

The book cover features a stylized illustration. In the foreground, a young boy with dark hair, wearing a red shirt and a black vest, stands in a field of green grass, looking upwards with his right arm raised. Behind him is a yellow field with a white grid pattern. The background is filled with green foliage and trees. Several black birds are depicted in flight: one is perched on a branch at the top, another is in flight to the right, and two others are flying in the sky. The title is printed in blue text over the scene.

The Call
of the Fledgling
and Other Children's Stories

**The Call
of the Fledgling**
and Other Children's Stories

Hao Jan

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CONTENTS

<i>The Chirruping Grasshopper</i>	I
<i>The Speckled Hen</i>	17
<i>Making Snowmen</i>	27
<i>Children's Library</i>	35
<i>The Call of the Fledgling</i>	44

The Chirruping Grasshopper

ERH-WANG was eating breakfast when suddenly he heard a long-horned grasshopper chirruping outside.

“Guo-guo-guo,” how merrily it sang!

He cocked his head to listen carefully. The more he listened the more he was attracted to it, and finally he put down his rice bowl and started for the door.

“Come Erh-wang,” said his father. “Finish your meal before you leave.”

“Put on your shirt before you go out,” added his mother.

Erh-wang heard neither his father nor his mother. He skipped out of the door, like a lamb that had been locked in the fold all night.

But where was the grasshopper?

Erh-wang searched up and down the trellis holding up the gourd vines. But it wasn't there. Then he bent over the fence all covered with climbing beans. Still no grasshopper. He stopped,

listened carefully again for a while, then bounded out of the gate in the direction of the chirruping. He looked up and, sure enough, that's where it was.

The house opposite was where Kuei-kuei lived. Outside the doorway stood a small locust tree. On it hung an insect cage made of sorghum stalks. Inside was a big-bellied grasshopper, dark green and chirruping gaily.

Just as Erh-wang was reaching for the cage, Kuei-kuei, who was sitting in the doorway, shouted, "Stop, it's mine!" Erh-wang quickly drew back his hand. He went up to Kuei-kuei, smiled and said, "Let's both play with it."

"No," declared Kuei-kuei.

"Then can I play with it for just a little while?" Erh-wang pleaded.

"No, not for a second," Kuei-kuei said. "It's all your brother's fault. The other day we were catching grasshoppers in the bean field, and not interfering with him one bit. But he saw us and said we'd trampled the beans. And he told the team leader on us. If not for him we'd have caught some more. Your brother likes to stick his nose into things that aren't any of his business."

Erh-wang didn't like to hear people say bad things about his brother. He wanted to speak up for him. But he was afraid that if he did Kuei-kuei wouldn't even let him look at the fat grass-



hopper. So he didn't open his mouth. Instead, he just hovered over the cage. Erh-wang really yearned for that insect. If only he could have one in a cage for himself!

Last year he did have a grasshopper, brought from the bean field by his father. It was a really fine one, with a big belly and long legs. It had a mouth like a pair of pincers, big wings that glistened in the sun like glass, and a grand pair of whiskers. "Guo-guo-guo" — its song rang so loud it used to make his ears tingle. It chirruped day and night, but especially when it was in the sun. Erh-wang's father made a cage for it, shaped like the belly of a big crab. But unfortunately, when winter came, the grasshopper died. Erh-wang wept. And he had never had another since, much as he wanted to.

Thinking of all this, Erh-wang kept his eyes fixed on the fine grasshopper. His hands stretched out again involuntarily for the cage.

Kuei-kuei rushed over angrily and pushed him aside. "Go away!" he cried. "I won't let you play with it, so there!"

Erh-wang lost his balance and plumped down on the ground.

Just then someone called from over the low wall: "Stop fighting! Stop it right now!"

It was Ta-wang, Erh-wang's elder brother. He was in the third year of primary school and had received his red scarf as a Little Red Guard. He was shouting as he ran up, a pitchfork on his shoulder and a sickle in his hand. Jumping over the wall as easily as a goat, he put down his farm tools, helped Erh-wang to his feet and beat the dust from his clothes. Then he asked Erh-wang if he was hurt, and what the fuss was about.

"I just wanted a look at the grasshopper, and he pushed me," Erh-wang wailed.

"I wouldn't have pushed you if you hadn't touched my cage," Kuei-kuei came back at him.

"You're bigger than Erh-wang, Kuei-kuei," Ta-wang said. "You shouldn't have pushed him like that. Suppose you'd hurt him."

"I wouldn't care," retorted Kuei-kuei. "Why did you tell the team leader on us?"

"You trampled the brigade's beans, and then you blame me for telling on you?"

"Nosey! Managing everything. You're not a cadre anyway."

"Every commune member can have a say in managing things."

"Well, you can't manage me! I'll go after grasshoppers there again. What can you do about it?" Kuei-kuei challenged.

“Like to see you try!” Ta-wang fumed. “If teacher didn’t say we mustn’t hit people, I’d slap your face!”

Braver because his brother was there, Erh-wang clenched his fist and threatened to hit Kuei-kuei. But Ta-wang stopped him.

“No fighting,” he said. “Good kids don’t fight each other.” Then, picking up his sickle and pitchfork, he led Erh-wang away.

But as they went off, Erh-wang could not help looking back at the grasshopper in its cage. And, when they got back home, he kept nagging at his father to catch one for him.

“I’ve no time for your games, son. I’ve got to go harvesting.”

Ta-wang handed his father the sickle and said: “Dad, your sickle was blunt, so I sharpened it.”

Erh-wang then got after his mother to catch him a grasshopper.

“I’m busy threshing, child, and I’ve no time to amuse you,” she said.

Ta-wang handed his mother a pitchfork, saying: “Ma, your pitchfork was broken so I fixed it.”

Father and Mother were both pleased and praised Ta-wang for being a boy who understood things.

With their sharpened sickle and repaired pitchfork, they started off to work. But Erh-wang spread out his arms and blocked the door.

"Be good, let Father and Mother go to work," said Ta-wang to his little brother.

"I just want a grasshopper," said Erh-wang.

"I'll catch one for you, a great big one," promised Ta-wang.

"I want a cage too," Erh-wang pressed.

"I'll make you one, the best kind."

Only then did Erh-wang let his father and mother go off to work.

It was a Sunday. Ta-wang had figured on going harvesting with his father, or threshing with his mother, or to help the carter bring in the beans. But also he was fond of his little brother and wanted to do all he could to make him happy. So he decided that he would first take Erh-wang out to catch a big-bellied grasshopper and make a cage for it.

The two boys were scarcely out of the gate when they heard a bang. It was the pig pushing its long snout against the door of the sty. Ta-wang remembered that the pig hadn't eaten yet. Their mother used to come back from the threshing ground during work breaks to feed it. This must be very tiring for her, Ta-wang thought.

So he said to Erh-wang, "Come on. Let's help Mama by feeding the pig before we play." With that he took a bucket of swill to the pigsty.

Erh-wang tagged along, calling out at each step, "Let's go, let's go and catch grasshoppers."

After feeding the pig, they had just come out of the gate when suddenly a button popped off Ta-wang's shirt. As he bent to pick it up he noticed their cabbage patch was so dry, the earth had begun to crack. Yes, it needed watering. However, Father, who did not want to hamper collective production, had said that morning, "It wouldn't be right to take time out from working for the team to attend to our private plot, so I'll do it after work in the evening." But that would make Father too tired, thought Ta-wang.

So he said to Erh-wang, "Let's help Dad by watering the cabbage and then go out to play." He went back into the yard for a small pail to take to the well for water. Hanging behind his brother, Erh-wang nagged again, "Let's go, let's go and catch grasshoppers."

After watering the cabbage patch, Ta-wang wiped the sweat from his forehead. He looked around the courtyard. Lots of work still needed to be done — beans to be picked, the yard to be cleaned. But when he saw how upset his little brother was he decided to go with him first.

They headed for the hillside on the north, because Ta-wang didn't want to go hunting for a grasshopper in the fields and trample the crop.

As they came out of the lane they heard the team leader calling out in the distance, "Hey, a storm is forecast! Everybody out to help with the threshing!"

At this call, even the old folks got out with pitchforks to protect the grain from the coming storm.

Ta-wang, leading his brother, ran over too.

They found many people already there. Corn cobs and millet ears stood in neat ricks lined up on either side. Commune members were spreading bean stalks on the ground. Ta-wang's teacher, Comrade Chen, was also there with the pupils carrying the stalks.

Ta-wang went up and asked her, "Teacher, what are we spreading those bean stalks for now? Isn't there a storm on the way?"

"Yes, but the forecast says it's three days away," explained Teacher Chen. "We must get the beans hulled today while it's fine, then bring out the other stalks that are still in the fields. Otherwise the beans will sprout under the rain and spoil."

Ta-wang thought what a big waste it would be of all those fine beans the team had already

harvested. "Erh-wang," he said, "let's give a hand with this work first, then go hunting grasshoppers. Right?"

Erh-wang, hanging on to Ta-wang's sleeve, said pouting, "No. You promised you'd get me a big grasshopper. Didn't you mean it?"

Ta-wang replied, "And you said last night you want to be a good commune member when you grow up. Didn't you mean that?"

"Who didn't mean what?" Erh-wang asked resentfully.

"If you don't take care of the collective's beans when they're threatened by rain, you'll never make a good commune member."

Erh-wang had no answer to this, so he just blinked. Then Ta-wang asked him to keep the chickens off the ground while he got a pitchfork and started working on a big stack of bean stalks.

The stack was very high. It was quite a job getting the tangled stalks down from the top.

The team leader said someone should go up there. He was starting off to get a ladder when a voice came from overhead: "Team Leader, we don't need a ladder."

Everyone looked up. It was Ta-wang in the poplar tree.

Seeing that the stack was so high, and the tree so convenient to clamber up, Ta-wang had put down his pitchfork and climbed the tree.

"I'll throw the stalks down," he said. "You spread them on the ground."

Ta-wang got out on a branch overhanging the stack. Then he swung from it like a professional athlete and landed smack on top of the stack.

Everyone had a laugh at that, the team leader passed up a pitchfork, Ta-wang began throwing down the stalks. It was not long before the huge stack was gone and the threshing ground was covered with the bean stalks. When Ta-wang had time to look for his little brother again, it was almost noon.

Ta-wang shouted out his name, but no answer came. Erh-wang was nowhere near the threshing floor.

Ta-wang went home. But there was nobody there either. Then he went to the team office and the stock farm. But still no Erh-wang. Ta-wang was so worried, the sweat ran down his face.

He ran outside the village to look for his little brother.

The sun was like a ball of fire overhead, and the people were having their noon break. Sorghum and bean stalks lay drying in the fields.

Ta-wang was really disturbed. Little Erh-wang must be very upset and crying somewhere, he thought. And soon he did hear a sound like someone crying, and a voice that was like Erh-wang's. But when he came up, he was surprised to find Erh-wang laughing and not crying at all.

"There he is! Let him go wherever he can!" Ta-wang shouted joyfully.

Erh-wang was racing over the fields, jumping all over the piles of bean stalks, chasing after grasshoppers. After Ta-wang had started to work, he had shouted for him a while. He watched the chickens by the threshing floor to pass the time. Then he got tired of that and called to his brother again. But Ta-wang was so busy he didn't even hear. Finally Erh-wang became thirsty and started for home to get a drink, passing Kuei-kuei's place on the way. Kuei-kuei's grasshopper was chirruping, but it had been taken inside where Erh-wang could not catch sight of it.

Kuei-kuei had caught his grasshopper in a bean field, Erh-wang remembered. At this thought, he forgot all about being thirsty and dashed off to the bean field.

The sound of grasshoppers shrilling came from all over the field. But they were all in hiding and not a one could Erh-wang see. Wherever he went they would suddenly fall silent. As soon as he was

gone they would start up again. Wherever the chirruping was, there Erh-wang would turn over the bean stalks, pile after pile, but never a grasshopper did he find. He was still at it, very excited, throwing himself onto the heaps of bean stalk piles and combing through each.

Ta-wang's joy at finding his lost brother changed to anger when he saw what Erh-wang was doing. Dashing up he yelled, "Who told you to come here?"

Erh-wang was startled by this sudden shout from behind. "Look, Brother! Grasshoppers. . ." he stammered, beaming.

"Don't talk rubbish!" Ta-wang planted his hands on his hips and roared. "Look at the beans you've trampled and thrown around. You. . . you. . . ."

"I'm catching grasshoppers," Erh-wang said, still puzzled. "I'm not doing anything to the beans."

The crumpled bean stalks crackled as Ta-wang turned them over. Pointing at the beans on the ground, he snapped, "Look here! Haven't you trampled the beans? What a bad boy you are!"

Erh-wang looked down. Sure enough there were a lot of beans under the stalks. His brother's face was red as fire, eyes glaring with rage.

Erh-wang burst into tears.

Usually, when Erh-wang began to cry, Ta-wang's heart would soften. But today he was too furious to console him. He was thinking what he ought to do. Should he go back and report on what had happened? Finally he decided that, before going back to the village, he must pick up the scattered beans.

But what could he put them in? He had no basket or bag. So he took off his shirt and tied up the sleeves with straw. Moving the stalks carefully he began picking up the beans and putting them into his shirt sleeves.

After finishing several rows he looked for his little brother. There he was, bent over a heap of stalks and picking up beans too!

Erh-wang had not understood at first why Ta-wang had bawled him out. Indeed, he had felt it was most unfair. But when he saw his big brother picking up the beans so carefully under the blazing sun, he realized what he had done wrong. This made him stop crying and feel ashamed. No use crying any more, he thought. Better do what Ta-wang is doing and put things right again. So he started picking the beans up too. He had no basket or bag, and wasn't even wearing a shirt. Should he take off his pants? But he was due to go to school next year and thought he was too big to run around with a bare behind. So he took off

his little shoes, and started putting the beans in them.

When Ta-wang came up and saw the beans in those shoes, all his anger melted. He felt sorry he had flared up at Erh-wang who was so small, and was a good kid after all. If he had done wrong he should be helped. Flying into a temper was no use.

Coming close to his brother, Ta-wang said: "That's a good boy! It wasn't easy for the commune members to grow those beans. We can't ruin them just because we want to play."

Erh-wang went on quickly picking up the beans, without a word. Pretty soon Ta-wang spoke again, "Erh-wang, go and rest a while under that shady tree over there. Let me do it."

"No, I'll do it with you."

Ta-wang tore a leaf off a castor-bean plant at the edge of the field. He put it on Erh-wang's head to protect him from the fierce sun. The two little brothers went on their task. They went back to lunch only after they had gathered up the beans.

Who knows how, but the story soon got round the whole village. When it reached the ears of the team's accountant he at once wrote a verse praising the boys. It was put up on the blackboard. When the boys came out of the team office they saw it there.

Ta-wang could read. After one look he blushed and ran off. But Erh-wang didn't know what was up, and he asked the accountant to tell him. At first he blushed too, but then felt pleased and went home full of himself.

After lunch Father and Mother returned to work. Ta-wang went off somewhere too. From the threshold, Erh-wang again caught sight of Kuei-kuei's cage hanging on the locust tree. "Guo-guo-guo!" What a wonderful chirrup that grasshopper had!

Erh-wang itched to get hold of it, but he turned away quickly with his hands over his ears and ran to the threshing ground. "If I can't find Ta-wang," he thought, "I'll help the others there."

But the noon break wasn't over and nobody was there yet. So Erh-wang found himself a small basket, and got to work picking up the beans scattered around the edges of the threshing ground. Pretty soon he had the basket full. Wouldn't it be great to show the beans to his brother before handing them in, and get some praise from him?

Erh-wang ran home with the basket of beans. At the threshold he stopped short. "Guo-guo-guo!" A grasshopper was singing — inside! Hanging on their gourd trellis was a newly-made insect cage with a big-bellied grasshopper in it!

Ta-wang sat by the doorway bandaging his finger which he had cut while making the cage for Erh-wang.

Now Erh-wang understood. He ran up and hugged his brother.

“Guo-guo-guo.”

How wonderfully that big-bellied grasshopper could sing!

The Speckled Hen

FANG-FANG liked to eat eggs very much.

One day her grandma bought her a little hen. It had beautiful wings, a black tail and a tuft on its head, just like Fang-fang's own short hair.

Grandma told Fang-fang to look after the speckled hen well. She said that when the hen started laying she would boil the eggs for Fang-fang to eat.

Fang-fang was an industrious child. Every morning she got up early to let the hen out of the chicken coop.

Every evening she shut it in again. And she kept the hen well fed.

As the days went by, the little hen grew up. Its comb became redder and redder, like Grandpa's face after he'd had a bit of wine. Grandma said that when a hen's comb turned red it was ready to lay eggs.

But though Fang-fang looked in the nesting-box every day, it was always empty. Not an egg to be seen.

Fang-fang asked: "Grandma, why hasn't the hen laid any eggs yet?"

"It would if it had live food," replied Grandma.

"What's that?"

"Small insects, worms and grasshoppers. They're all live food."

"I'll go and catch some."

But Grandma said: "The hen can scratch for itself if you just let it run outside."

Now Fang-fang lived on the western edge of the village. The house faced a hillock where there was plenty of green grass dotted with bright flowers. On the other side of the hillock were grain-fields, stretching as far as the eye could see. There were more insects and grasshoppers hiding there than the little speckled hen could ever eat.

Fang-fang did as her grandmother said, and drove the hen to the grass on the edge of the hill-ock. How happy that little hen was! It had a brand new dining room and sports ground combined! It ran out in the morning and did not return till dark.

But one day the hen came back before noon, went into the nesting-box and sat down.

Fang-fang was so worried, it seemed her heart was on fire. She ran to her grandmother, saying: "Grandma, the hen must be sick."

Grandma took one look at the hen and laughed, "Silly girl. She's laying an egg for you!"

Fang-fang was still a bit worried. She fetched a stool and sat down in front of the nesting-box. The sun was hot, and she got all sweaty. Just as she was about to go into the house for a drink of water, she was startled by a cackle.

The speckled hen jumped down from the nest and kept cackling as it ran towards Fang-fang.

There, sure enough, in the straw was a big, white, oval egg! It was still warm when Fang-fang picked it up.

Every day after that the speckled hen went out to scratch for food, then came back and laid an egg for Fang-fang.

One day Grandma went to a meeting. When she came back she called to Fang-fang: "I have something to tell you."

Fang-fang ran to her grandmother, holding a boiled egg which she'd been eating.

Grandma said: "After we've cut the wheat we'll plant maize in the harvested fields. Our team leader has given me a job, it's to keep the chickens and sheep from stealing into the fields to eat the

seeds and shoots. Our speckled hen will have to be cooped up too.”

Fang-fang was a smart girl. She knew that chickens don't just catch insects, but often peck and trample young crops. They are the worst enemies of newly planted seeds and freshly sprouted seedlings. Commune members must protect the tender maize sprouts, which belong to everyone, from loss. She understood all this so she nodded her head.

“Suppose your hen stopped laying every day,” Grandma asked Fang-fang, “would you be willing?”

“That'd be all right, too,” Fang-fang answered at once.

Grandma was glad. “That's a good child,” she said. “A good child loves the commune. When the shoots grow big, it'll be all right to let the hen out again.”

And from that day Fang-fang kept her hen shut up in the courtyard. But the speckled hen didn't like it and made a big noise to get out. Every time Fang-fang opened the gate to go out, the hen would try to slip out too. But Fang-fang would shoo it back and close the gate tight. The hen would cackle in protest, but Fang-fang paid no attention to that. Every day she helped her grandma guard the newly planted fields. If any chicken,



no matter whose, started over the hillock she would chase it away at once.

When Grandma had to go home to cook meals, Fang-fang would ask two little neighbours, Hsiao Hsing and Yuan-yuan, to watch the borders of the rice field. One of the three children stood guard at the east end, one at the west, and one mid-way. They kept an eye out for stray hens, guarding the field like little sentries of the People's Liberation Army.

Even when the butterflies were fluttering about, they wouldn't chase them.

Even when the grasshoppers were jumping around, they didn't run to catch them.

They were looking after things for the production team, so how could they play about!

But one day Yuan-yuan had an accident.

It was the hottest noonday of the summer. The grown-ups working in the fields hadn't come back for lunch. The village street was empty; no one was in sight except for the three children at the edge of the field. All of a sudden a flock of chickens headed by a big rooster climbed up the hillock from two sides.

Yuan-yuan was at the west end of the field, looking in the direction of the village street, while making a "sun helmet" out of willow twigs. He didn't notice those chickens at all.

The chickens turned from the hillock and in a jiffy disappeared into the field. Then they started pecking away. The seeds had been planted for several days and were already sprouting. The chickens scratched them up with their claws and then ate them.

It was Fang-fang standing mid-way in the field who saw this and shouted to Yuan-yuan: "Hey! Chickens there!"

Looking over his shoulder, Yuan-yuan got a start. He began right away to drive them off with his willow helmet.

But those chickens were a real nuisance. The more Yuan-yuan tried to chase them off the more they scattered over the field. Yuan-yuan got so flustered he picked up a big stone and raised it to throw at them.

When Fang-fang saw him she shouted: "Don't throw stones, Yuan-yuan. Better just drive them away!"

But before Fang-fang's words were out of her mouth, the stone had flown from Yuan-yuan's hand. It hit a speckled hen at the back of the flock. The hen let out one cackle and fell over. The rest of the chickens scattered noisily in all directions.

The three little friends ran over to see the hurt chicken. They couldn't see where it had been hit.

But it seemed to be dying, for its eyes were closed and it was gasping for breath.

Yuan-yuan clapped his hands: "See! My aim was pretty good!"

Fang-fang came back at Yuan-yuan: "What are you chattering about? The hen's going to die."

"Serves it right!" Yuan-yuan said. "Who told it to ruin our production team's crops!"

"How can a hen understand?" said Fang-fang. "Our team leader asked us to watch the fields. He didn't tell us to throw stones and kill people's chickens. Which family does this hen belong to anyway?"

"It's Grandpa Wang's," put in Hsiao Hsing.

Yuan-yuan took a careful look. Sure enough, the chicken was Grandpa Wang's. He was a People's Liberation Army man's father, and Yuan-yuan's parents had often said that he had sent a son to defend the country's frontiers so we should respect and do all we could to help him. Now it was Grandpa Wang's speckled hen that lay there as if dead. How could they make it up to him?

Yuan-yuan started to cry and put the blame on Fang-fang. "It's all your fault. You asked me to watch the fields," he sobbed.

Fang-fang answered: "We all belong to the commune so we should all do good deeds for our

production team. Anyhow, I didn't ask you to throw stones at people's hens."

Yuan-yuan cried harder than ever.

Fang-fang lowered her head and thought a while. Then she said: "Don't cry, Yuan-yuan. I have a way. Wait here till I come back."

With that, Fang-fang ran home and looked for her own speckled hen.

It was sitting in the nesting-box, just about to lay an egg!

Grandma, who was cooking, saw Fang-fang getting ready to take the hen off the box. "What do you want to pick the hen up for?" she asked. "Can't you see she's laying?"

"Grandpa Wang's speckled hen went into the field to eat the sprouted seeds," Fang-fang explained. "And. . .and. . .we killed it with a stone. . ."

"Was it you?" Grandma asked, surprised.

Fang-fang shut her mouth tight and didn't answer.

"Silly girl! Why didn't you just drive it away?" Grandma was unhappy.

"I'll repay Grandpa Wang for his hen with mine."

"Don't you want to eat eggs any more?"

Fang-fang shook her head.

"You're right. That's the way to act," said Grandma.



With her own speckled hen in her arms Fang-fang met Grandpa Wang and Yuan-yuan right at the door. Yuan-yuan was also carrying a hen. He didn't seem to want to go with Grandpa Wang.

"Let Yuan-yuan go, Grandpa Wang," said Fang-fang, running up to the old man. "It was my fault, I killed your hen. I'm paying you back." She thrust the hen into the old man's coat front.

Grandpa Wang gave a laugh, Fang-fang and her grand mother, who had come to the door at the sound, didn't know why.

Grandma started to apologize to the old man. "Our Fang-fang did something really stupid..." she said.

"Don't wrong the child, Auntie," Grandpa Wang interrupted. "She didn't throw that stone."

"It was I," Yuan-yuan broke in.

"Yuan-yuan's brought his hen to pay me back too," Grandpa Wang explained.

Only then did Fang-fang realize that the chicken in Yuan-yuan's arms was his very best laying hen. "I'm the one who should pay you back, Grandpa. Please take mine," she insisted.

"No, I must pay, Grandpa. Take mine!" Yuan-yuan shouted.

"Don't argue, children," Grandpa laughed. "Neither of you needs to repay. Sure, my hen was hit. But maybe it won't die. Even if it does, Grand-

pa won't let you pay. You watched the team's crops and didn't let the chickens ruin the shoots. That was the right thing to do."

"It was my fault," said Yuan-yuan, hanging his head.

"No, it was my fault," said Fang-fang.

"It's not the fault of either of you," Grandpa Wang said. "It's mine. I didn't coop my hen up properly. So no wonder it got into the field. Grandpa'll give each of you a bamboo pole. From now on you can use those to drive away the chickens. Just don't throw stones."

Laughing, Grandma said to Grandpa Wang, "They knock your chicken out, then you go and reward them?"

But Grandpa replied, "It's not for stoning the chicken that I'm rewarding them but for being good children."

The eyes of Fang-fang and Yuan-yuan met, both broke into laughs of happiness.

Making Snowmen

THE wind died down and the snow stopped flying. The red rays of the sun began to peep out from behind the clouds in the eastern sky.

Just then, the sound of a whistle came from the road that ran through the village.

Yu-ling hurriedly changed into a pair of old padded shoes and tied a string round her trouser legs at the ankles, putting one foot and then the other on a low stool to do it. Then she wrapped a shawl round her head and pulled on a pair of mittens. Yu-ling was only eleven. But when she dressed like this she looked like a grown-up commune member.

Yu-ling was getting ready to help her father and mother carry snow to the fields.

Little Tsai, Yu-ling's younger brother, was only in the first grade in school. There was a lot he didn't understand yet. Since he wasn't going to work himself, he tugged at his sister's hand to

make her stay behind and play with him. Dancing around her, he pouted and mumbled: "If you don't make a snowman with me I won't play with you, not ever."

Yu-ling got a bit worried. When the winter holidays began, she and her classmates had made a plan for spending them. They had agreed that, after finishing the homework set by their teacher, they would help with the work of the production team. But in the winter season there weren't many farm jobs to do, and some of the things that needed doing were too much for children to manage. Yu-ling was wondering how they could fulfil their plan. Now that a chance had come to help the commune members carry snow, she didn't want anything to spoil it.

"Listen, little brother," she coaxed. "You wait at home and when I get back from work I'll make a big snowman with you. Won't that be wonderful?"

"No, no! The snow'll melt before you come back," Little Tsai protested, shaking his head.

"This job of carrying snow is really important," Yu-ling explained. "Didn't you hear what Papa said about it? There wasn't much rain in our village last autumn. Now we're carrying snow from the hillside to the wheat fields to cover them with a white blanket. When it melts it will

be just like giving the winter wheat a slow watering. Next spring the wheat will grow strong and we'll have plenty of delicious buns to eat. Think how nice that'll be!"

"No, no," Little Tsai roared. "I want to make a snowman."

Yu-ling was all in a sweat.

Little Tsai was all tears.

The children's parents appeared, with baskets and shoulder-poles, ready to go to the fields.

"Yu-ling, you needn't go," said Father.

"You'd better look after your brother," said Mother.

Hearing this, Little Tsai smiled. But Yu-ling frowned.

People had gathered on the village road, laughing and talking, preparing to set out for the northern slope.

Soon some children stuck their heads in the door of Yu-ling's house.

"Yu-ling, can you take us out to play?" they asked her.

"We're going to make a snowman, aren't we?"

"Yes, yes," Little Tsai hastened to reply for his sister.

Yu-ling hardly knew what to say. Her big, dark eyes were on the glistening white snow in the courtyard. She was a girl who liked to think

things through and got many good ideas. Now, as she looked at the snow, one flashed into her mind.

"Fine, let's make a snowman," she cried out to her playmates at the door. "Each of you find at least two friends to join in. The more the better."

Little Tsai jumped up joyfully! "I'll call some more, I'll call five."

The village road soon rang with the children's shrill voices as they called together their friends. They appeared in a jiffy, dressed in many colours, warm in cotton-padded caps with ear-flaps and scarves and each carrying shovels or baskets. There were at least twenty-five of them.

Yu-ling said, "Let's break up into threes. Each group of three can make one snowman. Do you agree?"

"Let each group make three snowmen, and we'll see which is the biggest," said a chubby boy.

"I'll make eight all by myself," said Little Tsai.

"We'll set two snowmen in front of every house, like sentries," Chen-tzu suggested.

The others thought this was fine and clapped their hands.

Yu-ling said, "I agree to make a lot of snowmen too. But the snow on the road is so trampled and dirty, and they won't look good. Besides, the road is narrow. There won't be room for all of us!"

"Where, then?" the children asked.

“The team’s vegetable garden’s a better place. The snow is clean and white, and it’s big enough. . .” said Yu-ling.

The chubby boy liked this idea so much he didn’t even let her finish speaking. “It’s as big as a playground,” he chimed in. “We’ll make our snowmen doing exercises.”

“Let’s have the snowmen in a ring, doing the Unity Dance,” said Chen-tzu.

The youngsters marched off to the vegetable garden. At their head was Little Tsai, singing as he walked, quite the little hero.

The garden was flat and covered with thick snow. Not a footprint or a speck of dirt on it. White as newly milled flour. Light as newly fluffed cotton. And so smooth one would think it had been gone over with a roller.

It made Yu-ling happy to see this. And in her mind she pictured how it would look in the spring, greener than any other place, vegetables growing up crop after crop. Then she thought of how it would be in the summer, too, with countless bright red tomatoes, and of how vivid they would look at picking time, heaped up under the sun. And she thought of the autumn, when the big cabbages, half as tall as a man, would be loaded on the team’s trucks and carts to go to town. But now it was still winter. . . ;

The children had scattered and started building their snowmen.

"Wait a minute!" Yu-ling called. "We'd better not use the snow in the garden. Let's get the snow from the path and the ditches alongside and carry it over. There's plenty there!"

Shouting their approval the children flew to the path and the ditches like a flock of birds. The slumbering garden came alive with the swish of snow being shovelled, and the shouts and merry laughter of the children.

The snowmen went up one by one. Little Chubby's was the biggest of all. Little Tsai helped him make two large eyes for it out of donkey droppings, and stuck rice straw in its chin for a great beard which blew in the breeze. No one who saw it could help laughing.

Chen-tzu made a woman commune member of snow. He did a splendid job, giving her a round face and bobbed hair, and pressing a corn stalk into her hand. Little Tsai moulded a plump baby and put it on her back.

The clouds dispersed and floated away, clearing the sky for the sun to shed its dazzling rays on the snow. This made the garden twice as beautiful as before. The children joined hands and danced round the many snowmen they had made. How happy they were!



Suddenly Little Tsai glimpsed Grandpa Wang approaching from the village. Grandpa Wang minded the vegetable garden and the sight of him gave Little Tsai a scare because the old man was ever so strict. At ordinary times he wouldn't even let the children in to play, and anyone who slipped in got a great bawling out.

"Run! Grandpa Wang's coming!" Little Tsai shouted over his shoulder.

But before the children could scatter, Grandpa Wang was already there, saying, "Don't run off! I have something to tell you!"

Grandpa Wang went into the garden and had a look at the snowmen. He gave a happy laugh. "Thank you, children," he said. "This time you deserve a pat on the back."

The children looked at each other, puzzled.

"You've piled all that snow onto our vegetable garden. It'll keep down insects and protect the soil. You've done a good job for our production team," said Grandpa Wang.

Little Tsai said, pulling at Yu-ling's hand: "Sister, you. . . ."

Yu-ling said nothing. She just smiled.

Grandpa patted Little Tsai on the head and said, "A good child should study hard, play hard and work hard."

Hearing his words, the children understood everything. Their joyful laughter was so loud the snow tumbled down from the trees.

Children's Library

YUN-YUN had a quarrel with Yu-ting.

They had been good friends at school, always walking to school and back together. And when they joined in labour in the production team, they had worked side by side like sisters.

When Yun-yun was asked why they had quarrelled, her round face turned red and she answered with a pout, "Yu-ting's stingy, that's all. She had a few books. But if you wanted to borrow them it was as if you'd bitten a piece out of her flesh. I won't borrow from her any more. I'll write to Father to buy me lots of books!"

In fact, the new books from Yun-yun's father arrived that same day, and she went in the morning to Pangchun Post Office for the parcel. Though the production team had a holiday and a very lively fair was being held in the town, Yun-yun didn't want to stay and have fun there. As soon as she got the books, she went home.

She was delighted with the interesting new books her father had sent. They were much better than Yu-ting's! Now Yun-yun could read books to her heart's content. She'd read them any way she liked and for as long as she wanted. Her friends would be in on it too, of course. "Anyhow, I'm not stingy like Yu-ting," she said to herself.

What happened between Yun-yun and Yu-ting was like this: One day Yun-yun went to see her granny in town. She took a book she'd borrowed from Yu-ting with her and forgot to bring it back. When Yu-ting heard, she was very displeased.

"Yun-yun, go and get the book. You mustn't leave it around."

"When Mother goes to town, she'll pick it up. All right?"

"It may get lost if you leave it there so long. Then what?"

"I'll pay for it."

"Just the same, it'd be a pity to lose it; a lot of the kids haven't read it yet."

Yun-yun was angry. After lunch, she walked back to Granny's in the blazing heat to fetch the book. Opening Yu-ting's door, she flung it on her bed. Yu-ting picked up the book and looked it over carefully. Then she complained that Yun-yun had got it all dirty and wrinkled. Yun-yun

flushed bright red and walked away. From that time on the two girls were on bad terms.

Now, new books in her bag, Yun-yun was going around to show them off. In front of the village was the bean-noodle mill where her grandpa worked. When Yun-yun went by, he was just cutting up a watermelon, and he asked her to stop and have some.

The watermelon looked delicious, so she took a slice. But she found it difficult to eat with one hand, and she was afraid to use both for fear of soiling the books. Where could she put them? On the ground? They'd get dirty. And the little table Grandpa had cut the melon on was wet with juice. So Yun-yun said, "Grandpa, will you hold these books for me?"

Grandpa took the books and carefully leafed through one of them.

"Grandpa, go easy there. Don't tear it!" Yun-yun said hurriedly.

Grandpa closed the book and said smiling: "You're right. They're beautiful books, worth making an effort to keep clean."

Yun-yun answered, pleased: "Of course. They are fine books."

"Are they Yu-ting's?" Grandpa asked.

"Who says they're hers?" Yun-yun pursed her lips.

"They're so clean," Grandpa replied good-naturedly. "Yu-ting knows how to take good care of things, whether they're clothes or books, her own or other people's."

Yun-yun was annoyed and almost called Yu-ting "stingy" then and there. Taking her books, she quickly ran to the village.

Yun-yun's little friends — Chin-chu, Huai-chen, Hsiao-wang and his little brother — were gathered under a big locust tree, waiting for her to come back. Yu-ting was there, too.

Yun-yun was glad, because she could hand out the books to her friends in front of Yu-ting. She didn't need to borrow any more from that girl!

Thinking of this, she raised her bag high for all to see and shouted, "Look! What a lot of new books!"

Her friends crowded around. Their faces lit up at the sight of the attractive covers.

Yun-yun laid the books on the grass and wiped the sweat from her face. "Choose which ones you like. You can even take several at a time," she said generously.

Chin-chu took *Tung Tsun-jui* and another picture story book. Huai-chen took *The Story of Liu Hu-lan*. Hsiao-wang and his little brother chose two each.

Yun-yun felt very happy when she saw the other children merrily picking out books. It was as if they had found a treasure. When she saw that Yu-ting chose only one, she said, "Take more; all you like!"

But Yu-ting answered, "I'll just have one. When I've finished it, I can get another."

Yu-ting was a year older than Yun-yun. Her father was the store-house keeper of the production team. Her mother was in charge of the team's side-line occupations. Yu-ting was a girl who didn't get excited easily. Like her parents, she was steady and orderly in all she did.

The sun was shining down, without a breath of wind. But under the big tree it was cool and quiet. Some of the children stretched out on the grass to read. Others sat along on the ridge. All were absorbed in new books. Yun-yun had lent so many of them to her friends that only one slim book, *New Children's Songs*, was left for herself.

At noon, the children's mothers called to them from the doorways to come to eat lunch. The children hurriedly picked up their things. Just then Yun-yun got a glimpse of Chin-chu rolling up the book he was reading and stuffing it in his pocket. And she saw Huai-chen throwing her book on the ground while she untethered her lamb,

then closing it and, what was worse, using it as a fan as she set off down the road.

Back home at lunch, Yun-yun's elder sister asked her: "Where are the new books?"

"You don't know how to take care of things," her elder brother scolded.

Any other time, Yun-yun would have paid no attention. But today, as she sat and ate, she gazed at the table, silent. She seemed to see before her eyes the crumpled book *Tung Tsun-ju* which Chin-chu had shoved in his pocket, and Huai-chen fanning herself with *Liu Hu-lan*. She didn't eat much, but fidgeted about. Then she sat down on a little stool and opened *New Children's Songs*.

When her little nephew saw the vivid cover of the book, he toddled over and grabbed for it with both his hands. Yun-yun gave a start and ran indoors. Suddenly an idea came to her. Chin-chu's little brother was even naughtier than her nephew. Surely, if he saw the *Tung Tsun-ju* he'd want it. And if he got hold of the book, that would be the end of it. Huai-chen's little sister liked to tear books too. She had ripped up Huai-chen's arithmetic text-book last year.

The more Yun-yun thought about these things, the more she felt like she was sitting on hot bricks. Putting *New Children's Songs* away in a little box, she hurried over to Chin-chu's.

Chin-chu was still at lunch when Yun-yun came into the courtyard. Plucking up her courage, she asked him in a low voice, "Chin-chu, let me read *Tung Tsun-jui* now."

Still working away with his chopsticks, Chin-chu said: "But I haven't finished it."

Yun-yun said: "Just let me have a look? I'll give it back in a minute."

Putting down his bowl, Chin-chu went to his room for the book. But it was not on the bed, the cupboard or the table. At last he found his little brother playing with it in the back yard. Chin-chu asked him to hand it over. But the little boy just wouldn't. Chin-chu had to chase him all over the place before he got it back.

Yun-yun scowled, and her face turned bright red. She quickly walked away with the book. Then she went to Huai-chen's. She found her intently reading *The Story of Liu Hu-lan* at her back door.

Yun-yun hurried up and demanded: "Give me the book!" She snatched it out of Huai-chen's hands and went off.

Huai-chen ran after her to the gate, saying unhappily: "But I was just in the middle of it. Why should you grab it away? You're really stingy!"

Hearing these words, Yun-yun stopped in her tracks as though she'd been hit on the head. "Am I stingy too?" she muttered. The thought made her so sad. She couldn't move a step, as if two big stones had suddenly rolled on top of her feet. She wanted to cry.

Just then she heard someone calling from the road: "Yun-yun, have you had lunch?"

She looked up and saw Yu-ting with a book in her hands. It was covered neatly in a jacket made from a newspaper. On the jacket, written neatly in red was the title *Stories of Young Heroes*. It was the book Yu-ting had borrowed from her.

Yu-ting said: "Yun-yun, I've something to say to you."

Yun-yun glanced at her. "Well, say it then."

"You're very straightforward and willing to help others. . . ."

"No, I'm stingy. . ." Yun-yun stammered back.

"Sometimes you are. But sometimes you're too open-handed. That's no good either."

This time Yun-yun didn't flare up. She hung her head and kicked at the pebbles on the ground.

Taking Yun-yun's hand, Yu-ting said: "Come home with me. I want you to see something."



The two girls went to Yu-ting's house. Leading Yun-yun into the living room, Yu-ting showed her a packing box covered in front with an old cloth curtain. When Yu-ting lifted the curtain, Yun-yun stared in surprise.

Inside were three shelves as in a book-case. On the first was a neat row of books. Each book had a paper cover with its name.

Yu-ting showed Yun-yun a small note-book, saying, "I have the names of all my books here. Cover your books and write their names in too. Put them on the second shelf. If anyone else wants to put books in our little library, they can, too. Then we'll have a lot to read. We'll make a rule. Anyone who borrows books must take good care of them, and not let them be ruined. Then they'll last a long time. Another thing. We'll elect two librarians and put the books in their homes. Whoever wants to borrow can go there. . . ."

Yun-yun listened in silence but she felt very warm inside. Finally she took Yu-ting's hand and said: "All right, I agree. Let's call our friends together to talk it over."

Several days later, the little library was set up. Yun-yun and Yu-ting were chosen as librarians.

The Call of the Fledgling

BIRDS sang and twittered in the trees, while a boy laughed under their shade.

Why were the birds singing so merrily? Because they had feathered out and were going to fly in the sky.

Why was the boy laughing so happily? Because school was out for the busy farming season and he was going to work in the fields.

People on their way to the fields hailed him as they passed: "Ta-mang, what are you hanging around for?"

"I'm waiting for Grandpa."

"What's your work today?"

"I'm going to the hillside with Grandpa to look after the wheat."

Ta-mang was holding a long bamboo pole in one hand and a small water-flask in the other. His face was ruddy and plump and he thrust out his sturdy little chest. Now he looked up at the sky, then at the country around and the commune

members passing by, and the corners of his mouth kept turning up in a broad smile.

This was Ta-mang's third day of farm work.

The first day, he had been with Father grazing the herds along the Golden Cock River.

The animals were roaming on the river flat eating the tender green grass. There were yellow plough-oxen, grey donkeys, two brown ponies and three big black mules.

Father said to Ta-mang, "In 1953, when our farm co-op was starting up, our team owned three donkeys and two oxen and that was all. Now after only a few years, we have a whole herd of mules and horses. Things could never have gone ahead so fast without the people's commune."

And Father told Ta-mang, "A commune member should love the commune, and be of one heart and one mind with his team."

The second day, Ta-mang had worked with his big brother replanting beans northwest of the village.

The broad fields there were mirror-smooth and green with sorghum, maize, peanuts and sesame, growing thick and lush.

"This place used to be salty and alkaline, all weeds and no crops," his brother told Ta-mang. "The commune has a lot of people with lots of go, so we dug a large reservoir and ran water from it

to wash out the alkali. In two years the soil became fat and fertile. If we hadn't organized the commune we couldn't ever have dreamed of such a thing. Wait a few more years and we'll be growing rice here!"

Brother also told Ta-mang, "A commune member should love farm work, and never slacken or be scared by hardships while working for the team."

Ta-mang was a clever boy. He took what his father and brother had told him to heart. He thought over and over again of their words and was thrilled at the idea of learning to drive a tractor and grow rice. He was determined to grow into a good commune member who loved collective work. Both his father and brother had said he was smart; only Grandpa didn't think too much of him. Today, he was all set to show Grandpa what he could do!

Grandpa came with a long carrying pole across one shoulder and a gleaming sickle in his hand. He was a big man with a long beard and white eyebrows. Though over seventy, he didn't look that old, had a straight back and was full of pep.

"Have you brought the water-flask?" he asked Ta-mang.

"Yes, it's full right up to the top," Ta-mang replied.

“That’s good. We won’t be back until dusk. We’ll need a bit of water with our lunch.”

It was June and the hill slope was beautiful with snow-white blossoms, emerald-green millet and big-eared wheat. The valley was a joy to see with flowers of every colour and kind.

Down in the gully was a wheat field, golden-ripe with huge heavy ears.

Grandpa squatted under a small date tree on the edge of the field. “You stay here and keep an eye on the wheat,” he told Ta-mang, sucking at his pipe. “When the sun rises, the tom-tits will be flying over to eat the ears.”

Ta-mang nodded. The old man picked up his carrying pole as if about to leave. Ta-mang asked, “Where are you going, Grandpa?”

“Our team’s old bullock is sick. It won’t eat hay. I’m going to cut him some tender grass.”

“You go ahead. I’ll keep watch here,” Ta-mang said. “The tom-tits won’t dare come. If they do, I’ll beat them off with this bamboo pole.”

Grandpa nodded, his eyes narrowing as he smiled. But he wasn’t in any hurry to go. Refilling his pipe, he looked for a moment at the field. Suddenly, he asked Ta-mang, “Do you know what this wheat will be used for when it’s reaped?”

"For seed," Ta-mang replied. "I've known for a long time that we'll sow all our hillside fields with this kind of wheat next year."

"Do you know what variety it is?" Grandfather asked.

Ta-mang looked at him with a blank expression.

"So you can't say?" laughed Grandpa.

"I'll know if you tell me."

Blowing out a puff of white smoke, Grandpa started to tell Ta-mang the story of that wheat field.

"Three years ago, the team's young technician went off to serve in the People's Liberation Army. But while there he still often thought of our team. Once when his unit was in the Northwest he found a variety of highland wheat that stands up to a dry climate. So he got a few ears from the commune there and mailed them back. We sowed them that autumn. The next year we reaped maybe a fistful. Then we sowed that again, and got three litres, which we planted on this hillside plot. This year, we'll reap scores of litres. After the autumn harvest we'll sow all our hillside fields with this strain. Next year, the commune members will earn much more. And our team'll have more surplus grain to sell to the state."

Ta-mang listened with rapt attention, his bright eyes fixed on Grandpa's wrinkled face.

Having finished his story, Grandpa stood up and looked towards the cliff on top of Taohsing Mountain. "The tom-tits are a pest," he said. "They're death to wheat. We'll be starting the harvest in three or four days. So we mustn't let them ruin a single ear."

He glanced at Ta-mang as if to say: "I'll test you to see whether you think only of playing and will forget our team's wheat." Then, shouldering his carrying pole, and sickle in hand, he walked off towards the north path. When he got to the ridge, he paused and glanced back, as if worried.

Ta-mang was silent, but thought, "I must keep good watch and not let those tom-tits steal even one grain!" Then he put the water-flask on the gnarled roots of the date tree, and took up his position on the edge of the field, pole in hand like a small sentry.

The sun was rising, shedding a myriad golden rays on the valley, the wheat field, the grove in front of the hill, the village and the crystal-clear river which wound sparkling through the valley like a silver ribbon.

"Chi-chi, cha-cha! Chi-chi, cha-cha!"

Like a gust of wind, a swarm of twittering tom-tits skimmed suddenly over Ta-mang's head and lighted on the west side of the field.

Ta-mang charged over there, shouting and whirling his pole.

The tom-tits flew off, only to alight on the east side. Ta-mang hurried that way, but the birds just flew to the west side.

Maddening! Ta-mang ran back and forth till he was tired out and gasping for breath, with beads of sweat rolling down his forehead. Even then he would not stop, but just wiped off the sweat and ran on. The wheat was the production team's to be used for seed. That People's Liberation Army uncle had mailed the seeds back from far away, and the old team leader had sowed them and reaped some more. Last autumn, the commune members had ploughed the land, manured it and sowed the seed. And in the spring they had hoed it, added more manure, and sprayed insecticides three times, to knock out the insects that came when the crops began to ear. Now the harvesting was approaching and it hadn't come easy! The team leader had given Ta-mang the job of watching for tom-tits, a real honour. If he fell down on the job and let them damage the crop, it would be a pity and a shame!

The more Ta-mang thought of this, the more strength he felt. He forgot how hot and tired he



was. He ran and ran, now east, now west, his jacket flapping in the breeze. He was like a little eagle chasing those tom-tits.

Suddenly Ta-mang hit on an idea.

He ran to the east side of the field, stuck his straw hat on one end of the pole, tied his Little Red Guard scarf round it and planted it in the ground. The hat and the scarf, fluttering in the breeze, scared the tom-tits over to the west side.

Then Ta-mang ran to the west, making the birds rise again. But now they did not dare alight on either side. Ta-mang clapped his hands in triumph. Then he looked up. There was Grandpa on the ridge, holding his sickle in one hand and shading his eyes with the other against the sun's glare. He gazed in Ta-mang's direction for a moment, then disappeared on the other side of the ridge.

Ta-mang thought: "Grandpa must be very pleased and will call me a smart boy."

How well everything would have gone if Ta-mang were a little more careful.

Unfortunately, however, he became too self-satisfied. He started jumping about and clapping his hands, yelling, "The tom-tits are through! They can't do a thing now! They won't eat our wheat any more!" In his excitement, he tripped on the flask and it fell over with a plop.

There it lay on the ground, the water flowing from it.

Ta-mang hastily snatched it up and gave it a shake. Luckily, there was still some water left.

The sun had climbed higher, shedding a scorching heat. The grass turned yellow, the stones burned and Ta-mang's head tingled and sweat poured from his forehead.

Feeling so thirsty he couldn't bear it, he ran to the date tree, picked up the flask, gave it another shake. There was so little water! It should be kept for Grandpa. Ta-mang licked his lips, then put the flask down!

When he got back to the edge of the field, he kept his eyes on the wheat and tried not to think of the flask. But the more he tried to forget it, the more thirsty he got.

Why not sing a song? That would put the flask out of his mind. So he sang:

We are little commune members,

We can shoulder heavy loads,

Loving the commune like our home and,

Keeping all our thinking sound,

We're keen on work, not scared of hardship.

But who would have expected that the more he sang, the thirstier he became, till he felt as if his mouth was stuffed with sawdust, and he could hardly move his tongue.

Once more Ta-mang ran to the date tree, picked up the flask and shook it. What a beautiful tinkle! He never knew before that water could be so tempting.

The thirst was hard to bear. What should he do?

Ta-mang looked down at the Golden Cock River below. What splendid water! When Ta-mang had drunk from this river one day, his brother had made a hemp-leaf cup to scoop the water up. The water was cool and sweet. Ta-mang licked his lips at the thought.

That's it! I'll dash to the riverside and drink my fill.

Ta-mang ran and ran until suddenly he heard a chirruping behind him. He halted and looked back. The tom-tits had seized the chance to fly to the west side of the wheat field again.

Ta-mang doubled back, shouting and swinging his arms. Again, the birds flew off.

Ta-mang turned round and again headed for the foot of the hill where the rippling river was winking at him. He seemed to be tasting that water, its coolness and its sweetness. He ran as fast as his legs could carry him, towards the river, which seemed to be welcoming him with open arms. Then, suddenly, as if someone had pulled him up, Ta-mang stopped and glanced back at the field. It

too seemed to be beckoning to him—the ears of wheat looking sad and whispering among themselves. When he turned and started back the wheat seemed to be smiling.

The tom-tits had just returned, only to be shooed away once more by Ta-mang.

Ta-mang licked his parched lips and kicked at the stones underfoot, wondering what to do next.

Got it! Just make a really sharp dash to the river bank for a quick drink and get back quick. No need to make a hemp-leaf cup, no time for that. Dip up a mouthful in both hands, that's enough. Even if the tom-tits come they can eat only a few ears, and who'll miss that in such a big field!

But . . . came another thought which made Ta-mang shake his head. He'd been given the job of watching that wheat. Could he let those pesky tom-tits wreck any ears just for one drink of water. Of course not!

Ta-mang felt his face burn. The waving wheat ears seemed to be looking at him like so many eyes, the PLA uncle's eyes, their old team leader's eyes, his father, brother and grandfather's eyes. They were all looking at him as if saying: "Ta-mang, let's see if you're really an honest little commune member, let's see if you truly love the commune."

Ta-mang was an honest boy, an honest little commune member. As such, he knew, he must love

the commune not only when people were looking but also when they weren't.

Though his throat burned with thirst, he gritted his teeth and stuck to his post.

The sun was so hot that the grass began to droop and the rocks gave off heat.

Just then Ta-mang's grandfather appeared on the ridge. From his shoulder-pole hung two loads of tender grass swinging like a pair of birds' wings as he walked.

"Are you hungry, Ta-mang?" he shouted while still some distance away.

Ta-mang stared, but couldn't utter a word.

Grandpa put his load down under the date tree, wiped the sweat off his face and looked at the field. When he saw the bamboo pole with the straw hat and red scarf, he smiled. "You've certainly got a good idea there," he said to Ta-mang. "Not bad at all." Then he took a lump of bun from his bag and broke it in half. "Let's have a bite," he said.

Ta-mang looked at the bun his grandpa offered him and shook his head.

Grandfather took a few bites of his half, then picked up the water-flask and shook it. "Only this much left?" he asked, gulping down a mouthful. Then he urged Ta-mang, "Come on, you drink some." Ta-mang shook his head decisively.

"You don't want any more?" asked Grandpa.

Ta-mang shook his head again.

“Then have some bun.”

Ta-mang took the piece of bread and bit into it. It was like biting into dry sand, and he just couldn't swallow it. It was only now that Grandpa found a spot of damp on the ground and asked in surprise, “What! You didn't drink the water? Did you spill it?”

Ta-mang couldn't stand it any more. The tears came rolling down his face. Grandpa was silent with surprise for a while. Then he asked Ta-mang, “Did you go to the river bank for a drink?”

Ta-mang shook his head. “How could I go and let those pests eat the grain?”

Grandfather nodded and began to smile. He understood it all. Drawing Ta-mang to his side he handed him the flask: “Here, drink.”

Ta-mang rubbed his eyes dry and shook his head.

“Grandpa wants you to. When you've finished, you keep watch here while I refill the flask at the riverside, and then we'll have lunch.”

Ta-mang looked at Grandpa, who was gazing at him encouragingly through kind, narrowed eyes. He took the flask and drank a mouthful. It tasted really sweet!



Patting Ta-mang's head, Grandfather said, "Go ahead and drink. It's Grandpa's prize for you. You've done right, my boy."

Then he started towards the river, flask in hand.

Ta-mang glanced at Grandpa's retreating figure, then back at the rippling wheat field, beaming with happiness.