



Little Soldier Chang Ka-tse

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Illustrations by
WU WEN-YUAN



1

In the days of the Anti-Japanese War there was a small village on the shores of the Paiyang Lake in the central plains of Hopei Province. It had a strange name, "Kuei Pu Ling", meaning Even-The-Devil-Is-At-A-Loss.

In the northwestern corner of Kuei Pu Ling stood a small two-roomed thatched hut facing south, surrounded by a low wall with a wooden gate that opened to the west. Two willow trees stood on either side of the gate. Along the shore of an arm of the Paiyang Lake some fifty feet west of this gate was a dense growth of reeds, which rustled in the wind like a ring of laughter. It would have been an attractive scene were it not for the sinister sight of the Japanese fortress that lay beyond the arm of the lake.

This was in 1943, the most bitter days of the Anti-Japanese War, only a year after the Japanese "mopping-up" campaign against the people of Central Hopei.

At the end of this campaign, there was not a village or a household without a mourner. Now every time people went out they had to pass a check-point. The *pao chia* or tithing system, in which a contact-man had to be sent every day to report to the enemy stronghold, had been instituted in most villages. The Communist Party's armed forces and the Party and government workers had gone underground and were carrying on their arduous and secret duties only after dark. Japanese pillboxes stood at three *li*¹ intervals, and forts at five *li* intervals, along a network of highways on either side of which a blockade ditch was dug. All this was to further their countless "annihilation and suppression" campaigns.

In the hut an old white-haired woman in a long gown was sitting on the *kang*² beside the window, mending an old cloth shoe where the upper had come apart from the sole. Her back was bent with age and her eyes were dim. The weather was sultry, and beads of sweat lined the furrows on her brow. Yet she seemed entirely absorbed in her needlework, and oblivious of the heat.

Suddenly she started and pricked her finger as the sound of running footsteps drew close. The curtain on the door went up and from under it popped the head of a boy. "Granny! 'A snake slithers round a stack of slates and slips into the stack of slates.' Can you say it?"

¹ Three *li* equals one mile or one and a half kilometers.

² A brick bed, usually heated in winter.

The old woman was nonplussed. Glowering at him and nervously pressing her hands to her breast, she sighed and at length found her voice.

"You really gave me a fright, young 'un. Why is it the more I tell you to stop running about the more you like to run about?" This struck the little fellow with the force of enlightenment. His eyes lit up and a big grin came over his face. He squatted down and leant his head against the *kang* as if he had made a big blunder.

This was her grandson — Chang Ka-tse, the light of her heart, the apple of her eye, the hope of her remaining years. The boy was now thirteen.

The two were all and all to each other. The boy's father, her only son, had been killed at the outset of a Japanese campaign and his mother had died when he was only five. Now nearing seventy, the old grandmother was bent on only one thing — to bring up the youngster. She eked out a bare living by weaving reed mats and spinning. Her greatest joy came from the fact that the boy, besides being able to put up with cold and hunger, was intelligent and cheerful. He helped her wash the dishes, gather firewood, and split the reeds into thin strips so that they could be made into mats. He also looked after her comfort. Though she might be afflicted with a million sorrows, he could appease them all. He added warmth and comfort to this lonely household.

After the bloody mopping-up campaign, misfortunes, death and destruction befell every household. The old woman and Ka-tse were driven hither and thither,

barely escaping death. This experience came as such a shock to the old woman that her heart began to play up.

It was during this storm, however, that the old woman, with irrepressible élan and loyalty, knitted an indissoluble tie with the Eighth Route Army. Party workers and wounded soldiers came to her for shelter. Her cottage lay on the fringe of the village where it was easy to come and go without being noticed. Though some of them came and went by night without her having so much as a chance to see what they looked like, her own bitter experience of life told her that they were the salt of the earth. They gave their lives for the nation and people without flinching from the danger facing them. Before the enemy they were men of iron, but with her they were as considerate and attentive as if she had been their own mother.

Ka-tse, however, found these comings and goings of absorbing interest. Every one of those who came and went was his friend and his hero. Who else, besides Ka-tse, knew so many heroes and had so many secrets confided in him — how the fort in East Village came to be burnt down; who penetrated into the enemy stronghold at West Marsh; who beheaded the traitor in the city in the middle of the night; how a Japanese steamship was sunk; how the Japanese were suddenly attacked from a bridal sedan-chair; how a fortune-teller had blown up a Japanese steamship; how some White Necks¹ had been disarmed with whisk brooms. His heart had time and again been carried away to the bat-

¹ Name given to the puppet troops by the people.

tle-field by these stories. Thus with people always stopping over at his granny's home, there was no end to the curious and interesting stories to be heard. In the evenings, his playmates in the village used to jump with joy when he passed on the stories just as he had heard them.

A day without any callers from the Eighth Route Army left him depressed and restless. He could find no way to while away the time.

Now it was Ka-tse's job to patrol the village every day. When his grandmother first sent him to keep watch, he had gone happily enough because he looked on it as something of an adventure. Whenever the Japanese troops were sighted at the approaches to the village, he would turn quietly for home to give warning of their approach. In an instant, the Eighth Route Army men holding a meeting in their compound would vanish into thin air.

"Many, many no have!" the Japanese would say after a long and futile search. This was really something to take a pride in. But as time went on, the task began to pall — the same old pillboxes, the same old highways. He lapsed into boredom. Besides, every time the Japanese turned up in the locality the village administration knew of it long beforehand, so everything went smoothly. Young Ka-tse grew even more slack. Now he spent the greater part of the day in the room where the Eighth Route Army men were lodging. His granny, for fear of being alerted to no purpose, told him never to run unless he had something to report on the enemy.

But today he came pounding in, forgetting the old rules just because he had learnt a new tongue twister.

Now though his grandmother had contained her agitation, she pointed an angry finger at him. "You've been to Uncle Chung's¹ room again," she exclaimed. "Just keep on acting the fool and let the Japanese devils slip up on us and see if I don't give you a pinch!"

Without uttering a word, Ka-tse sat on the *kang* and rolled over in front of his granny. "I'll come in as quietly as a ferret next time, Granny. All right?" He was still smiling broadly.

His grandmother glanced at him and subdued a laugh.

"Hey, Granny! D'you know Uncle Chung's not married yet? You find a girl friend for him, a handsome one, eh?"

She gave a little laugh. "You've got a gift for the gab all right. I'll tell you something, I just had a message from Uncle Chung's unit today saying that if he's better he should go back at once. The Japs are up to their old tricks again. They mean to surround and raid the village at dusk. But here are *you* behaving like a gentleman of leisure. Your Uncle Chung's spoiling you."

Seeing that his grandmother was no longer angry, Ka-tse cushioned his head on her lap and toyed with a button on her gown. "Let 'em do their worst. Uncle Chung said that our district forces are ready for a big battle. If they dare come they'll get a licking!" he said. Then he opened his eyes wide. "Talking about

¹ Chinese children address their adult friends as "Uncle" or "Aunt".

war, Gran, why don't you let me go back with Uncle Chung, so I can see a bit of the fighting? Eh, Gran?"

The old woman seemed not to have heard him. She glanced up at the sky. The sun was slanting towards the west. She pushed his head off her lap, laid aside her sewing and rubbed her eyes lightly. "Another day nearly done! May the Lord of Heaven be with us. . . ." She smiled at Ka-tse and stepped down from the *kang*. "Now what was that you were saying about the snake slithering around a stack of slates? . . ."

2

The old woman groped her way into the kitchen to prepare supper. Ka-tse, whose mind was perpetually on his Uncle Chung, seized the chance to steal out again.

Uncle Chung, whose real name was Chung Liang, was head of the Reconnaissance Platoon. He had been laid up in Ka-tse's home for the last five days or so with rheumatism in his legs, but he was not staying in the same courtyard. Within the wall separating the grandmother's house from her neighbor's in the east was a small courtyard with a three-roomed building on the north, a small two-roomed building on the south and a pigsty against the wall on the west. The northern building had once been the ancestral hall of the Han family and the southern was once occupied by their hired hands. This was before the Hans had gone bankrupt many years earlier. Now the younger generation

of this family had bricked up the windows of the building in the south and used it to store straw in. Having been uninhabited for more than ten years the courtyard had become so overgrown with grass that it looked like an unfrequented temple. Since the Japanese mopping-up campaign, this place had quietly come alive again, and become a "guest-house" for Party functionaries and Eighth Route Army casualties. It was an out-of-the-way place and a padlock hung on the door of the ancestral hall all the year round. This placed it above suspicion to the enemy and even to the neighbors. People had been coming to and fro in steadily increasing numbers over the past year or so without raising any comment. The place had only one drawback. Being so near the lake, no tunnel had been dug to connect it with the other tunnels in the heart of the village, for fear of striking water. Besides, since any dampness would affect Uncle Chung's rheumatism and the place itself seemed perfectly safe, it was decided to leave well alone.

Uncle Chung was easy to get along with and had a child-like turn of mind, though he was well over thirty. He was always ready to sing, guess riddles, write cross-talk pieces and tell jokes. Besides he also knew many stories about heroes. He and Ka-tse quickly became inseparable friends.

Ka-tse dashed towards the foot of the wall in the east, against which leant several stacks of reeds like a screen. He moved aside the third stack and squeezed through the opening. Then he replaced it; crouched down and for a short two feet felt his way along the narrow space

between the reeds and the wall to a hole nearly three feet across. He crawled through the hole, moved aside a stack of bean stalks and found himself inside the pigsty. Happily poking out the tip of his tongue, he leapt out of the pigsty and stealthily made his way up to the small side door of the building on the south.

Apart from a few narrow shafts of light which broke through the cracks in the sealed window, the room was in complete darkness. Uncle Chung was seated on a pile of straw, carving something by this light. Ka-tse jumped for joy when he drew nearer and saw that Uncle Chung had made a wooden pistol.

"Oh, what can I do to thank you for it?" he exclaimed, kneeling down beside Uncle Chung and taking the "barker". It was well made, with a cylinder, a trigger guard, a standard-size chiselled butt and a barrel made



out of a shiny cartridge. It looked like the real thing. Smacking his lips over it, Ka-tse handled it fondly.

"You behave as if I'm going to give it to you," teased Uncle Chung.

"If you're not going to give it to me, then who are you going to give it to?"

"To . . . er . . . to a courageous and intelligent young hero who resolutely resists Japan!"

"Who is he and where is he?"

"You guess."

"I know! It's me!" he exclaimed, his eyes darting from side to side. Going through the motion of cocking the pistol, he closed his left eye, aimed at a chink in the sealed window and roared: "You dog of a traitor! Do you think you can escape? — Bang!"

"Sh . . . people in the street will hear you!" remonstrated Uncle Chung pointing to the window. A soft smile straight from his heart appeared on his face. "All right, I give it to you, but you must become a brave and resolute little hero."

"Sure!" said Ka-tse. He tucked the "barker" in his belt, marched around the room a couple of times counting "one, two, one, two!" and then suddenly flung himself upon Uncle Chung's neck. "Take me along with you to become a scout, Uncle Chung. Will you?" he pleaded.

Uncle Chung rested his hand on Ka-tse's head and smiled with pride. "So *you* want to be a scout too, eh, young Ka-tse?" He rubbed Ka-tse's head caressingly. "Anyone can become a scout, Ka-tse, but he must go through a certain amount of steeling and testing. A

scout not only must be courageous, shrewd and flexible, but must be calm and collected when trouble blows up. By calm and collected I mean if something comes on you suddenly, say for example, the sky falls down, you should not so much as flinch!"

"Huh! How can you be calm and collected when something like that happens?"

"That is to say, you must make up your mind to be a revolutionary to the end!" Warming up to his subject, Uncle Chung peered through the crack at the sky, took his Mauser and hand-grenades out of his belt and seated himself in a comfortable position. "All right, then! If you really want to join our scouts, I'll tell you a story."

This was just what Ka-tse had been hankering for. He put his "barker" away, sat down facing Uncle Chung with his legs crossed under him and listened avidly.

"Once there was a Communist," Uncle Chung began, "lodging in the home of one of our fort families¹ recovering from a wound. One day he was talking to a man — just like I'm talking to you now — when — Bang! Bang! Two shots suddenly rang out. . . ." Pop-pop-pop! At that moment, as if to illustrate his words, three rifle reports came from somewhere beyond the village.

Uncle Chung sprang to his feet and released the safety catch on his Mauser. An alert expression replaced the good-natured look on his face, and a fighting light came into his eyes. Pop-pop-pop! Another volley of rifle shots, fired from nearby, was followed by the thud

¹ Peasant families which covered underground workers of the Communist Party.

of horses' hoofs and the sound of people accosting others to stop. "The enemy has caught us napping!" whispered Uncle Chung slowly as he threw a glance at Ka-tse and picked up his hand-grenades.

3

It was dusk. The enemy troops in the county seat had suddenly swooped down on Kuei Pu Ling and surrounded it.

After firing a couple of rounds, the White Necks, followed by the Japanese, tramped into the streets shouting orders. Some of them climbed upon roof tops to cover the street entrances, while another group charged into the village "Administration" to arrest the functionaries. The rest of them broke up into small parties and made a house-to-house search. Barking dogs snapped at their heels, chickens fluttered to one side squawking. Men and women, young and old, huddled together in the houses preparing themselves for the coming disaster.

Two White Necks were hammering at the padlock on the door of the ancestral hall of the Han family.

It was at this time that Uncle Chung opened the little side door, with the idea of fleeing to the west courtyard. On the roof of the grandmother's house, he saw two Japanese soldiers keeping watch on all around them. The enemy had every place covered. Uncle Chung drew back his head and secured the door with

a cross-beam. He looked about the room several times. Ka-tse was shivering with terror.

"Now just relax and don't stir, Ka-tse!" he commanded. "Just do as I tell you. There's no need to be afraid. . . ."

C-r-a-c-k! The padlock on the door had been broken. From that direction came the tramp of footsteps.

"They've broken in, Ka-tse. Do you dare let 'em have it with this?" asked Uncle Chung, picking up the sickle he had been using a few minutes before to carve the "barker".

"Sure!" replied Ka-tse taking the sickle.

"That's the boy!" said Uncle Chung. "Come, let's guard the door." They took up positions on either side of the door, their feet planted apart.

The crunch of footsteps was heard in the yard and the shadow of two men flickered across the crack in the door. Uncle Chung flattened himself against the wall and motioned for Ka-tse to stand clear of the crack. No sooner had he stepped back against the wall than someone pushed against the door from the outside.

"Huh! The door's bolted from inside." Rifle bolts clicked. "Come out! You Eighth Route Army men!" barked a voice.

Ka-tse shivered with fright and threw a quick glance at Uncle Chung. The Eighth Route Army scout was standing stock-still, Mauser in hand. His lips were tightly compressed. "That's the spirit!" Ka-tse thought to himself. He too froze into immobility.

"Come out!"

A loud kick resounded against the wall, bringing a shower of dirt down from the rafters onto their heads. Uncle Chung blinked the dust out of his eyes and remained motionless.

"What an example!" thought Ka-tse, his courage rising. He compressed his lips and stood still.

The shadow of something round flitted across the crack in the door. The White Necks were apparently peeping into the room. Uncle Chung trained his Mauser at the crack. A squeeze of the trigger would blast the brains out the peeping head. He nevertheless withdrew his Mauser. It was evident that he was racking his brains for the next course of action.

"Ha! Ha!" came a laugh. "I see you! Don't play the fool! Hurry out of there, or I'm going to shoot!"

Ka-tse turned pale. He shuffled back, pressing himself hard against the wall. Uncle Chung gave him a look, imploring him with his eyes and a shake of his head not to stir. Ka-tse understood and froze to the spot. Sweat beaded his forehead.

Following this maneuver to intimidate, the footsteps outside quietened down. But before the two had time to catch their breath, several bricks fell away from the sealed window. The White Necks had made a hole in it. Uncle Chung felt his way quietly along the base of the wall towards the window. No sooner had he reached it than a shining bayonet shot in through the hole there, almost striking him on the head. Uncle Chung remained steady.

Ka-tse's spirits rose. Gripping his sickle firmly, he stood with his eyes fixed on the crack in the door. Now

that he was guarding this door alone, he felt a great sense of responsibility. He was ready to chop heads off like grass if the enemy ventured to stick them inside the door!

The silence in the room threw the White Necks into a quandary. "Is there anyone inside after all?" one asked.

Another cursed loudly. "I'm going to climb up on the window sill and see," he said.

"Don't! It might be a tunnel! There may be an ambush behind the door."

"Then . . . then we'd better call up a couple more to help us. There may be mines inside too," said the other, clearly shaken by the mention of the word "tunnel".

They gave up the attempt to break in and left. Uncle Chung peered out of the window. The yard was deserted and the Japanese on top of the grandmother's house had gone too. "Follow me!" he said softly, unbolting the door. He took Ka-tse by the hand and led him to the pigsty. They moved aside the bean stalks and crawled through the hole. Uncle Chung took cover under the reeds and drew in a deep breath. Sounds issued from the west courtyard. Listening intently, Little Ka-tse heard someone jabbering in Japanese in the north building and then his grandmother's voice.

"I don't understand a word you say. I'm a lone old woman and have nothing to offer you," she was heard to shout. This was followed by some bumping and scraping, mingled with shouts.

Uncle Chung frowned. He was mapping out his next move. Loud voices came from near the ancestral hall as another knot of troops went into the yard. The narrow space between the reeds and the wall evidently could not serve as shelter for long, for the soldiers would surely search here. Now that the yard was empty, Uncle Chung crawled along by the wall towards the southeastern corner of the courtyard where stood two date trees. Here he leapt to his feet, took cover behind a date tree and peered beyond the wooden gate. There were no troops near the clump of reeds by the lake, about ten seconds run from the gate. But with some still in the north building, there was no chance of dashing through the courtyard. Looking back at the courtyard to the east, he saw four White Necks about to enter the southern room, while four others, walking on tip-toe, bayonets in hand, were investigating the ground for mines.

He beckoned Ka-tse to crawl over. Ka-tse did so, and strange as it may seem, far from being frightened, he bared his teeth a grin, just as if he was playing some sort of war game.

"We can't stay here long, Ka-tse," whispered Uncle Chung, pulling him over to him. "Listen to me, when I throw these hand-grenades into the east courtyard, the Japanese in the northern rooms will surely rush for that point. When they've all cleared out, d'you see that place?" Uncle Chung pointed to the reed thicket. "We're to run there. But you must let me go first, and if nothing happens, you follow. Eh?"

Ka-tse, eyes flashing, drew his lower lip in between his teeth. "Let me go first, Uncle Chung. It doesn't matter if I get arrested; I'm only a kid."

"No! You don't know how cruel the enemy is."

"Then —"

"Hush and do as I say!" ordered Uncle Chung, pulling the pins out of a hand-grenade. "Remember, you come only if nothing happens to me!" At this he flung the grenades into the courtyard. The two then crouched down again.

Loud explosions resounded from the east courtyard and a shower of dirt came down on the reeds. This was followed by scrambling and screaming. As expected, the three Japanese in the northern rooms dashed out through the wooden gate. Uncle Chung threw a glance at Ka-tse and ran. He looked both ways before crossing and covered the distance in a flash. Ka-tse took cover behind the wooden gate and peered in both directions. Seeing no one, he leapt forward. But no sooner had he gone through the gate than came the challenge:

"Halt!"

Looking around, he saw two White Necks followed by three or four others emerge into the lane. If he ran, he would be sure to draw the enemy in the direction Uncle Chung had fled. What to do? A plan flashed through his mind. He turned and ran towards the White Necks.

"Officer! Officer! Two mines went off over there!" he shouted.

"Mines? Where?" they chorused in surprise.

"There, inside the ancestral hall!" replied Ka-tse, pointing.

"Come, lead us there!" roared one with red-rimmed eyes, prodding Ka-tse with his rifle. This gave him just the chance he wanted to lead them astray. He took them to the ancestral hall of the Han family. As luck would have it, they reached the gate in time to see two gory White Necks being carried out of the yard. "Were they killed by mines?" inquired Sore Eyes.

"Mines, nothing! They were killed by hand-grenades thrown from the west courtyard," came the reply. Another knot of enemy troops crowded into the grandmother's courtyard.

Sore Eyes glared and bellowed:

"Uh-huh! Hand-grenades, but you said mines! How foxy you are! I wager it was you who threw them, didn't you?"

"No, I didn't!" replied Ka-tse, staring. "All I heard was two bangs; how could I tell they were hand-grenades?"

"Oh, you want to be stubborn!" barked another White Neck. "A natural-born Eighth Route Army man. Keep an eye on him!"

"Get going!" cried Sore Eyes, prodding him into the house.

The enemy had set up their command post in the courtyard of the Han family which was located to the north. It was formerly used by the village administration. Here was where the *pao* chiefs and contact-men waited for orders from the enemy. Ka-tse was taken into the courtyard which was crowded with Japanese and White

Necks, some seated against the grape trellis drinking wine, some crowded round a table counting money, some flogging a captive, others killing chickens while the *pao* chiefs were going back and forth to the kitchen for hot wine and dishes. From the vicinity of the reed marsh issued a chaotic scramble of noises, just as Ka-tse was entering an inner gate. A shiver ran down his spine. With Sore Eyes keeping a wary eye on him, he did not dare move. He sat quietly down on the steps and fondled Little Tiger, the house dog of the Han family, while he stole glances beyond the gate.

A short while later a group of Japanese soldiers came crunching into the courtyard. Following them came a group of White Necks. Held firmly in their grasp was a robust, unshaven figure covered with blood. He had a ruddy complexion and his eyes shone. If that wasn't Uncle Chung then who else could it be?

"Bah-ah-ah!" Ka-tse set up a heart-rending wail, slumped on the ground and writhed there sobbing for all he was worth.

4

The sun sank and darkness gathered. A bugle sounded. The Japanese and White Necks threw Uncle Chung across the back of a stallion and took him together with the two White Neck corpses into the city.

Sore Eyes, who was guarding Ka-tse, stood watching him writhing and wailing on the ground. He was nonplussed. At this point, Uncle Chun, the village

"contact-man", spoke up and said that Ka-tse suffered from epileptic fits which sometimes lasted two or three days and then went on to say things in his favor. On the strength of these words, the White Necks decided to leave Ka-tse behind.

Though Ka-tse himself had been plucked from danger, the arrest of Uncle Chung cut him to the heart. He wailed inarticulately, especially when he thought of how Uncle Chung, upon being taken away, had not so much as thrown a glance in his direction. "Why don't you go back and see about your granny, lad? What are you still crying for? The Japanese've gone," urged Uncle Chun. Thus he returned home in tears.

Scarcely had he entered the courtyard when he heard piteous groans. "Granny!" he called in amazement. He dashed into the room and found her lying on her back on the floor in the dark, her breath coming in short gasps. Kneeling down beside her, he supported her head and exclaimed: "Granny! Granny!"

"Who is that? . . ." the old woman wheezed.

"It's I, Ka-tse, Granny! . . ."

"Ka-tse. . . . My dear child. . . ." Catching hold of his hand, she pressed him to her breast as if protecting him from someone. "Light it. . . ." she ordered, pointing to a lamp on the table. He lit the lamp hurriedly and placed it on a small square table. Under its dull sallow light he could see how pale she was. Ka-tse took a closer look. "Aiya!" What he saw made him blanch; there was a trickle of blood on her neck and a clot of blood on her head.

"Does it hurt, Gran?" Ka-tse implored. She embraced him tightly, the tears in the corner of her staring eyes welling bigger and bigger.

"Where is your Uncle Chung, Ka-tse?" she inquired anxiously.

"He —" Ka-tse's eyes clouded, yet he said calmly: "He went to Uncle Chun's house for dinner. He'll be back after a while. Shall I call a doctor, Gran?"

"No, no! Don't leave me! . . ." she gasped. "Give me a drink of water. . . ."

"Aye!" Ka-tse hurriedly fetched a bowl of water and held it to her lips. She took a few sips. Her eyes closed and she leant her head on Ka-tse's shoulder, breathing heavily. A short while later, she knitted her brows, writhed convulsively and groaned. "Where does it hurt, Gran? Do you want me to massage it?" he asked, rubbing her chest to ease the pain.

The old woman struggled into a sitting position, bracing herself on her hands. Tears rolled down her cheeks. "You're still so young, Ka-tse. . . ." Again she jerked convulsively, her voice growing weaker. Yet she went on. "Tell Uncle Chung that the Japanese with a head shaped like a barrel, eyes like a toad, and a moustache is the one. . . ." She gasped for breath and licked her dry lips. Again she shook convulsively and went limp. Her lips moved, but no words came out.

"Gran! Gran!" he shouted, shaking her. Her body became heavier and heavier. Ka-tse lowered her head to the floor, wishing to hear her out.

"Are you tired, Gran?" he asked. "You rest, while I give you a riddle to guess. Or sing you a song; that one you like best, eh?"

There was no sound from the grandmother. Her eyes gradually ceased to move. She was to hear Ka-tse sing no more.

Never before had Ka-tse met death face to face. He stood for a while, staring into the distance, not knowing what had happened. Darkness had set in completely. All around was silence. Such a lull came to the plain after every mopping-up campaign. He peered out of the window, through which drifted a few shafts of moonlight. Two mosquitoes buzzed in a corner of the room. He raised the lamp and shone it on the grandmother's face. She was still. He put his hand on her lips and found them icy cold. He then jumped to his feet. "Can she be dead?" he asked himself, as he began to wail and threw himself upon her breast.

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His cries roused Uncle Chun and the neighbors. With tears in their eyes, they helped him bury the old woman that same night. Uncle Chun then took Ka-tse to his house, consoled him, gave him some supper and told him to try and get some sleep.

But sleep would not come to Ka-tse. He lay there quietly weeping. "After I've had my cry, I'll think of a way," he thought to himself. To avenge himself was naturally the first thing to be done. This reminded him of his gun. He felt at his waist and found that the "barker" was still there. Hurriedly he pulled it out and looked at it in the moonlight. The barrel still shone.

When he looked at the exquisitely made trigger, cylinder and butt he felt that this was really a weapon that he could do something with. As he fondled it, his heart grew light.

But then when he remembered that its maker, Uncle Chung, was not around, he sighed. He began to shiver, and gave way to tears again.

"Uncle Chung! How am I to avenge Gran on my own?" Scarcely had this thought come to him than he seemed to hear the resonant voice of Uncle Chung:

"But you must be a brave and resolute little hero!"

"Sure!" he heard himself say, a feeling of strength flushing through him. "That's right! A man has to stick his chest out and fight!" Ka-tse was a person who could not be subdued by the most crushing sorrows. He wiped his tear-stained eyes with his shirt sleeve and solemnly declared a vendetta.

"Sleep on, Gran! I shall avenge you!"

He dozed off just before daybreak. In his dream he asked Uncle Chung for a gun. Uncle Chung, a rifle and a bandoleer slung across his shoulder, was still in high spirits. On hearing Ka-tse's request, he nodded with a smile. "To get a gun is easy, but you must go to the front," he said.

5

Ka-tse resolved to join the Eighth Route Army. The next day, however, the idea suddenly flashed into his mind that he should go into town.

When Uncle Chun tried to dissuade him, Ka-tse said firmly that he had to inform his aunt of his grandmother's death and at the same time he wanted to ask her for a little spending money. But in his heart of hearts he was hoping to learn the whereabouts of Uncle Chung and enquire about the situation. And who knows, he might have the luck to snatch a gun from the Japanese. With a gun, he thought that the Eighth Route Army would no longer look on him as a mere youngster.

He finished his breakfast, thanked Uncle Chun, then went and kowtowed twice before his grandmother's grave. Attired in blue pants and a white jacket, his "barker" tucked in his belt, he slung a straw basket across his back, took up his sickle and set out barefoot on a zig-zag path along the Liuliang Dyke to the city.

It was a fine clear day. A sea of green fields lay on both sides of the dyke. The dry land was mostly planted to sorghum and maize, which stood in rows like troops in battle formation. Drops of dew sparkled on the leaves of the rice and ramie which carpeted the lakeside. Dragon-flies darted over the leaves, frogs croaked below. The clear blue waters of the lake seemed to stretch out to infinity, merging into the clouds. Reeds and judas trees covered the fringe of the dyke, leaving no room for the green grass but on top. Crickets bounced up out of the grass, knocking the dew to the ground. The sun was not yet up and the air was cool. The rows of willows on either side of the dyke, however, were a disheartening sight. They had once been green and woody, but during the mopping-up campaign,

the Japanese had lopped all their branches. The bare trunks now stood dark and gaunt, like a black stroke slashed across a beautiful landscape painting.

But Ka-tse was in no mood to enjoy the beauties around him, or deplore the mutilation of the trees. He sallied forth, chest out, heart racing. "Now what if I can't steal a gun?" he thought as he went along. "They are sure to say I'm too young if I turn up empty-handed. . . . I know, I must think of a way to capture a traitor! Then I'll look like a real scout! . . . The only trouble is that the units are hard to find. There's no telling where the County and District forces are."

The hum of telephone wires came to his ears as soon as he stepped upon the main thoroughfare; the county town lay just ahead. A huge grim wall encircled it. At short intervals along the wall were guard towers with loopholes in their center which seemed to gaze out at him from the distance. Ka-tse strolled towards the county town, itching with the desire to take a gun. But as he drew near to the town gate, he was startled to discover two White Necks standing guard there. He looked closely at one of them. It was Sore Eyes. "Ah!" he thought. "What if he asks about my 'epilepsy'?" Ka-tse hesitated. Yet he knew he could not very well just stop there. He stepped off the road, set his basket down and began to cut grass on the roadside. Keeping a sharp look-out all around, he tried to think up a way of getting into the town.

About this time a bicycle came along from the direction of Moyuntu. Its rider was a square-faced fellow with a parting in his hair, a cigarette dangling from

his lips, dressed in white silk pants and jacket. He dismounted as he came to the gate, wheeled his bicycle up to Sore Eyes, and took something out of his pocket. Sore Eyes examined it and let him enter the city.

"Dog of a traitor!" Ka-tse cursed to himself, though he wished he had whatever it was the man had produced from his pocket. Just then he heard the clatter of horses' hoofs and saw fifty or so Japanese cavalrymen in olive green uniforms and unbuffed leather boots with rifles across their shoulders galloping down the road from the city, throwing dirt far and wide. Ka-tse hung his head and watched them out of the corner of his eye. At the head of the horsemen rode the Japanese with a barrel head, toad-like eyes and a moustache. Following behind them were seven bicycles. The riders wore dull yellow pants, white jackets and had wooden Mauser holsters at their waist. They went in the direction of Moyuntu.

"That's what I'll do!" thought Ka-tse, suddenly changing his plans. "I'll follow the so-and-so's to Moyuntu. If I can get there by the time the Eighth Route Army ambushes them, I'll perhaps be able to get a gun during the scrap too!" He felt this was a better plan than going into town. Hurriedly he picked up his basket and followed them.

By the time he had covered five *li*, the sun was high in the sky. He reached the entrance of Moyuntu soaked with sweat. Strangely enough, everything was quiet and there were no Japanese sentries patrolling the village outskirts. Peering down the street, he saw an old woman carrying a winnowing pan making her way

leisurely into a lane. Further down the street over a bicycle shop waved a white flag bearing its trade sign, a bicycle wheel. A dog lay basking in the warm sunshine at the entrance to the shop. It was clear that the enemy had passed straight through the village and on. Ka-tse cursed his luck. "It would have been better if I'd waited for Sore Eyes to go off duty," he said to himself.

Just then he heard a bicycle bell. Looking around, he saw the square-faced fellow in white silk pedalling towards him. Ka-tse stepped aside to let him pass. But the fellow dismounted as soon as he entered the lane, leant his bicycle against a wall, and went through a door. Ka-tse's mind was racing. Quickly he broke off two hard thorns from a nearby jujube tree, made his way up to the bicycle, punched two holes in the tyre, and ran off to the bicycle shop. When the fellow came out he hopped on his bicycle, pedalled a few times, then jumped off again and felt his tyres. Glancing around, he pushed the bicycle towards the shop, cursing noisily. Ka-tse, a piece of tile in his hand, was playing with the dog and at the same time watching everything closely. He had to hold his breath to keep from laughing. The fellow leant his bicycle against the wall under the window of the shop, borrowed a pump from the proprietor, came out and began to pump with his face to the wall. The moment he bent over to pump, his jacket lifted just high enough to expose something underneath it.

"A pistol!" Ka-tse's heart began to pound. He wanted that gun. The streets were deserted; not a soul was in

sight. He wrung his hands in anxiety. The tyre was almost full of air! The man was about to straighten up . . . to turn around. Ka-tse whipped out his "barker". But it was made of wood. Would it take the man in?

"It'll do!" he thought, clenching his teeth. "Uncle Chung said that all traitors are soft as muck! Didn't a fellow named Lo Chin-pao disarm one with a whisk broom? This thing of mine's certainly better than a broom!" He threw his basket to one side. "Don't move! Stick up your hands or I'll let you have it, you dog of a traitor! . . ." he shouted, drawing in on the man. He reached out for the fellow's gun. He almost had

it when something happened. He felt his legs give and the ground come up. His "barker" went flying through the air. "Now just look at this youngster!" cried Square Face, staring in surprise. He closed his holster and approached Ka-tse with arms akimbo. "Ho! You've got what it takes all right, young fellow-me-lad!" the man roared. Ka-tse



scrambled into a sitting position with his back against the wall and waited for a thrashing. The man drew closer, but did not touch him.

"What d'you think you're up to?"

"I'm a beggar," Ka-tse lied.

"If you're a beggar, what were you trying to take my gun for?"

"To sell for food."

"To sell for food?" The man came back with a serious face, then almost laughed. "Was that 'I'll let you have it, you dog of a traitor' to sell for food too?"

"Then, I'm mistaken . . ." stammered Ka-tse.

The man laughed. Glancing in both directions, he helped him up and pushed open the shop door. The two of them went in. The proprietor, who had been watching through the window, went out and fetched the wooden pistol, then went to patch the inner tube. He too was smiling. The man took a seat on a wooden bench and surveyed Ka-tse from head to foot with interest. He asked Ka-tse how old he was, what was his name and where he lived. Upon learning that he was from Kuei Pu Ling, he grew more interested and pressed for further information. "D'you know an old woman by the name of Chang, who lives in the house west of the ancestral hall of the Han family?" he asked.

"Yes, I do!" Ka-tse's heart began to pound. "Are you a relative of hers?"

"No," the man replied. "I had a meal at her house once." He gave a sigh and continued: "Ai! I wonder if anything has happened to the old woman. . . ."

Ka-tse's eyes clouded over. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Lo."

"Your full name?"

"Lo Chin-pao. What about it?"

"You're Uncle Lo?" Ka-tse exclaimed, jumping up. "Are you the one who took a gun from a White Neck with a whisk broom?" Before Lo could reply, he had thrown himself upon him, big tears rolling down his face.

"You're the one I was looking for, Uncle Lo!"

6

The patching quickly completed, Lo opened the door a little and peered down the street. All was quiet.

"Let's go!" he said. He lifted Ka-tse onto the crossbar and pushed off down the street to the east. Ka-tse gazed ahead happily, hoping they would soon be out of the village and at the unknown whereabouts of the unit. However, hardly had they turned off at the cross-section when Lo brought the bicycle to a halt in front of a tea shop. "Let's go in and get a drink of water," he said, lifting him off the bicycle and pushing it inside the shop.

Seated in front of the water boiler working the bellows was a thickset man with bare arms. Upon seeing Lo, he smiled.

"Go inside, please!" he said in a sharp falsetto. "There are empty places."

"All right," said Lo, pushing open a side gate which led to a rear courtyard. Ka-tse, following closely behind him, saw in the courtyard five buildings on one side, with a row of huts opposite. The huts stood so close together that they had left little of the original courtyard. Lo did not stop here but proceeded deeper into the interior, where, upon rounding a corner, he came to a wicket gate leading to another small courtyard. It was clean but had no houses. In it were planted several rows of egg-plants and onions. Against the wall in the north were gourd vines trained over a trellis standing two foot taller than the wall. The chirrup of a cicada could be heard issuing from them. Two earthenware vessels, one bigger than the other, were turned upside down at the base of the wall. Ka-tse began to wonder if Lo had lost his way. What had they come here for? Just as he was about to ask, Lo leant his bicycle against the trellis, stepped on the smaller earthenware vessel, then on the big one, pulled the branches and tendrils aside and climbed over the wall. He beckoned Ka-tse to follow him. Ka-tse also scrambled to the other side. Here lay another courtyard.

Inside the courtyard stood a five-roomed cottage, its windows blotted out with canvas matting, giving it the appearance of a storehouse. Thin smoke drifting from the kitchen showed that food was being prepared. The silence was broken only by the chirrup of the cicada. At the sound of them jumping off the top of the

wall, the canvas matting over the window moved. A woman peeped out, then closed it back again. Everything returned to normal.

"Is this where you live, Uncle Lo?" asked Ka-tse, unable to repress his curiosity.

"Ssh! Keep quiet!" replied Lo, throwing him a glance. He went over to the door of the west building and squeezed through it. Ka-tse squeezed in after him. "Ah!" Ka-tse gasped. There, facing him, was a shiny bayonet. He pulled himself together and looked up. Before him stood a stocky fellow, eyes flashing, gun at the ready. Ka-tse was rooted to the spot. The man seized him by the arm, pulled him inside and closed the door. Ka-tse stepped forward onto something soft. Looking down, he saw a prostrate figure asleep on the floor cradling an automatic rifle in his arms. There were several others on the floor too, all fully dressed, all with their rifles in their arms, all fast asleep. It dawned on Ka-tse that the man with the rifle at the ready was the "door guard" which Uncle Chung had spoken about so often.

"So here is where they've made their nest!" thought Ka-tse happily, poking out the tip of his tongue with excitement. He ran on inside after Uncle Lo.

In the innermost room were three men asleep on a *kang*, and a thin man in his thirties seated behind the *kang* table leaning back against the window sill, fanning himself and seemingly lost in thought. As they came in he looked up.

"You're late, aren't you?" he said.

"I was held up by this little fellow," replied Lo with a smile, nodding towards Ka-tse.

Ka-tse nodded at the man with a smile and tried to put in a word. But the man merely glanced at him and continued to question Lo.

"How's the situation?"

"'He' said that the mounted unit which just passed through here came from the upper and lower parts of the railway yesterday," Lo started off. "Now they are on their way to Shihfanyuan, Tunhukou, Wachiao and Mochakang. Some Eighth Route Army men are said to be trying to make a crossing there. But according to his estimation the Japanese cavalymen are going there mainly to arrange an annihilation campaign and he warned us to be doubly on the alert."

"Is there any news about Chung Liang?"

"I heard that he was taken to the police station, where he was questioned and almost flogged to death yesterday. He could hardly speak when they took him back to his cell. But he still cursed them and shouted 'Long Live the Communist Party' all along the way. Some of the White Necks were so moved by this that they shed tears in secret. . . ."

"Are you talking about Uncle Chung? . . ." asked Ka-tse, pulling at Lo's arm. Lo nudged him sharply and whispered: "Mum's the word." Looking around, Ka-tse saw the man lower his head as his eyes reddened. Ka-tse fell silent. After a long pause, the man began to fan himself. Then he looked up.

"Was Ichiro Hida with them?" he asked.

"Yes. He headed the mounted unit that passed through here just now."

The man listened avidly. Now that there was nothing more to be said, he looked up at the sky, feeling that was all the news about the enemy for today. As he gazed around at the sleeping men his eyes fell upon Ka-tse.

Before him stood a boy with a round head, a pair of dancing eyes, a pert nose and lips that turned up at the corners and exposed a set of sharp little teeth when he laughed. His eyes were roving and a mischievous tongue darted in and out between his teeth. "A lively looking little fellow!" said the man, a warm smile flitting across his face.

"You want to join the Eighth Route Army, do you?"

"How did you guess?" chirped Ka-tse happily.

"You're too young, laddie! In the Eighth Route Army you have to march and fight. Can you cover a hundred and twenty *li* at a stretch? I don't think so."

"Yes I can!" Ka-tse cut him short. "I can climb a tree more than thirty feet tall in one go. Take a look at my legs!" He pulled up his trouser leg, put his foot on the *kang* and patted his firm calf.

"Ah, you can climb a tree thirty feet tall in the time it takes to drink a bowl of water; but you have to keep going all day to cover a hundred and twenty *li*."

"That makes no odds! In climbing a tree you use your energy at one spurt, but in walking you use it gradually. If you can do one you can do the other. If you don't believe me, come outside and I'll show you."

The man smiled. Knowing that such an argument could go on and on, he shifted his glance towards Lo. "I think it'll be all right if we keep him; he can do all sorts of little jobs," Lo put in. Then he told him how Ka-tse had punctured his bicycle tyre and tried to take his pistol. For some time the man sat there silent, then he said as if speaking to himself: "The trouble is, there's going to be an annihilation campaign in the near future! That means fighting and bloodshed, but he's only a youngster."

"What if there is bloodshed? Didn't Uncle Chung keep shouting 'Long Live the Communist Party' even when he'd been beaten up?" said Ka-tse.

The man gazed at him thoughtfully. Seeing that he looked rather hot, he fanned him several times. Ka-tse blinked his eyes at the cool air blowing in his face. Then he saw the man give a reluctant nod to Lo. "Let him have a rest first and make some griddle-cakes for him. I'll talk about this with you later."

Lo Chin-pao took Ka-tse by the arm and led him out of the room. "Who was that?" asked Ka-tse quietly. "He certainly behaves coolly, as if someone's begging a favor of him."

"Don't talk nonsense!" whispered Lo. "That's our District Commander Chien Yun-ching. His nod meant that he's decided to keep you."

During the next few days Ka-tse was more cheerful than words can describe. He jumped about, laughed, stood on his head on the *kang* and would have given party to celebrate the occasion if he could have done so.

He took to all the fighters as if they were members of his own family. Some he called "Brother", others "Uncle". They liked him in the first place for his intelligence and resourcefulness; but it was his youth and cheerfulness that brought him in such close standing with everyone.

What pleased him most was his becoming a scout. Every time the unit set up camp, or went into concealment, he was sent out to keep watch on the outskirts of villages. As the advance eye of the unit he gained even more respect among his comrades. This was really something to feel proud of!

Ka-tse of course lived up to the trust placed in him. No matter how fagged out he was after a long night's march, he would set out at crack of dawn for the village, basket on his back, sickle in hand. Now squatting at an entrance leading to the enemy's stronghold, now clinging to the branches of a tree, now lurking in a fog-shrouded, dew-covered barley field, now concealing himself behind a quiet corner of a house, he kept his eyes forever peeled for enemy movements. He made a clear report every time he came upon any information about the enemy. Never once did he let his unit down.

Naturally he took an interest in many other things as well as scouting. All the activities of the troops —

mass meetings, speeches, propaganda work, maneuver, training, study, telling stories or jokes — everything was interesting and new to him. He was keen to learn, and all that came his way was grist to his mill. He wanted to try his hand at everything. Even after a day's scouting, he still ran to and fro doing this and that as if he did not know what it was to be tired.

But of all the things Ka-tse liked, he was most intrigued by guns. He knew how to use, take apart and reassemble every weapon in the unit, except one — the automatic rifle. This was always under the strict eye of Big Li, otherwise he would long since have had it apart too.

Since he was so fond of guns, it was only natural that he should go to the District Commander and demand to be issued with one. He never dreamed that his request would be laughed off as a childish fancy. This made him angry.

"What am I to charge with when we go into battle? A poker would be more use than this thing!" he protested vehemently, holding up the "barker" Uncle Chung had carved for him.

"Your duty is to reconnoiter, not charge," replied the District Commander calmly.

"Why do the other scouts have one then?"

"Their weapons were not issued to them but were taken from the enemy."

Ka-tse had no answer to that. But he was far from satisfied. He thought of raising his demand to Political Commissar Shih I-ming, but Shih had set out with the

Second Brigade on an operation in the Yangliuching and Lanfang areas. What could he do?

Though Ka-tse feared nothing, he somehow felt a bit restrained with the District Commander, who seemed to him to exercise a secret power over people. Not that the District Commander was not friendly to him. He saw to it that he had enough food, clothes and rest, taught him revolutionary principles, and even took time out to teach him to write. He was as patient with him as any woman teacher would have been. In fact he was out to make a real people's fighter out of this youngster. Then why should Ka-tse feel restrained in his presence? Perhaps it was because he had been infected by the behavior of the others. The most unruly and mischievous fighters would become as meek as lambs before this man. Even the brave Lo who rode in and out of the city alone on a bicycle and disarmed a White Neck with a whisk broom was as obedient as a pupil before him.

"Why is the District Commander able to make everyone do what he wants them to do like this?" Ka-tse once asked someone. In answer he was told many stories.

One of them was about a fierce battle that had been fought north of the Taching River two years earlier, when three hundred Japanese had descended upon one of the district platoons. The situation was extremely critical. Seven fighters were holding the pass in which the enemy had concentrated forces to break through. District Commander Chien went over and sat with the seven fighters. Bullets from enemy machine-guns and

rounds from their artillery rained down upon their position, but they did not give an inch. Then suddenly a round landed among them, killing four and burying the District Commander under dirt. It looked as if he was done for. But no sooner had the dust settled, than the form of a man was seen through the smoke — the Commander was still sitting in his original position.

Another was about the time he was discussing a plan of attack with two other officers with a map spread out on the ground before them, and an enemy bullet suddenly made a hole in the "village" that he was pointing to. He merely flicked the dirt off with his finger without raising his head and calmly went on with what he was saying.

Ka-tse was intoxicated by these stories. It was as though a magnificent golden mountain had arisen before his eyes, shedding a dazzling light all around. Then one day he remembered the grim concentration with which the District Commander had listened to reports about Ichiro Hida, and went to ask Lo about it.

Lo Chin-pao told him that Ichiro Hida, Commander of the Japanese Brigade in the county, was a vicious murderer. He had been picked to carry out the plan of suppression and annihilation around Paiyang Lake because he had carried out anti-Communist activities in neighboring villages so thoroughly. Once when he found out that there was a Communist organization active in Wanfotang, he sent a contact-man there with an order for a hole to be dug to bury twenty men. He led his troops there the next day, killed twenty persons without any explanation, then began his search for

Communists. On another occasion two contact-men from Shihlipao, one old and the other young, went to see him at grain-collecting time. They asked to be given two days grace in the delivery of the grain because of difficulties in collecting it in the village. He heard them out, laughed ironically, unsheathed his sword and struck the young fellow with it. He then chopped the young fellow's head off and threw it at the old man, saying: "Take it back with you to show the others. If you don't fork out the grain on time, you'll all get the same treatment!"

Before Lo had finished speaking, Ka-tse interrupted with his eyes wide open:

"Is that fellow the one with a head like a barrel, toad-like eyes and a little moustache?"

From then on, Ka-tse's urge to possess a gun grew stronger. And as time went by it grew stronger still. His one idea became to seize his first chance to take a gun from the enemy.

8

Heaven does not turn a blind eye to a determined man. Ka-tse got his chance at last.

When you come to think about it, it was a matter of pure luck. It was the day the unit was billeted in a small inn at Yangchiafu. It had been drizzling since dawn. Water dripped from roofs and the streets outside turned to mud. Thinking that the villagers would not be out on a day like this, Commander Chien did not

send Ka-tse out for fear of giving away the units' whereabouts. He decided to wait until the ground became drier. It never occurred to him that several scores of Japanese together with a knot of White Necks would come plodding through the mud to the village. Yangchiafu was only two *li* from their stronghold in Mochakang and they had never run into trouble there. So when they arrived, they went to the "Village Administration", demanded food, aired their clothes, scraped the mud off their boots, and took their ease. Several White Necks went scouring around from door to door to see what they could pick up.

Commander Chien sent Ka-tse out to keep watch, and passed the order around for combat readiness. Ka-tse took a piece of corn-bread and headed out of the courtyard munching it. At the main gate, he came face to face with two White Necks.

"Where're you going?" demanded one of them, levelling his rifle at Ka-tse and narrowing his eyes.

"To call my dad for his breakfast," replied Ka-tse. "Who are you looking for, Officers?"

"Eighth Route Army men!" Then prodding Ka-tse with his rifle he barked: "Take us inside!"

"Wouldn't it be better to let me bring you what you want, Officers?" rejoined Ka-tse, blinking his eyes innocently. "Grandma's eighty, you know, and she can't stand the sight of anyone carrying a gun. . . ." The two White Necks, however, prodded him on with their rifles, saying: "To hell with your grandma! Enough of your talk." Seeing that he was unable to stop them,

Ka-tse shouted into the house: "Grandma! Here are some officers who insist on coming into our house!"

"How many?" asked the calm voice of District Commander Chien.

"Two!"

"Invite them in for breakfast, then."

Ka-tse did not immediately grasp what was meant by "Invite them in for breakfast". He thought he was meant to lead them into the proprietor's room where breakfast was being prepared. The White Necks went into the room, Ka-tse leading the way.

"A pretty strong voice for an old girl of eighty!" said one of the White Necks.

The fighters were billeted in the west room of the three-roomed cottage, and the proprietor and his family occupied the east room. Both rooms led off a middle room, which was empty. Ka-tse opened the front door leading to the middle room and went in, the two White Necks following closely at his heels. Then he waved in the direction of the east room. "Please come in here for breakfast, Officers. The bean gruel is just ready," he said, holding back the door curtain.

"Are there any Eighth Route Army men here?" shouted the White Necks, squeezing into the room. The four members of the proprietor's family were sitting around the breakfast table. They stared at the White Necks, all the color draining from their faces.

"You're trying to frighten us, aren't you, Officers? D'you think I'd invite you in if we had any Eighth Route Army men here?" Ka-tse put in hurriedly.

"How many members are there in your family? Do you have a census book?" asked one. The proprietor pulled himself together. "Yes, we have," he said, at the same time feeling in his pockets for money. The other White Neck had long since opened the chest and was rummaging through its contents.

"You look after the Officers, Uncle, I'll go and call Dad," said Ka-tse. At this he passed out of the room and went into the west room.

Three bayonets barred the door of the west room. The fighters had all taken up their positions at the ready. Commander Chien was kneeling on one knee on the *kang*, peering out through a hole in the wall. "How many troops are there in the streets?" he asked in a whisper.

"I ran into them. I didn't get a chance to see."

"Hurry out and take a look. You don't have to worry about those two any more."

Ka-tse took fresh courage from the Commander's words. Why, it seemed as if those two White Necks amounted to nothing. "Yes!" He turned and ran through the door. He had gone no more than two steps when one of the White Necks stepped out of the east room. He had been watching him from behind the door curtain.

"Ha, ha! I thought you were up to something! Now what was it you hid in that room, eh?"

Before Ka-tse could think what to say, the fellow had him by the ear.

"Hurry and bring it out!" The White Neck moved towards the west room and pulled the curtain aside.

"Don't move!" someone inside the room called out softly. The fellow stopped dead in his tracks, three bayonets trained at his chest.

A short ruddy fighter standing inside the room beckoned silently to the White Neck.

They snatched him into the room, twisted his arm behind his back, and forced him on to his knees beside the *kang*.

"Call your pal over!" ordered Commander Chien in a soft voice.

The fellow made no demur.

"Kuo!" he called out. "Come over here! Quickly! Here are some silver dollars!"



Things could not have gone more smoothly. The White Neck in the east room charged through the curtain only to find himself faced with bayonets. He then knew he was taken prisoner.

Though Ka-tse had heard about "curtain warfare", he had never imagined it to be so easy. Forgetting for the moment that he was on a battle-

field, he jumped up and down clapping his hands. Only when the Commander threw him an angry glance did he remember that he had been ordered to go out and see how many enemy troops were outside. He turned and ran to the door.

"Aiya!" As he opened the door, he saw two shadows moving about in the yard. He looked closer. There were two Japanese outside!

The one in front was an officer. He was armed with a sword and had a leather case slung across his shoulder. "Aiya! Two Japanese dev . . ." Ka-tse almost cried out in surprise. Then he thought better of it and said: "Grandma! Here are two soldiers from the Japanese Imperial Army! Hurry and prepare breakfast for them!" A light scrambling noise was heard inside the room. "Invite the honorable officers in, Ka-tse," from within issued the voice of Chien Yun-ching.

The Japanese did not wait to be invited. They charged past Ka-tse, jabbering in broken Chinese: "Your house eggs have yes?"

"Yes! Please come in!" said Ka-tse, stepping aside. It was then he spotted the Mauser at the waist of the officer. He gazed at it and drew in his breath longingly.

The officer went up the steps and into the room, still jabbering. Leaning against the door and speaking in broken Chinese like the Japanese, Ka-tse said: "The room in the west clean, Officer. There go rest." The Japanese in the rear, seeing the curtains pulled over both doors, thought it was time for him to show his bravery. He dashed ahead of the officer with his rifle levelled and pulled aside the curtain over the west door.

Scarcely had he done so when he turned and fell prone bleeding from two bayonet wounds. "Aiya!" the Japanese officer shrieked as he turned to run. Seeing him about to escape, Ka-tse slammed the door on his foot. The officer tripped and fell flat on his face. His Mauser went flying into the air and landing ten feet away. Presently a fighter ran out of the room and fired a shot. The Japanese slumped, and his corpse rolled down the steps.

Ka-tse pounced on the Mauser. His heart beat for joy. Never before had he known such delight, even at a New Year Festival. He was so engrossed with his find that he almost forgot there was a battle underway. The fighters rushed forward with the battle cry "Charge!" Big Li led the way, spraying everything with his sub-machine-gun. The enemy troops in the street had no chance to set up a defence, and were flung into confusion. The warriors captured a street entrance and took off for the green fields. Ka-tse, seizing the chance to test the Mauser, turned now and then to fire on the Japanese as he withdrew.

9

Somewhere beyond the village, the District Forces shook the enemy off their trail. But the day was still young. To evade a combined attack from the enemy, they skirted the strongholds, crossed highways as the chance arose, and moved now east now west. Thus they kept on the go playing hide-and-seek with the

enemy all around the county seat until late afternoon when they returned to Paiyang Lake. The enemy would not dare come out now.

Commander Chien ordered the fighters to stop at Mengliangying. They rested on a threshing ground at the entrance to the village while someone was sent to allocate the rooms, prepare food and to do other after-battle details. After fighting and marching for a whole day, the fighters were hungry and thirsty. But they were in high spirits and showed no signs of fatigue, for this was the first time for a year they had taken part in any skirmishes out in the open. On the threshing ground, some of them were wrestling, some dancing folk dances, others singing ballads, each according to his tastes. A long time had passed since the villagers had last seen a regular Eighth Route Army unit. So to be together with these machine-gun-equipped Eighth Route Army men today was like being reunited with long absent relatives. Smiles on their faces, they gathered around the fighters asking after their welfare and telling them of all they had gone through during the past year.

Ka-tse was in higher spirits than anyone. He stood under a tall willow, the Mauser in his right hand and the wooden pistol in his left, describing all that had happened in the battle that day. He was surrounded by a crowd of village children. They stood there gaping, their eyes following the movements of the pistols in his hand.

Suddenly the messenger, Yang Hsiao-ken, came to tell Ka-tse to report to the District Commander. Ka-

tse's elated flow of words came to a halt. The most surprising thing, however, was yet to follow; the District Commander wanted to see him about the Mauser. In the County, District and lower organizations, explained the Commander, many cadres needed small arms for protection as they were constantly moving about alone. As for Ka-tse, he was too young to handle one in the first place and besides he was never sent out on a combat mission. The Commander therefore wanted him to hand the Mauser in so that it could be given to someone who needed it.

Blue veins stood out on Ka-tse's forehead. He fixed his eyes on the Commander. He saw clearly that though the Commander's manner was warm and he had a kindly smile on his face, he was not joking in the least but in dead earnest.

"Is it a 'must' that I hand it in?" asked Ka-tse apprehensively.

"It's a 'must'!"

Ka-tse blinked and spoke only after a long silence. "But," he said raising up the Mauser, trying to put up an argument, "I need it to avenge Grandma and Uncle Chung!"

"You can never avenge them alone; you must depend on the collective," the Commander retorted unhurriedly. "When I speak of the collective, I'm not just referring to our District Forces, but the Party, government, army and civilians throughout the country. You'd never be able to do it on your own even if you had a machine-gun."

Ka-tse's eyes smarted. Though he realized he hadn't a leg to stand on, he somehow felt that he was being wronged.

"What if I don't hand it over?" he suddenly asked.

"You're not allowed to speak like that!" said the Commander gazing at him sternly. "You're in the army; you're not an ordinary civilian. Here we have organization and discipline!"

This silenced him. Glancing about he saw smiles on the faces of all gathered around, but their eyes seemed to say: "Hurry, be a good boy and hand the Mauser in." There was no help for it. He would have to give up his precious Mauser.

"What if I'm able to get another one in the future?" Ka-tse asked.

"You'll have to obey orders just the same."

"I don't want it!" shouted Ka-tse, throwing the gun on the table before the Commander had finished speaking. He buried his head in his hands and pushed through the crowd, shedding tears as he went. He now began to feel sorry that he had joined the army.

.....

Ka-tse ran out of the inner courtyard to the threshold of the inner gate where he sat down and buried his face in his hands, planning to cry to his heart's content. He wanted most of all to soften the heart of the District Commander with his tears. Unexpectedly, however, he heard the tramp of approaching footsteps and felt someone tap him on the shoulder. "Hey! Get up and let's see which one makes the loudest bang!" challenged a voice that sounded like the clap of a small bronze bell.

Ka-tse raised his head. A ruddy-faced, corpulent boy who had been among the children listening to him speak earlier was standing behind him. In his left hand the boy was carrying a string of fire-crackers and in his right was a spill. A challenging look shone on his face. Ka-tse realized the boy had brought the fire-crackers along to get him to fire his Mauser. He relapsed into depression and turned his head away. He did not realize that Chubby was known for his persistence. Thinking that Ka-tse was putting on airs, Chubby raised Ka-tse's arm, lifted the hem of his tunic and felt round his waist for the gun. Though the Mauser was not there, he found the "barker", which gave him a new idea.

"Say Comrade! Since you've got a foreign gun, why not give this one to me?" He tried to pull it out of Ka-tse's belt. "Go away!" cried Ka-tse, pulling his tunic down over his "barker". "Aren't you ashamed, asking someone for something the first time you see him?"

"What's wrong with that? All right then, let's swap; I'll give you this string of fire-crackers for it."

Ka-tse's sense of mischief was now aroused. Of course, he was not going to part with the "barker", but he was tempted by those fire-crackers; thirty or more of them, long and thin. They would go off with loud bangs. Ka-tse became thoughtful, his eyes goggling, his tongue darting in and out between his teeth.

"So you want my pistol, eh? Let's make a bet. If you win, the pistol is yours; if I win, the fire-crackers are mine. What d'you say?"

"All right!" replied Chubby. "But what's the bet?"

"Let's see who can climb up to the crow's nest in that tree over there," said Ka-tse raising his head and pointing to the tree on the other side of the wall.

Chubby looked at the tree. It was a poplar, and more than seventy feet tall, as straight as an arrow. The crow's nest was in a fork at the top of the tree. It was so high that it looked like a black dot.

"I won't bet with you on that. I can't climb that high," said Chubby, shaking his head.

"All right then. Let's wrestle."

"Really?" asked Chubby in delight. He immediately withdrew two steps; threw off his jacket and put his hands on his hips, saying: "Come on! Which style do you want to use; belt wrestling or free-style wrestling?"

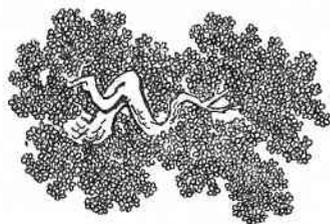
Ka-tse, being light and nimble, had never depended on strength when wrestling back home; so naturally he was not going to agree to belt wrestling. Each placed his bet on the threshold of the gate and took up stances opposite each other like a couple of fighting cocks. At first it looked as if Ka-tse was winning. Taking advantage of his adversary's clumsiness, he jumped around like a monkey, looking for an opportunity to sweep him off his feet. Chubby, however, was an old hand at wrestling. His body crouched forward and his eyes bulging, he did not leave any openings. They danced round and round, then finally locked into each other's arms. This was no good for Ka-tse. Chubby's arms were massive, his waist enormous. No matter how Ka-tse pushed or pulled he could not move him. Ka-tse had begun to get panicky. Scarcely had he used his foot to hook Chubby's leg than he got it caught. Chubby leaned

outwards and pushed inwards. Ka-tse fell with a thud, face upwards.

"Ha-ha! The pistol is mine!" shouted Chubby, running towards the gate.

"Wait a minute!" cried Ka-tse, burning with embarrassment. "It's the best two out of three who wins, isn't it? We've got two matches to go."

"Oh, so it's the best two out of three now, is it? You're sharp all right! All right, let it be the best two out of three!"



Chubby, stretching out his arms with a triumphant air, stepped forward as if he were going to jump astride a horse. The sweat was now pouring off Ka-tse. Without waiting for Chubby to take up position, he charged and kicked Chubby's foot. This brought Chubby to his knees, but not all the way down. Ka-tse followed this up by catching a hold on his neck and pressing it.

Chubby unexpectedly crouched and seized him around the waist. After pressing Chubby's neck a couple more times, Ka-tse felt his legs giving. He hurriedly released his hold on Chubby's neck and searched for one around his waist. But the most he could do was grasp hold of his opponent's arms. Twice more he felt his feet leave the ground. Ka-tse was on tenterhooks at the thought of losing his "barker". He sank his teeth into his opponent's shoulder. "Awo!" During the instant that Chubby turned to tend his shoulder, Ka-tse hooked his foot behind his leg and gave him a push. Chubby was down.

This dirty trick vexed one of the bystanders.

"Hey! What d'you think you're doing, biting like that?" He heard someone roar. Glancing around hastily, Ka-tse saw a dark corpulent man of about forty. Chubby resembled him in every respect. That's Chubby's father for sure, thought Ka-tse.

"If you're not going to play fair, don't play at all. Biting a man when his head's turned! What if you had bitten him seriously; would you pay the doctor's bill?" demanded the man, making his way over to rub Chubby's shoulder.

Blinking his eyes and red in the face, Ka-tse wanted to say something, but he could think of nothing to say. His face streamed with sweat.

"Let's go! Don't play with him," said Big Chubby, glancing at Ka-tse in scorn and pulling Chubby away. "You! Humph! You'll ruin the reputation of the Eighth Route Army if you go on like that!" They walked away.

Ka-tse's vanity was stung. Even if he did bite the boy when he was in a fix, why did the Eighth Route Army have to be dragged into it?

"Hey, you! You'd better mind what you say. How can I ruin the reputation of the Eighth Route Army?" retorted Ka-tse with a glare.

"What else can be said about you? There's no one in the Eighth Route Army as unreasonable as you!"

"Humph! All right!..." Ka-tse ground his teeth and stumped his feet angrily, unable to get out another word. As he stood gazing after the father and son, he thought of something more to say.

"You're goddam stubborn!" he swore, chasing after them.

His Mauser had been taken from him only a short while before and now he had just wrangled with others. This put him into a thoroughly depressed state of mind. He tucked his "barker" in his belt and paced around in a circle, but his anger did not subside. Raising his head, he caught sight of a locust tree near the wall in the east. He climbed up the tree and clambered onto the wall. The fighters were playing a game under the poplar tree on the other side of the wall. Ka-tse sat astride the wall, gazing into the distance. The sweet fragrance of flowers wafted in from across the green fields which spread out before him. He raised his head and greedily drew in the sweet aroma. At that moment a gust of wind brought along an acrid gust of smoke which stung his nostrils and made him cough. Looking around, he caught sight of a belching stove pipe at the corner of the house. Upon making a closer investigation, he saw

his adversary, Big Chubby, making a fire in a stove there. Ka-tse pulled a handful of grass, climbed across the roof and plugged the stove pipe with it.

A short while later, the lurid smoke came billowing out of the stove. Not knowing the reason why, Big Chubby got down on all fours and blew into the fire; but the harder he blew the more the stove smoked. He then began to work the bellows. The smoke came at him in bigger clouds and soon enveloped him. It choked him so fiendishly that he broke into a fit of endless coughing. Ka-tse stood on the roof and laughed until he was breathless.

10

Ka-tse had joined in the game with the fighters and long since forgotten his troubles, when Yang Hsiao-ken came to tell him that someone had come to report him.

Upon entering the room, he saw Big Chubby standing behind the District Commander, fuming. A ball of soot-blackened grass lay on the floor. Ka-tse knew it was no use trying to put up an argument; he might as well admit with a smile that he plugged up the stove pipe and be done with it.

What could the Commander do to him anyway? Chien Yun-ching loved children, and never in his life had he made a child cry. When he had seen how unhappy Ka-tse felt about handing in the Mauser, he had begun to feel sympathetic and was about to say a few

words of consolation when Ka-tse threw the Mauser down on the table and ran out. The boy was an intelligent orphan who had taken a gun from the enemy, but instead of being complimented, he had been somewhat wronged. Could he really punish him for this minor mischief?

Though this was a small matter, it was something that could affect the relationship between the army and the civilians. With a stern face, the Commander chided Ka-tse and ordered him to entreat the pardon of the proprietor. Ka-tse did so with a bow. The matter should have ended with this, but young Chubby suddenly said that Ka-tse's wooden pistol belonged to him because Ka-tse had lost it to him in a bet on their wrestling match just now. The argument started all over again.

"It belongs to you nothing!" said Ka-tse, his eyes reddening. As a rule, whenever there was a dispute between the army and a civilian, the army authorities took the blame for it. Ka-tse thought that his apology would end the case, but now it looked as if he was about to lose his "pistol". This was the last straw. He tightly clasped the handle of his "pistol", in a desperate state of anger.

"Chang Ka-tse!" the Commander called out sternly. He then fixed his gaze upon the young scout and fell silent for a long while. "Eighth Route Army discipline doesn't permit such behavior! Haven't you been told that the army and people are one big family?"

"I'll do anything; even get down and kowtow to him, but I won't give him this 'pistol' for the life of me. It

was given to me as a memento by Uncle Chung!" Ka-tse muttered. The Commander's heart was softened. However, he could not afford to handle this problem carelessly, otherwise he would cultivate bad habits in the boy. Therefore he put on a stern look and said, "All right! Go into the inner room and think over what you've done. Don't come out until I tell you to!"

Then the Commander turned to Big Chubby. "This boy is a newcomer," he said. "He hasn't been well schooled yet. Don't be angry. I'll keep him in confinement until he calms down, then I'll punish him."

Big Chubby took fright at the word "confinement". Though his straightforwardness had caused him to say a few harsh words to the boy when angry, he had meant it only as a warning. He never dreamed that this would bring about "confinement"; besides he did not know what sort of punishment this was. "Don't put him in confinement!" he remonstrated, a smile on his ruddy face. "Just give him a dressing down. Childish mischief doesn't deserve such punishment."

The Commander nodded in agreement. Nevertheless, he said to Ka-tse: "What are you standing there for? Go to the inner room!"

Ka-tse, who had been long anxious to leave, now hurried off to the inner room. His heart was gladdened by the fact that he had held on to his "barker".

That ended this case. Young Chubby and his father went home to prepare their meal. Commander Chien made a study of battle losses and wrote up a summary while waiting for the scouts to return. All the other

fighters had gone off to their posts. Only Ka-tse was left alone in the inner room.

This inner room was small. In it was a small *kang* which had no bedding. A basket and an old trunk stood on the floor. An old spinning-wheel was on the trunk. Ka-tse looked around at this and that, but found nothing interesting to play with. He turned the wheel of the spinning-wheel with his finger. After a while, he found this dull too. He then picked up the basket with the thought of using it to trap a rat. But not even a leaf of vegetable had been left in it; that idea was out too. He was bored to death. Then suddenly he heard the chatter of two sparrows on the window sill. There were their shadows on the rice paper covering the window, ruffling their plumage as if putting on a shadow show. Ka-tse was greatly excited. He took off his shoes and tiptoed over to the window. Pop! Plunging his hand through the rice paper, he caught one of the sparrows. The bird's silky feathers and bright eyes filled his heart with elation. The thought of "confinement" sank into oblivion. . . .

The Commander was in the outer room. He had no time to know about Ka-tse's sparrow catching. One by one the scouts returned with reports on a newly arisen situation. Two trucks carrying puppet officers to Paoting for training were to leave the city on the morrow, said one. Several prisoners were going to be taken to Paoting too, and perhaps Comrade Chung Liang would be among them, said another.

All were excited over this news. A group of fighters gathered around the Commander. They had mapped

out so many ways to free Chung Liang since his arrest! They had thought of breaking into jail to release him, of bailing him out and of bribing the guards, but conditions were ripe for none of these. Now everyone was on tenterhooks with suspense.

Commander Chien spread out a map and calmly studied the roads leading to Paoting.

"I should say the best way is to lay an ambush," he said finally. But no matter how much he had thought a problem over, he never issued an order at random. He was always ready to hold a council of war with his comrades-in-arms.

The fighters were too wrought-up to say a word.

"In the two trucks," the Commander went on, "there will be twenty or thirty men in addition to the prisoners and officers. I don't think the Japanese will escort them. Even allowing that they have a machine-gun and a grenade launcher, I should say we still have enough strength to do them in. Our only difficulty lies in the fact that there will be two trucks, not just one. What will be the distance between them? And which one will Chung Liang be in? We can't say. We therefore have the problem of how to block both trucks."

Then the fighters, one after the other, put forth their own proposals. Some suggested laying an ambush at the city gate; some thought it better to split up into two groups, one for each truck. Another said it would be better to construct an ambush along the way to Paoting and take the trucks one by one. . . . There was something to be said for each of the suggestions, but no single one was perfect. Taking the good points

from all the suggestions, the Commander came out with a new plan. He suggested to blockade the road and set the ambush in the green fields along the sides. The first truck would stop to remove the blockade. If the unit was able to lie low, it was to wait until the second truck arrived and then open fire. Though this plan was not too satisfactory, it was somewhat better than the others. It is impossible to avoid a certain amount of risk in warfare.

Everyone was nodding in agreement, when a voice came from behind them. "Ai, I still have my doubts about this plan," it said. A sparrow lighted upon the map, scurried about, then disappeared. Startled, the fighters looked around and saw Ka-tse holding a string in his hand. He had inadvertently let the sparrow loose.

"Who was that speaking?" asked the Commander with a stern face, but unable to hide the smile in his eyes. "Oh, it's you, Chang Ka-tse! Who told you to come out?"

"I came out when I heard Uncle Lo speaking . . ." said Ka-tse blushing. He hastened to put the sparrow back up his sleeve.

"Hm —" The Commander's eyes opened wide and his face lit up with a warm smile that came from his heart.

"Now tell us what's on your mind?"

"Just think," said Ka-tse haughtily, pointing to the place of ambush on the map, "when the trucks stop here and we open fire with our machine-guns and start throwing hand-grenades, won't Uncle Chung be caught in the fire?" All exploded with laughter.

"You don't have to worry about that!" the Commander said, placing his hand on Ka-tse's shoulder. "The comrades have Chung Liang in mind just the same as you have. Our bullets have eyes!"

11

. . . A tense night had passed. Dawn was approaching. The fighters had taken up positions in the green fields. Silence prevailed. Were the wind not blowing, the vast fields of corn and sorghum would have been long lost in slumber. A fine rain was falling; it was a chilly dawn such as one seldom saw in those parts.

Ka-tse was lying in a bean patch beside the automatic-rifleman, Big Li. His eyes were fixed on the road, his heart pounding. It was his first ambush. He was going to see the enemy charging towards him, rifles and mortars exchanging fire and the fighters dashing forward shouting "Charge!" Ah, to make a surprise attack on the enemy was so much more exciting than anything else he had done. But mostly he was excited at the thought of seeing Uncle Chung again. Once the enemy had been wiped out the fighters would dash forward shouting, and Uncle Chung would jump off the truck and exclaim in surprise: "Well! If it isn't Ka-tse!" That would be the happiest moment in his life!

The ambush was skilfully constructed. A field of sorghum and a field of corn interlocked on one side of the road. Between the rows of corn were planted soya

beans, which had grown so tall and thick that they looked like hedges. If anyone were to hide there, he would have to be stepped on before he would be discovered. The cotton field on the other side of the road was left open to the enemy. The thickly balled, entwined cotton stalks and branches which were no more than knee high covered an area of fifty *mou*.¹ Though Ka-tse knew nothing about tactics, he was convinced by the selection of this place that the Commander knew what he was doing!

Perhaps because they wanted to travel in the cool of the morning, or because the mission was urgent, the enemy trucks came as the first rays of dawn began to glow. They loomed into view as black dots, smoke pouring out of their exhaust pipes. Steadily they drew closer, sliding along the road. The two trucks were coming together, one after the other.

"Aim straight!" said Ka-tse, shaking Big Li by the foot.

"Don't muck things up!" cried Li unhurriedly, as he pressed the stock of the automatic rifle to his shoulder. His ammunition carrier lay prostrate next to him. Ka-tse threw a glance towards the flanks. Hidden under the corn and bean stalks, rifles were all at the ready. Commander Chien's eyes were fixed steadily ahead.

The two trucks drew closer. They came to a screeching halt when they reached the corn-field: the road had been blockaded. "Pow!" A rifle shot rang out crisply before the riders had time to move. This was followed by the chatter of an automatic rifle, the bark

¹ A *mou* is equivalent to 1/6 acre or 1/15 hectare.

of hand-grenades and the crack of rifles. They rained down upon the trucks. The one in the rear was the first to go up in smoke and run into a ditch. The puppet soldiers jumped off the truck in confusion and began to run for the cotton-field.

"Charge! . . ."

That very instant, the sorghum leaves became swords and the millet ears became bullets. Bayonets glistening in the sun and bullets cleaving through the air, the fighters charged out of the corn-field. By now several hand-grenades had landed on the truck in front and sent it up in flames. As the puppet troops tried to run through the cotton, they kept tripping over the branches. They were neither able to get away nor entrench themselves against the onslaught. They were caught like fish in a net. The fighters dashed forward and captured them one after the other. Here again Ka-tse was perhaps the busiest and the most enthusiastic. Having charged out of the corn-field behind Big Li, he climbed up on one of the trucks. Here he found three men lying prostrate. None of them was Uncle Chung. He picked up a sword, jumped off the truck and scrambled up on the next one. Uncle Chung was not there either. Looking all about him, he saw people everywhere; which of them was Uncle Chung? Seeing several figures running to the southwest, he went chasing after them.

A corpulent fellow in a white shirt was tripping and falling over the cotton rows, trying to make his getaway. Ka-tse caught up with him: "Hey you! Where's Uncle Chung?"

The fellow stood there with bulging eyes, puffing like a freight train, unable to say a word.

"I asked you about Uncle Chung! — Are you deaf?"

"What Uncle Chung? I . . . I don't know. . . ."

"Why don't you know!" Ka-tse stamped his feet in anger. He let the fellow alone, planning to continue his search. But to his surprise, the fellow pulled something out of his belt and handed it to him with a shaking hand. Ka-tse looked. Hey! It was a brand-new pistol! He felt as if a star had dropped before his eyes! "Assemble over there by the trucks!" he ordered, as he tucked the pistol in his belt. Then he jumped over a cotton row and chased after a fellow in green.

Matters ran smoother than expected. In a little over ten minutes the battle was over. Five of the enemy troops were killed, seven escaped and seventeen were taken prisoner. The unit captured only small arms, as the enemy had no machine-guns. Commander Chien issued the order for the troops to assemble, to clear the battle-ground and prepare to withdraw.

The battle-ground had been almost cleared, but Ka-tse was still running hither and thither investigating the corpses. None turned out to be the one he was looking for.

"I couldn't find Uncle Chung!" he said running over to Commander Chien almost in tears.

"Too bad," said the Commander with a sigh. "We made a search too. It seems they didn't bring him after all. We gained only one goal in this battle." The Commander then stepped forward, caressed Ka-tse's head and uttered a compassionate sigh. "After all our

efforts, we've still got to think of a way to free him." With this he turned and ordered the troops to set out for Shihfanyuan immediately. It was then he noticed that Ka-tse was limping. Looking down, he saw blood stains on the boy's trouser-leg. He hastened over to support him and called for the medical orderly. Ka-tse began to feel a sharp pain in his leg. When he rolled up his trouser-leg he found blood on his hand.

"Don't worry, lad, you've been hit!" The Commander helped him to sit down and began to soothe him like a mother. "Don't be afraid. It'll soon be better. You're young and strong, you'll never miss that little bit of blood." Then he went on to crack a joke: "Look, it's only little nick, and in your leg at that! Better than having a hole in your stomach, eh?"

But Ka-tse, who had been jumping about so actively a minute earlier, began to feel weak all over.

The medical orderly rushed over, opened his medicine kit and dressed his wound. A short while later a stretcher was brought up from a nearby village. Ka-tse was put on it and carried along behind the troops.

Ka-tse, to tell the truth, was a bit over-wrought. Never before had he lost so much blood. What would be the outcome? And Uncle Chung was still in enemy hands. He frowned thoughtfully and did not say a word all the way back. The medical orderly, who was walking alongside of the stretcher, was a kind-hearted youth. Noticing that Ka-tse kept rubbing his left hip off and on, he thought he was wounded there too. "What's the matter? Are you wounded there too?" he asked, pulling up Ka-tse's jacket.

"Oh, it's nothing!" said Ka-tse, blocking his hand. The orderly was puzzled to see a look of secret satisfaction come over Ka-tse's face.

Ka-tse was taken to Hehuawan that evening. There he got his first taste of being an invalid.

12

Though there's not much fun in being laid up with a wound, Ka-tse found himself in a paradise.

Here in the small village of Hehuawan the tasks of the war of resistance held sway over all other work. Resistance-war songs could be heard at every sunset. Communist Party and government workers walked about in the open. Though the enemy could see all movements in the streets from the round guard towers of his stronghold less than three *li* away, there was nothing he could do about it. Hehuawan lay hard by the Paiyang Lake. A thick and tall growth of reeds and rush which could not be burned or penetrated by bullets ran for five *li* along the shore. Among the reeds flowed innumerable inlets which looked for all the world like a network of roads. Boats could vanish into the reeds in a flash. Though the White Necks knew that this village was the "most pro-Communist in the district", they had been licked by the Eighth Route Army here. Therefore so long as they could hoodwink the Japanese, they turned a blind eye to what went on here. Wisely, they also warned the Eighth Route

Army when the Japanese were about to make a move, so nothing could be pinned on them. Thus the village had a double safeguard. Many war-time organizations and convalescence centers for wounded soldiers were set up here, and nothing had ever gone amiss.

Ka-tse was put to live in Uncle Yang's home. There were three members of the Yang family, the old man and his wife, and their daughter, Yu-ying, a comely, good-natured girl of thirteen with a great deal of charm. The two elders were in their late fifties and she was their only child. Naturally, she was very dear to them. They devoted their whole life to her.

Now with Ka-tse around, the house came alive like a quiet pond in which a carp has been let loose. The young lad was talkative and never still for a moment!

They liked him first and foremost for his happy-go-lucky nature. He called the old man and woman "Uncle" and "Aunt" and was on familiar terms with everyone. He ate and drank whatever was given to him and slept when he was told to. Auntie Yang, a kindly woman, nursed Ka-tse like her own son. Every day, she was the one to give him his food and water. Twice when Ka-tse refused out of embarrassment to let her empty his night chamber, she pouted. Even when the doctor came to dress his wound, she stood off to one side watching, fearing that the doctor might hurt the boy.

Uncle Yang owned two boats. During his free time, he used to catch fish for Ka-tse and sometimes brought back half-opened lotus flowers for him.

Yu-ying, however, was Ka-tse's best friend. She was a child who had grown used to loneliness. But now that this young lad had turned up from the Eighth Route Army, she was delighted. He always had interesting things to say. Before he was able to sit up, she sat by his bedside telling jokes, guessing riddles and reciting tongue twisters with him while she did her needlework. As for Ka-tse, he mostly told her war stories, all those stories he had heard from Uncle Chung and his own experiences in battle. This not only set him up as a great hero in Yu-ying's eyes, but stimulated her interest in that strange and exciting life he was leading. Later on when he was getting better, she helped him to sit up and found some work for him to do. She had him winding thread for her embroidery; mixing Chinese ink or cutting the paper while she drew a design; or unravelling old socks for the thread. It all helped to pass the time. On several occasions she gave him a lesson in drawing designs for embroidery. He pasted his works all over the walls.

Naturally they had their arguments too. Ka-tse's mind, for instance, was forever on his "pistol", especially the new real one. He was longing to have it by him in bed. But Auntie Yang had taken it the day he was brought to the house, put it in an attaché case and hidden it in the ceiling. He asked Yu-ying several times to get it down for him. But Yu-ying refused for fear the Japanese might come and find it and cause trouble. Twice they had quarrelled over this. Yu-ying was so angry the second time that she cried. Ten

minutes later the two had forgotten all about it, and were chatting together again.

13

Several days raced by. Ka-tse was soon on his feet again and longing to get out and about. For hours on end he sat at the window peering out at the swallows, wishing he could fly away with them. He tormented Uncle and Auntie Yang to let him go to the lake with Yu-ying until they were forced to give way. The lake was not too far from their home.

Yu-ying was a good oarswoman and knew the lake well. She helped Ka-tse into the boat and with a few pulls of the oar sent the boat gliding swiftly through the reeds. Ka-tse had been lying on the *kang* for so many days he had grown weak. But now that he was out in the open, the sight of the water, the bright skies, and the green reeds soon revived him. He felt buoyant and full of life, as if he could fly away on the wind. Involuntarily, he joined in song with Yu-ying:

In the clear flowing water,
Fish roam.
Birds fly in pairs,
We row along singing a song.
Ah, ah, ah, ah, ah,
The boat floats on the water,
The water merges with the sky,
Our friends are everywhere.

The wind blows,
Waves slap the bow.
We take the oars,
And row, row and row.
 Ah, ah, ah, ah, ah,
 Resist Japan, save the motherland,
Let's all join in the fight.

The mingled sound of singing and rippling water floated across the lake and drowned out the mew of the water-birds.

Watching the expression on Ka-tse's face as she rowed, Yu-ying wondered how he could look so happy, so enraptured, so carefree and fearless, when he did not even have a family. She longed to ask him to tell her the source of his happiness.

The boat glided forward. A light wind splashed small waves against the bow of the boat. The lake was sky-blue, and when you looked down you could see the bottom. Clusters of thick weeds bobbed to and fro in the water like a pine in the wind. Carp darted back and forth like birds on their way through a forest. From time to time a cat-fish could be seen chasing a silver carp. Just as they were about to swim into the side of the boat, they would disappear again. Schools of minnows flashed here and there at the roots of the reeds as if they were on their way to some feast.

Yu-ying pulled up several water-chestnuts for Ka-tse. They were too soft to eat, so Ka-tse placed them on the seat and leaned over the side of the boat meaning to rake in some more with his hand. The boat sud-

denly rounded a bend and a sweet fragrance wafted in. He raised his head. At the far end of the reeds lay a sea of lotus flowers, red, pink and white, all in full bloom. The dense sea of round lotus leaves spread all the way to the willows in the distance. "Look!" cried Ka-tse, pointing. It was like a paradise. Yu-ying guided the boat in that direction. Two ducks took fright at the boat, and rose from the water, spraying crystal clear drops on the lotus leaves as they went. Ka-tse plucked a big lotus seedcase. He stopped singing and busied himself pulling out the seeds and munching them.

Yu-ying moored the boat among the lotus. Smiling at Ka-tse, she picked a lotus leaf to protect her head from the sun. Another small boat, on the side of which perched several cormorants with strings tied round their necks, appeared in the distance. It was headed for the middle of the lake.



"Ai! Would you like to guess a riddle?" asked Ka-tse suddenly, throwing her another seedcase as he spoke.

"What's your riddle?"

"What is it that sits in a boat, does not eat what it catches, but has to be fed by man?"

"You're making it up — it's a cormorant."

"No, it's 'Yu-ying'! Why don't you pluck some of the lotus seedpods instead of waiting with a straight neck to be fed by someone?" said Ka-tse, laughing and clapping his hands.

"Oh, so it's me?" cried Yu-ying, dipping up water with the lotus leaf and splashing it on him. She then rocked the boat as though trying to tip him in the water. Ka-tse held a lotus leaf up in mock protection, and opened up a counter-attack. Laughter rang out over the lake, until Ka-tse's wound started to pain him.

"Let me ask you something, Ka-tse," Yu-ying said gravely. "What makes you so happy? If you're not singing, you're laughing, playing or getting up to some mischief."

Ka-tse laughed. "You think this is happiness. You should see how happy we are in our unit; there we have real fun! This place is dull, you know!"

"That's true. All those people who come from your unit are always laughing and talking." She suddenly sighed, "You're lucky to be a man!"

"But how backward you are! What do you mean 'lucky to be a man'? Women are as good as men, any day. You haven't seen the women in the Eighth Route Army! They're every bit as good as men. If you like,

you can come along with me. I guarantee that you can become a scout!"

"Ai-ya!" These lightly spoken words really struck home with Yu-ying. She had been toying with such ideas during the previous few days, but she had felt that they were rather fanciful. Now, unexpectedly, Ka-tse had put her dreams into words. She was both surprised and happy.

"Is that possible with me being a girl?"

"Why not? You mustn't look down upon yourself!"

"Then take me back with you!" begged Yu-ying, her heart pounding, her face flushed with happiness. Seeing that she had much confidence in him, Ka-tse began to encourage her all the more. He told her that everyone in the unit was a hero, and that men and women alike were welcomed and protected everywhere by the civilians. He raved about the ability and cleverness of the District Commander, of the way the scouts tricked the Japanese, the courage and kindness of the fighters. He pointed out to Yu-ying that as a young girl she would make a good scout because she would not draw the attention of the enemy. Yu-ying was carried away by this. Who would not be enraptured by such a brilliant prospect? She stood shifting her weight from foot to foot, wishing she could get Ka-tse to leave immediately.

But Ka-tse's wound was not completely healed. They both fretted at the delay. During the next few days they did all they could to get the wound better. Meanwhile they went to the lake every day and carefully worked out their plans for departure. Of course, Uncle

and Auntie Yang would be their first obstacle. Now that they saw Ka-tse's wound getting better, they were reluctant even to part with him. How could they be persuaded to let their only daughter leave them? Yu-ying had sounded them out on this question jokingly, but she got only a shake of the head for a reply. What to do? After much thought, they at last decided to run away. Since they were going to battle, Yu-ying was all for making a conspiratorial start.

Ka-tse, however, acted strangely. He had been the first to raise the idea of running away and Yu-ying had readily agreed. Now he was the first to think of the drawbacks. "Ai-ya!" he cried. "Won't we be deceiving the two old people if we slip off like that? They're getting on in age too, just like my grandmother."

"That's true!" agreed Yu-ying, following the thread of his thoughts. "When I leave, there'll be no one to help them prepare the meals, carry the water, or bring in the fire-wood; there'll just be the two of them."

They began to worry again.

But Heaven does not turn a blind eye to a determined man. Ka-tse devised a way. By now his wound had healed. The two of them busied themselves making the preparations.

A comrade in the convalescence center told him one day that the unit had returned and if he had anything to see them about he could go to Tunhukou. The evening of the same day, Yu-ying and Ka-tse, pretending that they had just come back from a day in the open air, went to Auntie Yang. Ka-tse nodded to Yu-ying,

winking as he did so. "Mum!" said Yu-ying. "We ran into a man from Lientzukou with a message from Second Aunt saying that she gave birth to a plump boy last month and she wants you to be sure to come there for a meal of dumplings tomorrow." This all came too suddenly for Auntie Yang. She did not know whether to believe it or not. "That's true, Auntie, I was there when the man said it," Ka-tse put in. "The man who brought the message was a fish pedlar from Back Village, right, Yu-ying?" Yu-ying nodded and said that she had invited him in for a cup of tea, but he said he had no time. Auntie Yang was beside herself with happiness. For half a generation, no child had been born to her brother. Now that a boy, and a big healthy one at that, had been suddenly added to the clan, how could she not go and celebrate the occasion? She busied herself half the night steaming buns, clearing out her basket, and buying flour. When she left the next morning, she instructed them to take care of the house, then set off in the boat with Uncle Yang. Lientzukou lay some twenty or thirty *li* from the village. It would take them two days to get there and back.

As soon as they had gone the two youngsters got busy. They first got out their carrying poles and baskets to fetch the dry corn stalks from the entrance to the village and stack them in the yard. Thus Auntie Yang would not have to go far for fire-wood. This finished, they began to prepare food. Ka-tse washed the dishes while Yu-ying mixed the flour, made griddle-cakes, and steamed enough corn-bread to last the two old people half a month. Lastly, they brought

in water. They brought in enough water to fill all the jars to the brim, then filled two small crocks and two pans. With nothing else left to put water in, they filled the cooking pots. This finished, they sat down to reckon what they had done. The food, water, and fire-wood had all been prepared. What else was there to be done? Nothing. Yu-ying took out the picture that the two of them had drawn beforehand and put it under a candle on the table facing the door.

The drawing was like this. It showed a small house, up to which led a big road. Two plump children were walking along the road. One of them had a patch of hair shaved out of the center of his head and the other had two little queues. They were headed for an army unit which could be seen in the distance shouldering their rifles, courageously marching forward in step. At the head of the troops was a red flag with a five-pointed star on it. This was the message they were leaving for the old couple to tell them where they had gone.

When everything had been arranged, Ka-tse reached down the attaché case from the ceiling, took out his "barker" and his pistol and said: "Let's go!" He then pulled the door shut and they set out hand in hand for Tunhukou.

14

Ka-tse and Yu-ying left Paiyang Lake. Walking along the cart ruts on the main road, they covered twenty *li* in little or no time. Ahead of them lay a green and shady spot. It was Tunhukou.

"Aiya!" Ka-tse suddenly yelped, coming to an abrupt halt. Yu-ying gave a start. "What should I do with my pistol? The District Commander is sure to take it if he lays eyes on it!" he went on.

"Goodness!" Yu-ying sighed. "I thought you'd sighted the Japanese! Is it worth getting all that excited about?"

Ka-tse, however, was grave. He peered ahead, holding his pistol. Tunhukou lay before him. The pistol could stay hidden under his jacket for a day at the most before it would be discovered. Then his eyes opened wide as he hit on an idea. Wasn't that Mengliangying to the left? Wasn't that the tall tree at the entrance of the village? Wasn't that black dot at the top of it the crow's nest? His trick of "climbing a tree in one spurt" would now come in useful.

"You wait here for me, Yu-ying, I'm going to Mengliangying and will be right back." With this he set off on his mission.

As luck would have it there was not a soul at the entrance to the village. The streets were deserted too. Ka-tse dashed over to the tree, slipped off his shoes, and, fixing his pistol firmly in place, shinned up the trunk in one spurt. He drove the crow out of the nest and looked inside. It was a strong nest, carpeted with dry grass and feathers. There could be no better place to hide a pistol. He pushed back the feathers, took out his pistol from under his belt, put it inside and covered it up with feathers and poplar leaves. This finished, he slid down the tree. Now he felt so happy and relieved that he began to whistle.



Scarcely had he put on his shoes, however, than from behind came the command:

"Hey, you! Come 'ere!"

Looking around, he saw several fully-armed White Necks coming from behind the village. They came tramping down the street like a pack of mad dogs, eyes glaring. A shiver ran down Ka-tse's spine. He turned and took to his heels. "Halt! Stay where you are!" they roared. Bullets whistled past his legs as he dashed into a lane. As he ran, he saw three Japanese come into the lane. Ka-tse darted through the first open gate he saw. Hardly had he shot the bolt inside when the crunch of leather boots came

within earshot. He ran on into the yard. Behind him the Japanese were pounding on the gate. Then suddenly he heard footsteps ahead of him. He looked up. There stood Big Chubby. It would have to be him. He was the one who had reported him to the District Commander.

"I'm in for it this time!" Ka-tse thought, breaking into a cold sweat. Near the wall he spotted a tree. He dashed for it, intending to scale the wall. Just then he heard someone whisper:

"Where are you running to?"

Big Chubby came up, lifted Ka-tse into his arms and shot into the house with him. He passed through the ante-room and into a small inner room. In this room was a little *kang* with no bedding, a basket, a trunk and a spinning-wheel — it was the place where Ka-tse was placed in "confinement". Big Chubby lifted the spinning-wheel off the trunk, opened the trunk, pulled up a floor-board inside the trunk and said: "Hurry, get inside!" When Ka-tse bent over and looked inside, it dawned on him that this was a tunnel. "Thank you!" said Ka-tse, stepping inside. As the floor board and the cover was replaced on the trunk from above, Ka-tse found himself in darkness.

From the gloom came the query: "Who's there?" A gust of hot air hit Ka-tse in the face. He started. Someone had already been squatting there for some time.

"It's me. Who're you?"

"I'm young Chubby. You . . . your voice sounds familiar. Who are you after all?" He first felt Ka-tse's face, then the top of his head.

"Chubby?" Ka-tse's heart gave a leap. It must be that boy he wrestled with. He reached out and gave Chubby a hug. "I'm Ka-tse, the one who made that bet with you."

"Oh, so it's you?" Chubby sounded very surprised. "You're a strange fellow! How did you know there was a tunnel here?"

The tramp of footsteps followed by swearing was suddenly heard above. The voices of the Japanese and White Necks could be distinctly heard in the inner room. From above their heads came the sound of the spinning-wheel crashing down on the floor and the trunk being opened. Ka-tse hung on to Chubby as tightly as he could.

"Slam!" The trunk was closed again. Then came a chaotic scramble of noises. "Where have you hidden the kid?" roared a voice.

"What kid are you talking about? I haven't even seen any child in the first place!" came the resolute voice of Big Chubby.

They heard the sound of a slap.

"Give him a taste of the bayonet!" bellowed two voices.

"If you bayonet me, it's all the same. I still haven't seen any child."

"So you want to be tough, eh! You're all Eighth Route Army men!" Thumps and bangs followed. The commotion, now far, now near, shook dirt down from the ceiling of the tunnel. Ka-tse ground his teeth, his blood up. He hung on to Chubby tighter than ever.

The noises above gradually died away. There was a long silence.

It was quite some time later that they heard the shuffle of approaching footsteps. The trunk was opened. A shaft of light streamed in. "You can come out now; they've made tracks," said Big Chubby.

Ka-tse came out and threw himself into Big Chubby's arms, tears streaming from his eyes. "I wronged you in the past, Uncle!" he said. "I'll never swear at you again!"

Holding him in his arms, Big Chubby settled down on the *kang*. He felt as tired as if he had just moved house. "Oh, that's all right, laddie. It's all in the family," he said. "Even if you'd hit me, we'd still have been able to live it down!" Ka-tse slowly looked up with shining eyes. Then he noticed a clot of blood on Big Chubby's temple. He stood on tiptoes to take a closer look. Uncle Chubby had been wounded.

"You got that because of me, Uncle Chubby!" said Ka-tse. "Does it hurt? Let me blow on it." So saying, he blew a stream of warm air on the wound. Though the air only tickled Big Chubby's temple, it made its way straight into his heart. He smiled and looked away. Then he looked at Ka-tse in mock severity. "You! You're good at being naughty, but then again, you know how to worm your way into people's hearts." His love for Ka-tse shone in his eyes. "You're a good lad, more use than I! What's it if I take a beating for your sake?"

Ka-tse felt moved to tears. "The fellow who beat you up, did he have a moustache, a head like a barrel,

and toad-like eyes?" asked Ka-tse, raising up his fist.

Uncle Chubby rubbed his hand across Ka-tse's head and nodded. Then a thought struck him. "I don't suppose you've eaten today, have you? Young Chubby! Bring in some wood and get a fire going!"

Young Chubby busied himself clearing up the broken things. When Ka-tse saw him pick up the string of fire-crackers, he thought of something. Taking out his wooden "barker", he ran over to him, saying: "Here, I'll give this to you, Chubby! Don't think badly of me! It really hurt when you threw me that day!"

Chubby drew back. "This is your memento, isn't it? I wouldn't want to take that from you," he said.

"I've got a real pistol now. Take it. I give it to you as a token of remembrance," said Ka-tse. At this, Chubby hit upon an idea. "Then I'll give you these fire-crackers," he said.

"That's a good idea!" cried Ka-tse jumping up and throwing his arms around Chubby's neck. "Now I'll have something to remember you by!"

"Rat-tat-tat . . ." the chatter of a machine-gun suddenly broke in on their conversation. The sound came from two or three *li* away. It was followed by rifle shots. "They've met up with our chaps!" said Big Chubby, running outside. Ka-tse and Chubby followed in his wake. The three of them climbed a ladder and saw the Japanese and White Necks running about in the green fields in confusion. Along the line from Tunhukou, the Eighth Route Army was closing in on them.

"Aiya-ya!" exclaimed Ka-tse, slapping his thigh in anxiety. "This would be a good time to catch 'em on the hop! But my gun's up at the top of that tree!"

15

The skirmish with the enemy came like a storm after a clap of thunder and ended as quickly. The enemy had clearly learnt never to be caught napping and besides, they had used the green fields for cover. As soon as the machine-guns opened fire, all except the slow runners vanished into thin air. Ka-tse could do nothing but stand there watching, for his pistol was up in the tree. The unit from Tunhukou pursuing the enemy was the district force under the command of Chien Yun-ching. Ka-tse spotted the huge figure of Big Li from a long way off. Ka-tse shouted, jumped down off the ladder, and ran towards them. The fighters could not make out where he could have come from at such a moment.

"Ka-tse! Ha, ha, ha!" asked Big Li. "Where've you sprung from?"

"Hehuawan!" replied Ka-tse, a big grin on his face.

"Did you run into the Japanese?"

"Mm! And I almost got it in the neck, too!" he said, turning and pointing. "It's thanks to Uncle Chubby you won't be scratching my name off the mess list." As he was speaking, Chien Yun-ching and the messengers came up. Ka-tse ran over to the Commander and told him all about how Big Chubby had

saved his life. The fighters crowded around Big Chubby and gave him their thanks. The medical orderly dressed and bound his wound, and gave young Chubby an empty medicine bottle that he had his eye on. The father and son were smiling bashfully, not knowing quite what to say or do.

Ka-tse was extremely elated over his recent military encounter. It was not till he saw the District Commander gazing at him with a strange smile that he began to wonder what was up.

"I say, has your wound healed, my boy?" asked the Commander.

"Yes, it's healed!" Ka-tse stamped his foot to prove that his leg was in good condition.

"Now that you're well you're up to your mischief again, eh?" said the Commander still smiling. "Where've you hidden that pistol?"

"What pistol?" said Ka-tse beginning to blush.

"Playing the fool again, eh?" said the Commander unhurriedly, his eyes riveted on Ka-tse.

Ka-tse fell silent, then suddenly laughed. He looked down his nose, planning to be evasive.

"Now hurry along and hand it over!" ordered the Commander before Ka-tse had a chance to say anything more.

"All right, all right!" Ka-tse nodded sadly. Then drawing near the Commander, he began to plead like a spoiled child. "District Commander! I'll go and fetch it directly, but just one thing — let me wear it for another ten days — just ten days! When the time is up I'll give it to whoever you like. Is that all right?"

"You always want to lay down conditions!" said the Commander. "First tell me where you've hidden it?"

"In that crow's nest," replied Ka-tse, pointing with his chin. The Commander laughed.

"All right!" he said finally. "But firstly, you must obey orders and secondly, you must not hide weapons you capture!"

"Yes!" Ka-tse clicked his heels together like a real soldier. He then pulled off his shoes and clambered up the tree. In no time he had his hand in the crow's nest. "Ah, you really did make it in 'one spurt'," said the Commander in an admiring tone when he came down.

As Ka-tse was proudly tucking the pistol into his belt, the Commander handed him a leather holster. "Here take this," he said. "You must learn to be more clever." Upon seeing what it was, Ka-tse realized that Big Chubby had told the whole secret to the Commander. He heaved a sigh. "The District Commander never misses a point," he thought to himself. "No one can get away with anything with him around!"

It was getting late. The troops were billeted in the home of Big Chubby and were preparing food. It was just as everyone was settling down for the night that Ka-tse suddenly remembered Yu-ying. "Aiya!" he cried, running outside.

"Where are you going?" Commander Chien shouted hurriedly.

"I'll be back in a jiffy!" replied Ka-tse, running out of the courtyard. He ran into Yu-ying just outside the gate. She had been asking for him everywhere and

was now on the verge of tears. Upon seeing him, she ran over, weeping with relief.

"All you think of is yourself. Leaving me standing there alone all this time! What if something had happened to me? Where could I have gone when I don't know a soul here!"

Ka-tse walked over and took her by the hand. "Dry your eyes," he whispered urgently. "The District Commander's in the courtyard! He hates to see anyone cry. If he doesn't let you stay, don't blame me!"

"When I reached the entrance to the village, I heard the machine-gun. It sounded as if it were right on me. I thought they were firing at you and wanted to scream but couldn't. When I saw people running in this direction, I followed them. I thought of telling them to take whoever it was alive," said Yu-ying.

Ka-tse listened, laughing all the time. Yu-ying stopped crying. Hand in hand the two went to Commander Chien. When he heard that Yu-ying wanted to join the army, he wrinkled his brow. But try as he would, he could not argue the two youngsters out of the idea. Probably because Ka-tse had already been allowed to join, he finally said: "Well, go and get yourselves something to eat, we'll discuss it later on." Ka-tse knew that this meant he had probably decided to let Yu-ying stay. He cheerfully pulled her outside.

Several of the fighters who had been clearing the battle-field came to report that a Japanese corpse had been found in North Lake which looked like that of a commanding officer, and that some believed it to be that of Ichiro Hida. Everyone was excited at this news.

The Commander immediately sent a messenger to ask the prisoners if Ichiro Hida had come along with them.

They were soon to be disappointed. The fighters took the prisoners out to identify the corpses. In time they came back to say that it was not Ichiro Hida but Saito, an agent from the Japanese Espionage Bureau.

"How could it be Saito?" His eyes flashing, Commander Chien did not take this news lightly. "All right!" he said. "We've got to keep on our toes! This will be a big blow to Hida. He's sure to be out for our blood!"

At dusk, the scouts brought in some news. Lo Chin-pao reported that Hida had put his head in his hands and wept when he heard that Saito had been killed. Stamping his feet, he had vowed to avenge him. He had even decided to hold a memorial meeting right away. "What's more," said Lo, "the cavalymen have begun to saddle their horses and get their weapons ready and the trucks are filling up with petrol. Messengers from the 'Garrison Troops' are running all over the place. From the look of things, there'll be a big combined attack against us tomorrow."

Other messengers also reported that the news of Saito's death had shaken the Japanese in other strongholds. Some of the soldiers were oiling their guns in preparation for an attack; some had enforced a curfew in their area, others had started to arrest people in places nearby.

Saito was an agent who had worked hand in glove with Ichiro Hida for many years. He was notorious for his cruelty. Many of the deadly methods employed by

Hida in his anti-Communist activities in neighboring counties had sprung from his mind. Commander Chien had long known of the close working relationship of these two master agents.

The room was solemn. A long silence reigned. Slowly, a little smile appeared on Commander Chien's face. Then, instantly, it was erased by a look of determination. He seemed to sense that the chance they had long waited for had come of its own accord.

"Ai!" Ka-tse sighed at this inopportune moment, "It's a pity he's dead, otherwise we could have exchanged him for Uncle Chung!"

"It's not certain that they'd agree to the exchange even if he were alive," retorted Commander Chien, regarding him with a thin smile. "We offered to exchange the seventeen prisoners we captured the time we blew those trucks up, but they ignored us!" Then with a sad sigh, he smote the table, fixed his gaze on Ka-tse and said: "The enemy thinks more of us than we do of ourselves!" Ka-tse waited for him to go on, but he bent over the table and began to scribble a message.

The scouts hurriedly went off for a meal. By the time they had finished, the messages had been written. One was to the Political Commissar, Shih I-ming, another was to the County Brigade and the third was to the sub-military area. Having despatched the messages, he sent the scouts out to their posts. Ka-tse took note of the fact that the scouts were sent much farther away than in the past. Apart from those sent to the main communication points, they were all sent

to neighboring counties. Each had the task of cutting the enemy's telephone lines in three or more places during the night.

That Commander Chien should suddenly decide to send Yu-ying to Kuei Pu Ling came as a surprise to Ka-tse. There were several wounded there, he said, and he wanted her to go help look after them and at the same time study nursing. Ka-tse's plan of making a scout out of her fell through. As for Yu-ying, she was used to doing what she was told. While she was not keen on being separated from Ka-tse, she readily agreed to the idea when it was explained to her. Feeling that she would fare better with the unit, however, she extracted a promise from him to let her return in the future. Thereupon, she told Ka-tse to write to her, and if he couldn't do that to draw a picture for her, and to come and see her when he had time. Ka-tse promised and did all he could to cheer her up. He told her to work hard, and assured her that her opportunity to become a scout would come in the future. After darkness set in, Yu-ying set out with the medical orderlies. Ka-tse accompanied them a long way.

The unit set out at midnight. They marched along in absolute silence. In a village no more than two *li* from the city, they set up camp. From here they could see the dark silhouette of the city wall and hear the enemy asking for the password.

The Japanese and White Necks from the different strongholds in the city set out the next day in trucks and on horseback in a combined attack against Tunhukou. They burned sixty or more houses and killed everyone in sight. On their departure, they wrapped Saito's corpse in a white sheet and carried it back to the city.

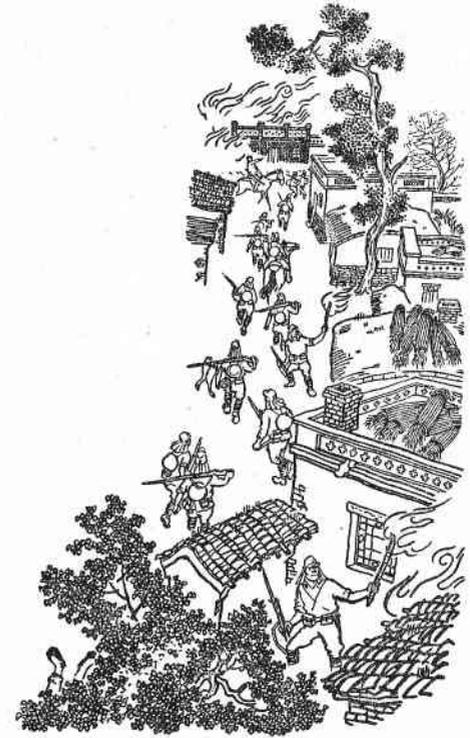
On the third day, a combined attack was launched against Yangchiafu, where Ichiro Hida personally slew the *pao* chief, and locked a sixty-year-old couple in a room and gassed them to death. On the fourth day they attacked Wanfutang. Here four women were bound and taken away, seven truck loads of grain were carted off and a street hawker was tied to a tree and his entrails torn out by an army dog. They broke twenty-eight cooking pots as they were leaving. . . .

This news aroused tremendous hatred among the fighters towards the Japanese and White Necks. Commander Chien sat with knitted brows, calmly collecting the facts — the time the enemy had set out, how many men and weapons he had and where he was headed. He listened attentively and remembered all the reports. Sometimes he would sit staring at the oil lamp for a good twenty minutes. Although he was in perfect health, he had lost weight during the past four days, and his eyes had sunk in their sockets. The unit had been dodging around no more than ten *li* from the city. The enemy troops were constantly passing in and out of the city gate under their nose. The District

Commander remained calm. He was calculating, estimating and waiting for an opportunity to attack. He demanded absolute secrecy about the location of the camp. He would become angry at the sound of footsteps or even whispered conversation. Ka-tse was sent out at daybreak and did not to return till dark.

A new situation arose on the fifth day. The enemy had closed the combined attacks and had assigned a small area to each stronghold; now it was piecemeal "suppression and annihilation". Inside the city, they had split up into small groups which set out on foot killing and burning, ransacking and plundering.

That night Commander Chien sent out his scouts on absolutely secret assignments. On the sixth day the enemy was still carrying out piecemeal "suppression and annihilation" without any change in tactics. Political Commissar Shih I-ming returned that night. Not long after him Lu Pei-chung, head of the County Brigade,



turned up. The troops under their commander had long since drawn together. Ka-tse noticed that two of the scouts were carrying a Czechoslovak light machine-gun with three hundred rounds. Wonders would never cease! Commander Chien and Political Commissar Shih I-ming examined the machine-gun and gave it to Big Li. Ka-tse found out later that they had been borrowed from the White Necks and would have to be returned after a couple of days.

"Are we going to attack the city this time?" Ka-tse wondered, his spirits rising.

Lo Chin-pao was the last to return. Tense and covered with sweat, he entered the room at a little trot.

"District Commander! The Japs are going to surround Kuei Pu Ling tomorrow! It is said that they are going to carry out an "anti-Communist pledge" and execute a batch of prisoners. Ichiro Hida may go along too."

"Really?" asked the Commander calmly, rolling up his sleeves.

"Our man reported this as the truth!"

"Execute a batch of prisoners, eh? Is Uncle Chung among them?" asked Ka-tse anxiously.

"I didn't hear anyone say so."

The Commander clenched his fist and pursed his lips. "What do you think, Shih?" he asked. Then without giving the Commissar time to answer, he turned to the scouts, messengers and fighters and ordered: "Clear out! All of you go out for a while!" Three men were left in the room — Commander Chien, the Political Commissar and Lu, the head of the County Brigade.

Ka-tse was longing to hear what they said. What would happen when the enemy surrounded Kuei Pu Ling, and when they executed the prisoners? Besides, Yu-ying was in Kuei Pu Ling. He stood in the yard looking about him. It was pitch dark. A single light, burning in the room, pierced the rice paper over the window. From time to time huge shadows fell silently across the window. Ka-tse licked his lips, wishing he could eavesdrop. What were they saying after all?

He did not dare go near the window, however, because he knew they were talking of military secrets on which hung the failure or success of this battle, not to mention the fate of Uncle Chung and other comrades. It was no light matter. Then looking around, he saw a bright light in a little room in the south building, and the shadow of Uncle Lo reflected on the window. "I'll go listen to them!" thought Ka-tse on the impulse.

He quietly stole his way up to the window, punched a hole in the paper and peeped in. Ah! There were six persons in the room, Lo, Big Li, the messenger Yang Hsiao-ken and three other highly respected people. He heard Big Li roar:

". . . This'll be a big battle and there will definitely be more Japanese. I guarantee my assistant and I will use the machine-guns in the best possible way to give cover to our comrades when they attack!"

"Ah!" Ka-tse now understood. They were discussing the coming battle. Feeling a bit angry, he charged into the room and said: "So you're holding a council of war and didn't notify me! You left me standing in the yard

all this time!" He squeezed by a couple of people, looking for a place to sit.

"Ai, Ka-tse! This is a Party meeting! What do you think you're doing here?"

"What if it is a Party meeting? I've come to take part in it!" argued Ka-tse.

"You're not a Party member; why should you take part in Party meetings?"

"I'm not a Party member?" This was news to him. Blinking his eyes, he became more vexed. "I've been in the Eighth Route Army all this time and still not a Party member?"

Everyone burst out laughing. Lo Chin-pao hurriedly explained to him that joining the Eighth Route Army did not mean that he had joined the Party and if he wanted to join he had to learn a lot more and go through a definite procedure. Ka-tse thought they were pulling his leg at first, but later on, seeing how serious everyone was, he was convinced. It seemed that he was different, eh? But what did they have that he didn't have? All along he had thought of himself as a Communist, but now it turned out he wasn't. He must do something about this!

"Chang Ka-tse!"

It was Commander Chien calling him. He answered, running across the courtyard as he did so. The three officers in command had already made out the plan of attack and were now thinking how to dispose the troops. They wanted Ka-tse to tell them about the situation in Kuei Pu Ling. This was the moment Ka-tse had been waiting for. He described the streets, lanes, courtyards,

tunnels and hidden pillboxes, what the enemy did when he occupied the village and how he coordinated his troops and fire power. Given these details, the Commander quickly drew up a plan for the disposition of the troops. By using the tunnels in coordination with mines, they planned to annihilate the enemy at one stroke. The enemy always set up his command post in the courtyard of the Han family at the western entrance of Kuei Pu Ling. Some of his troops were always posted on the roof of the primary school at the eastern entrance of the village. In this way he had the entire village under control.

The tunnels in Kuei Pu Ling ran in a chess-board pattern. They had four entrances, all of which came up in the vicinity of the vantage points occupied by the enemy. The district forces planned to wait until the enemy had occupied the village, posted his forces and dropped his vigilance, and then to strike at him from all four entrances and annihilate him in the courtyard of the Han family and the primary school. The command post was set up in an underground fort under a millstone which lay in the middle of the street. The tunnels crossed at this point. It was a good observation post and commands could be given conveniently too. Besides, they also assigned a man from the Courty Brigade the task of laying a mine at a definite place so that they could wipe out as many of the enemy troops as possible. The explosion of the mine would be the signal for the entire unit to attack.

As it was already late when they finished mapping out the plans, they set out and entered Kuei Pu Ling

secretly. After reconnoitering and making some other arrangements on the spot, the unit went into the tunnels. The people went to bed at their usual hour, not knowing that the Eighth Route Army had entered the village. Ka-tse was not sent outside the village at daybreak to keep watch this time. Using leaves as a camouflage, he lay behind a low wall at the edge of the village keeping watch on all that went on outside.

Shortly after daybreak two lines of black dots suddenly loomed into view on the road from the city. It was the enemy. They fanned out and stealthily closed in on the village from its two flanks. The village was surrounded. . . .

17

A grenade was hurled into the street. This was followed by the battle-cry of the Japanese and White Necks as they charged into the village from all directions. Then came an abrupt silence. A short while later a rifle report resounded from the southern end of the village. It was followed by another from the northern end. No cocks crowed. Silence enveloped the village. Some time later the battle-cries again burst forth. Now they were in the streets, crouching, their weapons at the ready.

Awakened from their sleep, the villagers grabbed their clothes, hid their belongings and pressed their children to their breast, terror-stricken.

The Eighth Route Army troops waited calmly at the four entrances of the tunnels for the explosion of their mines.

Several pairs of eyes were scanning the street through gun holes under the mill-stone standing obliquely opposite the courtyard of the Han family. Squatting beneath some stone steps leading up to a gate of elm wood directly opposite the mill-stone was Yang Hsiao-ken. He held a string in his hand. It was attached to a mine the size of a wash basin buried in the middle of the street. He was peering out through a crack between the rocks in the steps. Every time he recalled his role in opening the battle, he gave a quiet chuckle.

Enemy troops had already taken up positions on the roof tops. The *pao* chief and the contact-man were summoned and forced by a knot of White Necks to break open the gate to the courtyard of the Han family. A pack of supply-bearers then rushed pell-mell into the courtyard. The cackle of chickens and the barking of dogs mingled with the sound of swearing and crying.

No Japanese were seen, however, until some time later. In the distance, at the crossing, horses and men were seen milling about, churning up great clouds of dust. The more Commander Chien looked, the more he realized matters had gone wrong. "Have the Japanese concentrated their main forces at the eastern end of the village?" he wondered.

As expected, the troops at the eastern entrance reported that the Japanese had not only occupied the primary school, but had taken the houses nearby under control. This meant that the entrance to the eastern tunnel was blocked, and the fighters had no way of putting their heads out without being discovered, let alone charging out. As news of this came to the District

Commander's ears, a man from the County Brigade came up and reported that the enemy had occupied a courtyard and so blocked the entrance to the southern tunnel, and the unit wanted to move to the northern entrance.

"Stay where you are for the time being!" said Commander Chien. He then dashed off to the eastern and southern entrances to inspect. The situation had taken an unexpected turn. Instead of placing his troops as he usually did, the enemy had concentrated his main forces at the eastern entrance, posted guards at the crossing and was herding the villagers to that point. From all appearances, the courtyard of the Han family was at the most the command post of the White Necks; the Japanese had set up theirs in the primary school and had evidently chosen the crossing as the "meeting ground". Since the eastern and southern entrances of the tunnels came up near the primary school the troops were blocked inside. Though they could come out at the western and northern entrances, they would only be able to deal the White Necks a blow, while the main Japanese forces would be beyond their reach. There could be no hope for victory if they should strike in a hurry without hitting the enemy's nerve center, because the Japanese would be sure to descend upon them from the rear. The situation was extremely critical!

The pounding of horses' hoofs was heard coming down the street. Thirty or more mounted Japanese were coming from the west. As they passed in front of the mill-stone, Yang Hsiao-ken, holding on to the string, asked: "Shall I pull it?"

"Hold on a minute!" said Commander Chien.

Peeping out of a gun hole under the mill-stone, Ka-tse almost cried: "Aiya! Uncle Chung!" All rushed up to take a look. Behind the mounted soldiers were three men clad in rags, their hands bound behind their back, their hair long and dishevelled. The one in the rear had round dark eyes, a thick beard and a ruddy face. It was Chung Liang. Ka-tse's pistol was raised and waiting. If only the mine had gone off!

But time waits for no one. The longer they delayed, the more pressing was the need for battle. For after all the enemy was a living one.

Commander Chien swore and clenched his fists. Sweat poured off his grave face. "We've got to think of a way to trick the enemy into moving back to the west."

"That's right! It'll be easy going if we can get them back to their usual points, and free those two entrances," said Political Commissar Shih.

Ka-tse turned away from the gun hole. He had been watching the courtyard of the Han family. What was on his mind? By coincidence Commander Chien and Commissar Shih turned towards him at the same time. However, they simply heaved a sigh, then looked away as if to put a stop to his thoughts.

"We could send three men out of the western entrance to harass them," murmured Commander Chien as if speaking to himself. But then again it came to him that the enemy would by now have set up a tight blockade, making it impossible to get out. If a few shots were fired within the village, the chances were

that the tunnels would be exposed before the troops could get into position. What to do?

"Let me have a go at it, all right?" begged Ka-tse, unable to restrain himself any longer. He held up the string of fire-crackers. "I'll think of a way to set these fire-crackers off in the Han family courtyard. That'll draw the enemy in that direction!"

"A good idea!" said the Political Commissar. "But how are you going to get into the courtyard?"

"I've got a way! I'll take some eggs along and say that I'm bringing them for the 'Imperial Officers'. They're sure to let me in."

The faces of the leaders lit up with joy. With Ka-tse's bright wits and courage around, there was a chance of success. "But what if you're discovered?" asked the Commander.

"Then you think of some other way! We can't just sit here and watch the enemy without putting up a fight. We can't just see Uncle Chung and not free him."

The tunnel lapsed into silence. In a little recess in the wall stood an oil lamp. Now bright, now dim, its red flame shone on Ka-tse's face. His dark eyes were flashing, and his face was solemn. The fighters looked at him thoughtfully. Could he do it or not? Yes, after all, he had tackled similar tasks in the past with initiative and pluck. The eyes of the Commander and the Commissar finally met. They nodded to each other.

"Chang Ka-tse!" announced the Commander solemnly. His hand seized Ka-tse's in a tight handshake.

"Now, listen! I'm prepared to let you go. You're a bright lad, with plenty of pluck and initiative. . . . All right! Go and fulfil this mission!" Apparently he wanted to say more, but he let it go at this. All Ka-tse knew was that his hand was clenched in a warm, tight handshake. Thereupon, he snapped to attention, cried "Yes!" and took his leave. Then he suddenly came back. Removing the holster at his belt, he handed his pistol to the Commander. "I'm turning this over to you," he said. "But I've still got three days to go!" Only after the Commander had given him a nod did he turn and make his way out of the tunnel.

The Commander watched him disappear. He then sent three men out of the western entrance of the tunnel — just in case something should go wrong — to harass the enemy from outside the big wall around the courtyard of the Han family. Following this, he issued the order for the troops at all entrances to make ready for battle.

18

It did not take Ka-tse long to find ten eggs. Carrying them in a shallow basket, he came out through the elm gate obliquely opposite the courtyard of the Han family. He looked for all the world like a waiter from a small village cafe.

Throwing a glance in the direction of the mill-stone, he crossed the street, a smile on his face. From the courtyard of the Han family came the sound of food



being chopped up. The smell of frying and wine also floated out. Standing under the gate leading to an inner courtyard was the White Neck with the red-rimmed eyes. Ka-tse put on an air of being thoroughly familiar with the place and made as though to pass into the inner yard without even glancing at him.

"Hey! Where d'you think you're going?" demanded Sore Eyes, blocking his way with his hip. "Well, well! If it's not an old acquaintance! Hee-hee!" "Oh, so it's you, Officer!" said Ka-tse with an air of surprised recognition. "Did you think I was an Eighth Route Army man?"

The fellow was taken aback. He had just been about to brand Ka-tse as an "Eighth Route Army man" when Ka-tse took the words out of his mouth.

"Well, you look like one, like a natural-born Eighth Route Army man!"

Ka-tse remained calm. "Then you take me in to see the Honorable Officer, will you? He told me to bring these eggs," he said smiling.

"The Honorable Officer is at the eastern end of the village!" the White Neck said, peering at Ka-tse suspiciously.

"The cooking's being done here though!" retorted Ka-tse. Sore Eyes could find no answer to that. Though he did not know whether this little fellow was from the Eighth Route Army or not, he resented his bright manner, and decided to make trouble for him.

"You wait here until they send for you!"

"Then won't you go inside and say I'm here?"

Sore Eyes turned away whistling.

Ka-tse picked up his eggs and tried to walk through the gate, but the fellow prodded him with his bayonet.

Sore Eyes was evidently bent on keeping him out. Ka-tse's anger mounted. He would have liked to sink his teeth into the fellow's hand. However, he circled around in front of the gate, stealing glances inside the courtyard. Sitting in one of the many high-backed chairs which stood around a round table under a trellis facing the gate was a spectacled Japanese with a moustache. The table was set with three bottles of spirits, two dishes of sliced cold meat, a copper pitcher and several bowls. The *pao* chief and Uncle Chun, the contact-man, were sitting on a nearby bench talking to the Japanese. The cook was running in and out of the kitchen with dishes of food. Little Tiger, the house-dog of the Han family, hung around the table drooling and licking its lips. The officer gave a start as the dog sniffed wistfully at his empty white hands. Ka-tse looked up. The roof was covered with White Necks, walking to

and fro on the gray tiles. It was evident that most of the puppet army was here.

Sore Eyes was extremely aggravating. A gloomy look on his face, he glanced at Ka-tse occasionally, showing no sign of giving him even half a chance to go inside. Ka-tse kept smiling at him as if it made no odds. He could see that Sore Eyes would like to have ordered him to go away, had he been able to find any excuse for doing so.

It was at this time that Uncle Chun lured Little Tiger outside the gate with a piece of griddle-cake. When he saw Ka-tse, he stood rooted in his tracks. Ka-tse rushed up to him before the guard had time to see his dumbfounded look and said: "Uncle Chun! Here are the eggs the 'Imperial Officer' asked me to bring. Since this gentleman won't let me take them inside, please ask him to let me in."

Uncle Chun was afraid of getting into trouble and besides he did not know why Ka-tse had come. Hastily taking the eggs, he said: "I'll take them in for you. Here, take this piece of griddle-cake and look after the dog. The feast's about to start, and the animal's making a nuisance of itself!" He then carried the eggs inside. Tears of frustration sprang to Ka-tse's eyes. With Sore Eyes watching him so closely, there was no chance to explain anything to Uncle Chun. He could only stand there and watch his chance to get inside the yard fade away.

Little Tiger cared about none of this. He put his front paws on Ka-tse's waist, tail wagging and eyes fixed on the griddle-cake. Ka-tse broke off small pieces

of the cake and as he dropped them, the dog snapped them up in mid-air. It was then that Ka-tse suddenly thought of a way. Looking around, he saw Sore Eyes take out a cigarette and feel for a match. Ka-tse hastily produced a match, struck it and gave him a light.

"Give me a cigarette, Officer," begged Ka-tse with a smile.

"There's a butt over there," said Sore Eyes, blowing smoke through his nose. The butt lay just inside the gate. Ka-tse picked it up and deliberately went to get a light from Sore Eyes. But Sore Eyes turned away and refused to give him one. At this moment several Japanese came into the courtyard from the east. Among them was a fellow with a head like a barrel, eyes like a toad, and a moustache. He had a police dog on a leash. Ka-tse was the first to see them. "Come and look! Come and look! An Imperial Officer has come!" cried Ka-tse in a sing-song voice. Sore Eyes looked around to find the Japanese already upon him. He hastily threw away his cigarette and sprang to attention. His eyes followed the Japanese. Ka-tse hastily snatched up the fellow's cigarette butt and moved quietly behind him. On the one hand, he followed the Japanese with his eyes, and on the other, he stealthily pressed the lighted end of the cigarette to the hem of Sore Eyes' tunic until it began to smoulder.

The Japanese tramped into the courtyard as if unconscious of their presence. Ka-tse hurriedly withdrew from Sore Eyes, used his cigarette end to light his, then returned it to him. Sore Eyes took it and moved outside the main gate. Ka-tse remained in the

yard, teasing Little Tiger. "Come and look at this! . . ." Ka-tse cried in a sing-song voice. When Sore Eyes jerked his head around to take a look, Ka-tse grinned and leaned on the dog's back, saying: "See how long the hair is on this dog's back!" Sore Eyes simply spat and turned away.

Before long Sore Eyes began to shift about restlessly, sniffing the air. Finally he discovered that his tunic was smouldering. Swearing volubly, he whipped off his cartridge belt. "Come and look at this! Come and look at this! A black hen has laid a white egg!" Ka-tse cried again. But this time Sore Eyes was too taken up with his burning tunic to pay any attention to him. Ka-tse wasted no time. He whipped the fire-crackers out, tied them to the dog's tail and stuck the lighted end of the cigarette butt to the fuse. "Sh-s-s-s," the fuse began to hiss. Then he threw the remaining piece of griddle-cake inside the inner gate. Little Tiger dashed eagerly after it. The first crackers went off with a series of deafening bangs. The dog shot under the table in terror. Pop-bang-pop! He came scrambling out again and leapt blindly over the officer. Smoke and the smell of scorched dog's hair filled the air. The Japanese and White Necks scrambled to get out of the way. "Gr-r-r-r," the police dog snapped at Little Tiger. Little Tiger jumped up on the table, overturning bottles, bowls and pitcher. The two dogs then ran snapping and snarling in and out among the crowd with no regard for the table or chairs. The White Necks dodged out of the way as best they could. Smoke enveloped the entire yard.



Ka-tse could hardly restrain his laughter. "Hey, Officer! The Imperial soldiers are fighting each other in there!" said Ka-tse retreating through the gate. When Sore Eyes woke up to what was going on, Ka-tse had already passed the mill-stone and was on his way through the elm gate. Here he laughed so hard that he was almost unable to make his way back to the entrance of the tunnel.

The fighters had begun to come out. Big Li had already mounted his machine-gun in a window facing the courtyard of the Han family.

The Japanese at the eastern end of the village, under the impression that the Eighth Route Army had made a surprise attack on the courtyard of the Han family, deserted the small houses. Surging into the

primary school, they sent a part of their troops to "reinforce" the west. But when the reinforcements reached the courtyard of the Han family they found their officers safe and sound. The officer with the toad-like eyes ordered them to tie up the *pao* chief and Sore Eyes, hang them to the rafters and set fire to them.

This officer was none other than Ichiro Hida. When he saw the Japanese soldiers standing in the gateway watching the excitement, he became even more vexed. He swore at them and ordered them to assemble the civilians.

It was at this moment that Commander Chien gave Yang Hsiao-ken the go-ahead signal. Yang Hsiao-ken clenched his teeth and pulled the string. A resounding explosion shook the village as a column of black smoke rose from the middle of the street. Broken guns, pieces of cloth and helmets flew through the air. Crawling and running about, the Japanese did not know what had happened. "Rat-tat-tat." A machine-gun in a window of the north building opened fire. Hand-grenades came flying out of a window. Battle cries were heard in all directions. The White Necks and the Japanese scrambled about desperately searching for something to hide behind. Even a gate post represented a haven of safety. The White Necks on the roof of the house of the Han family, trying to put up a fight, were caught by the machine-gun fire. Two ladders suddenly appeared against the eaves of the house and there were people climbing up them.

When the Japanese in the primary school heard the sound of battle, they hurriedly clambered up on the

school-house roof. Before they could take up positions, a part of the building was brought down by the explosion of two hand-grenades. Machine-gun bullets rained down upon them, throwing broken tiles and dirt everywhere. Some Japanese ran out into the yard just as a hand-grenade landed among the thirty or more horses there, sending them stampeding madly round in circles. The Japanese and White Necks were knocked down and trampled.

Two Japanese ran into a class-room, and, unable to find cover, started shouting in panic. They smashed the window panes and leapt out into the street, with the idea of taking up positions in the nearby temple. Several White Necks followed them. Scarcely had they reached the crossing than they came under rifle fire and hand-grenades from the tiled-roof house behind the temple. They were all wiped out.

The battle was short and sharp. What with the effect of the mines, and the sharpness of the offensive, the enemy was wiped out in twenty minutes. Fifty or more Japanese and White Neck corpses were found in the courtyards and streets. A hundred or more White Necks surrendered and were taken prisoner. All was over except an occasional rifle report from here and there in the smoke enshrouded village where the troops were mopping up the enemy remnants.

Ichiro Hida's corpse was found in front of the millstone. Shortly after the explosion of the mine, he had unsheathed his sword and, leading a group of Japanese, had planned to defend the courtyard of the Han family. Uncle Chun, however, got into the highest building in



the south before him and bolted the door. Thus no place was left where he could put up a fight. Unable to hold their own, the White Necks clambered down from the roof tops and surrendered. Hida had then charged out of the courtyard with his troops, never thinking that the

street would be blocked in both directions. He was caught by the machine-gun fire and his sword was shot in half. Raising the broken stump, he ran for the millstone, hoping to gain cover and a chance to escape. There was a muffled sound of a rifle shot and he rolled onto the ground. The shot had come from one of the gun holes under the mill-stone. Within a few minutes, all life had left his body.

Carrying a rifle longer than he was tall, Ka-tse appeared in the smoky street. He was searching every house and courtyard. "Have you seen Uncle Chung?" he asked every time he ran into someone.

"Hey, Comrade!" called a young voice from a lane. He looked around. A girl with big eyes stood looking at him. It was Yu-ying.

"Aiya! What are you doing here?" asked Ka-tse running over to her. Yu-ying gave a start of recognition and came towards him. "Ka-tse!" Tears stood in her eyes. "Oh! I was frightened to death!"

"What are you doing here? Aren't you scared of getting caught by a stray bullet?" said Ka-tse in the manner of a seasoned fighter. "Hurry and find a place to take cover. We can talk later on!"

"Never mind about that. I was in that hollow wall. The Japanese almost discovered me there. Hey! One of them was chasing a chicken and it ran in among the fire-wood covering the hole in the wall. Close, wasn't it? But just then the firing broke out. I guessed it was our unit! Oh, how I wanted to catch that Japanese!" Yu-ying was pink with excitement.

"So, you're really qualified to be a scout now!" said Ka-tse in a complimentary voice.

"Of course!"

"What did you call me for just now?"

Yu-ying turned and pointed to the courtyard. "There's a fellow over there with his arms bound. He asked me where the tunnels were and told me to hide him there."

"So!" Ka-tse opened his eyes wide. "It's not Uncle Chung, is it?" He ran inside as he spoke, Yu-ying following in his wake. From behind the feed trough, he pulled out a grotesque, muddy, sooty figure. It was not Uncle Chung. Ka-tse looked at him closely. The fellow grinned obsequiously.

"You don't know me, Comrade? We're old acquaintances!" It was Sore Eyes.

"Ha! So it's *you*, Officer!" Seizing him by the ear, Ka-tse jumped up saying: "A fine friend you are! You wouldn't even spare me a cigarette!"

Ka-tse pulled him up in a sitting position. "Although I didn't give you a cigarette, I gave you a butt; otherwise how would you've been able to set off those fire-crackers? I was almost burned on the rafters for that!" The fellow grinned as he spoke.

"Ta-ta-ra-ra —" the bugle sounded clearly. Ka-tse and Yu-ying led Sore Eyes out into the street. In the distance, standing on the mill-stone, he saw Yang Hsiao-ken, his head flung back like a crowing cock blowing the bugle. The crisp clear sound made Ka-tse feel like flying. A piece of red silk hanging from the bugle fluttered gallantly in the wind.

A big group of people had gathered near the mill-stone. Commander Chien and Commissar Shih were both there. His heart racing, Ka-tse hurried in that direction. Making his way through the crowd, he saw at last the one he was looking for! "Uncle Chung!" he cried, pushing through the crowd, almost tripping in his excitement.

19

The battle of Kuei Pu Ling took the wind out of the Japanese sails. The Japanese troops stationed at the strongpoints in Chilipao and Mochakang retreated to the city under the cover of darkness. Stragglers from the puppet army, afraid for their skins,

pulled up the drawbridge to their forts and passed the time away drinking. They would not even open up for the report brought to them by their contact-men. Things tightened up in the city too. People coming and going were subjected to strict investigation and the city gates were locked long before sundown. In the past, a defeat in battle would be followed by mopping-up operations the next day. But this time three days passed and still there was no sign of any movement on the part of the enemy. Not until the fourth day did two hundred Japanese troops from neighboring counties, under cover of two artillery pieces, venture out to carry back the corpse of Ichiro Hida.

The people in the surrounding countryside were so happy and grateful that every day someone offered thanks to the Gods. Every day someone would be seen carrying a fat hog looking for the Eighth Route Army. Even in the villages where enemy strongholds were set up, the people openly loaded pork and white flour on carts and took them to the Eighth Route Army. The White Necks could do no more than pretend they knew nothing about it.

People everywhere took up war work. Party workers in the counties and districts openly summoned mass meetings every afternoon. Resistance songs descended upon enemy fortresses. The people filled in the blockade ditches, cut telephone lines and even blocked off roads overnight. "Down with Japanese Imperialism!" Many a fortress woke up of a morning to find such a slogan had appeared overnight on a nearby wall.

The District Forces seized this opportunity to launch political offensives against the enemy, and at the same time they rested and strengthened their organization. Everyone of the fighters was happy. They showed off their new weapons to one another. A triumphant air prevailed everywhere. Of course, here again Ka-tse was perhaps the luckiest. He spent three days in succession with Uncle Chung, getting him to tell him in detail how the enemy had tortured him and how the prisoners had struggled. After this, Ka-tse told Uncle Chung everything he had done since he had joined the army. Uncle Chung beamed with pride. He picked Ka-tse up and tickled him with his stubby beard.

Yu-ying looked up to Ka-tse more than ever after this battle. If she had any problems she talked them over with him. She was always happy to be with him. As for Ka-tse, he became more and more willing to take care of her and train her as a scout. After all, he was the one who had recruited her, and besides, she had made such a good showing in Kuei Pu Ling. After the battle, he gave her a coloured pencil, red one end and blue the other, which pleased her exceedingly.

"Have you heard from home recently, Yu-ying?" Ka-tse suddenly asked Yu-ying one day.

"Oh yes!" she said. "Mama and Papa came to see me some time ago in Kuei Pu Ling! They even brought along the picture we drew."

"What did they say? I bet they were after my skin!"

Smiling and shaking her head, Yu-ying said: "They didn't say too much. Mama said that they puzzled over that picture for several days. My father was so angry.

He said, 'I bet this was young Ka-tse's idea. Yu-ying would never think of it!'"

"I thought you said they didn't have much to say! What about this?" said Ka-tse.

"You listen," said Yu-ying, cutting him short. "They didn't worry any more once they found we'd joined the Eighth Route Army. My father said: 'Why did they have to run away to join the Eighth Route Army? I'd join myself if I wasn't so old!' When they were leaving they said: 'Obey your officers and don't quarrel with Ka-tse. You two should help each other whenever you're in difficulties.' And they gave a message for you."

"What?"

"They want you to write to them; and to keep out of mischief and work hard!"

These words hit home with Ka-tse. He dropped his head and, toying with his newly acquired Japanese belt, he remained silent a long while.

"Ka-tse!" called Yu-ying. "You'll have to learn to read and write, so you can write to my mother and father."

"Yes!" Ka-tse lifted his head, and gazed into the distance. "I have something I want to talk to you about, Yu-ying. I want to know what you think?" He suddenly stopped speaking.

"Think about what?"

Ka-tse hesitated, his face slowly coloring up. "No! I'm not qualified yet. It's best that I wait a few days more," he said. And with that he jumped up and ran

off. Yu-ying stood there for a long time with a puzzled look on her face.

That evening there was a meeting to celebrate the victory in Kuei Pu Ling. All the people of the locality turned up. Commander Chien addressed the meeting. He spoke first in general of the significance of this battle in the struggle against the enemy and then after this he praised those who had done particularly well in the fighting. He spoke of Big Li, Yang Hsiao-ken . . . and then he suddenly mentioned the name "Chang Ka-tse". Sitting in the audience, Ka-tse thought he was hearing things. The Commander spoke of how clever and courageous he had been in this battle, how he had taken in the enemy with the fire-crackers, enabling the battle to develop smoothly.

"Therefore," said the Commander holding up the pistol, "the Headquarters of the District Forces has decided to issue this pistol to Comrade Chang Ka-tse in recognition of his services."

Thunderous applause burst out in the meeting place.

"Comrade Chang Ka-tse!" called the Commander from the platform.

Though Ka-tse felt that this name was familiar, he continued to sit where he was as if he were not being called. Yu-ying, sitting beside him, nudged him. "He's calling you. Why don't you go?" she urged. At that he stood up and walked up on the platform. Holding the pistol in both hands, the Commander strapped it on him. The audience again applauded. "Turn round and let's have a look!" shouted someone from among the crowd. Commissar Shih turned him around to face



the audience. Seeing so many applauding hands, so many smiling faces and so many eyes fixed on him, Ka-tse turned red with embarrassment. He glanced around at the Commander and the Commissar. They were both smiling at him. On the impulse, he began to clap his hands in return. An even more thunderous applause broke out in the audience.

Ka-tse cheerfully jumped off the platform, and ran back to his seat beside Yu-ying.

“Tell me what you think — but you must not tell anyone else — I’m thinking about joining the Party. Do you think I’m qualified? . . .”