationalities

An exhibition of art works by minority nationalities in Yunnan, Kweichow, Szechuan and Tibet was held in Chengtu, Kweiyang, Kunming, Tientsin, Lhasa and Peking from May last year to the beginning of this year. This exhibition was the first of its kind since the founding of the People's Republic. On display were more than 200 works by artists from 30 minority nationalities in southwest China, including traditional Chinese paintings, oils, woodcuts, New-Year pictures, serial pictures, gouache, cartoons and scissor-cuts. Outstanding among them were the woodcuts.

The exhibits covered a wide range of subject-matter. Many of them depict the deep sorrow of the minority people at the death of our great leader Chairman Mao, their joy at the downfall of the "gang of four" in October 1976, and their warm support for the Party Central Committee headed by Chairman Hua Kuo-feng. The woodcut *Chairman Hua Is Close to Us Liberated Serfs* depicts an Yi woman who has just returned from a conference in Peking. She is telling her



Scissorcuts by Yang Li-ming

people how she was received by Chairman Hua. The others crowd round her to see the picture of her taken with the new leader, their delighted smiles showing their deep feeling for Chairman Hua. The vivid engraving is done with meticulous care, each figure depicted having distinctive features. The presence of the spikes, carrying-poles and ropes used on construction sites conjures up a lively picture of the Yi people's hard work.

Some exhibits praise the socialist revolution and construction in southwest China. *Green Winter*, a coloured woodcut, depicts a young Tibetan woman irrigating a field of winter wheat while in the background tractors are turning up the land still under snow, showing that farming is going with a swing on the Tibetan Plateau. In *Spring in a Tung Village*, a wood-block print, two women have just put down their load of seedlings to admire the paddy transplanters at

work in the fields. The bright colours and exuberant style affirm the successful mechanization of farming in the Tung villages.

Returning from College, another coloured woodcut, shows a different facet of the changes in the minority nationality areas. The composition is simple but effective, portraying the arrival by train of some college graduates of the Yi nationality. Their faces show their delight at sight of the changes in their home town. The eagerness of the girl in front to alight heightens the artistic impact.

Willows, a traditional Chinese painting, is original in conception, presenting a bird's-eye view of a group of young people, holding high a red banner, marching down a highway flanked by green weeping willows. They are city youth going to the minority nationality areas to help with socialist construction. After being tempered in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, they are as resilient as willows and able to strike roots wherever they go.

The Tibetans have a long history of painting and sculpture which have reached a fairly high artistic level. *A Pedlar Comes to the Mountain Village* is a new work by an old Tibetan mural artist. The scissorcuts popular in Yunnan and Kweichow have a strong local flavour, and have adapted patterns from the embroidery on women's clothes, shoes, handkerchiefs and sashes. Reproduced in this issue are scissorcuts depicting mechanized farming in the Pai nationality area, thus integrating this traditional art with revolutionary content.

After Liberation, guided by the Party's national policy, the minority nationalities now have their own artists. Ah Ko, who painted *Chairman Hua Is Close to Us Liberated Serfs*, is herself a liberated serf. She became the first wood-engraver of the Yi nationality after studying in the Szechuan Fine Arts Institute from the age of eleven. Since the Cultural Revolution, especially since the downfall of the "gang of four", both professional artists and amateur art workers of the minority nationalities have been working harder than ever. The exhibition is a demonstration of their achievements.

The Colour Cartoon “Monkey Makes Havoc in Heaven”

Recently the colour cartoon *Monkey Makes Havoc in Heaven*, based on excerpts from the popular Chinese novel *The Pilgrimage to the West*, was shown throughout the country. Its distinctive artistic appeal has won widespread applause.

This mythical romance written by Wu Cheng-en in the sixteenth century drew on folk tales about a monk named Hsuan Tsang in the Tang Dynasty, who went to the West Heaven in search of scriptures escorted by Monkey King Sun Wu-kung. In fact, Monkey is its central, most successfully created character. The legends about this rebellious hero who overcomes all evil spirits on their way were passed down from generation to generation in China. However, it was not easy to make a film of this impressive novel. The cartoon *Monkey Makes Havoc in Heaven* is a bold yet successful attempt made by the Shanghai Animation Film Studio.

The basis of this cartoon is the first seven chapters of the novel. The film starts with Monkey Sun Wu-kung being crowned as the

king of his home base — the Mountain of Flowers and Fruit — and then describes how he fights against the heavenly ruler the Jade Emperor. It ends with Heaven, once so peaceful and solemn, thrown into utter confusion.

According to legend, Monkey Sun Wu-kung was born from a rock which split open. Due to his ability, all the monkeys of the Mountain of Flowers and Fruit make him their king. His conflict with Heaven starts when the Dragon King of the East Sea goes to the Jade Emperor, the mythical ruler of the whole universe, with a complaint that Sun Wu-kung has plundered his sea treasury. His adviser, the Spirit of the Morning Star, proposes that Monkey should be induced to come to Heaven, given the title *pi-ma-wen* and confined to tending horses in the Imperial Stable. They can then restrict him, and peace will be restored.

Having heard so much about the magnificence of the Heavenly Palace, Monkey jumps at the invitation. He knows nothing about official matters, let alone the trap the deities have laid for him. He thinks that the Jade Emperor values him highly. There in Heaven he works hard and the several thousand horses he tends soon become plump and strong. But one day his superior, the Heavenly Horse Supervisor, makes an unexpected inspection. He gives Monkey a dressing-down for no reason at all. Only then does Monkey realize that a *pi-ma-wen* is nothing more than a groom. In a fury he beats up his superior, topples the stable and leaves Heaven. This is the first conflict between Monkey and the rulers in Heaven.

To show his contempt for and defiance of Heaven, as soon as he gets back to the Mountain of Flowers and Fruit, Monkey sets up a banner inscribed “The Great Sage, Equal of Heaven”. He means to be on an equal footing with the Jade Emperor. The Jade Emperor, hearing the news, flies into a rage and immediately sends heavenly troops to capture Monkey. But they are ignominiously defeated. The crafty old adviser of the Jade Emperor suggests trying new tactics, allowing Monkey to use the title “The Great Sage, Equal of Heaven”, and recalling him to court and putting him in charge of the celestial Peach Garden.

Monkey does not realize that this is another trick until he discovers that his name is not on the invitation list for a Peach Banquet given by the Queen Mother of the West. However, instead of going into action at once, he slips into Green Jade Pool Garden, where the banquet is to be held. Plucking out a handful of hairs, he turns them by magic into Drowsy Insects which make the attendants fall asleep. He sits on the throne eating and drinking to his heart's content, then makes off with the rest of the peaches. He is pretty drunk now. Staggering and blundering along, he loses his way and arrives at the Taoist Patriarch's alchemical laboratory. There he gulps down all the elixir the Patriarch has just made for the Emperor, after which he rides happily back on a cloud to his Mountain of Flowers and Fruit.

The despoiling of the Peach Banquet is an affront to Heaven which the Jade Emperor and Queen Mother will not take lying down. They send Vaisravana and a hundred thousand Heavenly troops to besiege the Mountain of Flowers and Fruit. Resorting to his magic powers, Monkey holds them back. But in one fierce battle he is caught off guard by a trap the Patriarch has cast and gets trussed up. The Jade Emperor orders his immediate death. However, axe, arrow, thunderbolt and fire all prove ineffective — Monkey comes through unscathed. At his wits' end, the Jade Emperor asks the Patriarch's help. The mythical founder of Taoism prides himself on his supernatural powers. He puts Monkey into his crucible to melt him. When the fire has burned for forty-nine days and nights, the Patriarch reckons that Monkey must have been reduced to ashes. But when he opens the lid, to his great surprise, Monkey leaps out, wielding his iron staff. This time Monkey hits out recklessly, not caring whom he strikes and runs amuck. Even the Jade Emperor has to flee in a panic. Wherever his cudgel reaches, palaces topple, pillars break, dust rises in clouds. The whole Heavenly Palace is shaking amidst Monkey's laughter. And the banner of "The Great Sage, Equal of Heaven" is hoisted again, fluttering high over the Mountain of Flowers and Fruit.

This cartoon ending with Monkey's victory is an artistic recreation of the original novel, but more concise and cohesive. Monkey's

rebellious nature is more forcefully projected. By means of romanticism, this cartoon, which portrays Monkey's fearless struggles against Heaven and all its deities, praises the uncompromising spirit of the Chinese working people and their splendid determination to conquer Nature and all their enemies. Sun Wu-kung is presented as an unconquerable hero with human attributes, a monkey's dexterity and great magic power.

Wan I ai-ming, the director of this cartoon, has more than forty years of experience in this field, being one of the pioneers in making animated films in China. He has a highly original technique. In making this cartoon, he took care to give it a distinctively national style.

A good cartoon is made up of artistic images. One of the film makers, the late artist Chang Kuang-yu, displayed his ability in this respect. He had made a careful study of Chinese folk painting and was renowned for his beautiful decorative drawings. In his painstaking designs for *Monkey Makes Havoc in Heaven* he has drawn on the fine traditions of folk painting and Chinese opera, using line drawing and striking colour contrasts to bring out very vividly the distinctive features of different characters. The shining round eyes and red peach-shaped patch on Monkey's face convey his alertness, humour and rebellious spirit, while the lacklustre eyes and pink patch on the nose of the Jade Emperor make him look an old fool for all his imposing airs. The adviser, Spirit of the Morning Star, poses as honest, yet his beady eyes reveal his craftiness. Natha and Erhlang, though both are Heavenly generals, are differentiated, the former having a clear complexion and air of militancy while the latter with his yellow forehead, blue cheeks and three furious eyes is the picture of pride. These exaggerated images make their characteristics vivid and clear-cut and leave an indelible impression on the audience.

The beautiful, fairy-tale settings, a combination of Chinese traditional painting and decorative art, conjure up a mythical world in which characters and surroundings blend perfectly and the whole atmosphere is strongly romantic.

The movements of the figures are modelled on those of traditional operas, with a suitable degree of exaggeration. These stylized move-

ments combined with a monkey's natural agility make Sun Wu-k'ung appear dextrous and humorous. The rhythm of percussion instruments also lends force to the movements. All in all, with regard to sound, atmosphere and painting, this cartoon is thoroughly Chinese in style.



Chronicle

Peking's Theatre over the New Year

During the New-Year holidays many new programmes were staged in Peking. Among them, *Yang Kai-hui*, a play produced by the teachers and students of the Central Theatrical Institute, greatly impressed the audience by its plot and acting. A satirical comedy, *When Maple Leaves Turn Red*, and two other plays *Turning-point* and *They Are Mighty Fighters* were the creations of the China Modern Drama Troupe last year. In different ways, they showed how the Chinese people struggled against the "gang of four" and their followers. A number of fine traditional operas were also staged, including: *Women Generals of the Yang Family* and *Monkey Makes Havoc in Heaven* by the China Peking Opera Troupe; *The Young Phoenix* by the Peking Opera Troupe of Peking; *Yentang Mountain* by the China School of Opera; *Seizing the Seal* and *The New-Year Sacrifice* by the Peking *Pingchu* Opera Troupe. Peking audiences were delighted by these performances.

The National Photographic Exhibition in Peking

The National Photographic Exhibition was held recently in Peking. On display were more than 300 photos covering a wide range of subjects, illustrating the life of the people in different walks of life and various aspects of our political, economic and cultural fields. Also on display were landscapes, flowers and portraits.

Literary Works Republished in Shanghai

A number of Chinese and foreign literary works were republished recently by the Shanghai People's Publishing House. They were such favourites as the Chinese novel *The Railway Guerrillas* and a translation of the Italian novel *Spartacus*. The Shanghai People's Publishing House is at present editing *A Selection of Contemporary Chinese Stories* and *Library of Classical Chinese Literature*. The latter is to be published in 50 volumes, including works by Li Po, Tu Fu, Li Shang-yin, Tu Mu, Hsin Chi-chi, Lu Yu and others, as well as excerpts from *The Book of Songs*, *Chu Tzu*, *Wen Hsuan*, *The Western Chamber*, *The Peony Pavilion* and *Tales of Liao Chai*.

Exhibition of Chinese Paintings Held in Shanghai

An exhibition of modern Chinese paintings was held not long ago in Shanghai. It was in four sections with a total of 130 paintings by 30 artists, covering the period of time from 1840 to the establishment of New China in 1949. In the first section were paintings by Chao Chih-chien, Jen Po-nien and Jen Wei-chang; in the second section, works by Wu Chang-shuo, Chi Pai-shih and Chen Shih-tseng; in the third section, works by Hsu Pei-hung, Kao Chien-fu, Kao Chi-feng and Fu Pao-shih; and in the final section some by Huang Pin-hung, Lai Chu-sheng and Hsieh Chin-kuang.





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