



Mao Tun

SPRING SILKWORMS
AND
OTHER STORIES

by
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Chiang Kai-shek's reign of terror. Mao Tun, as an active participant in the struggle, knew every level and corner of Chinese society. Here, in this cross-section of his best short stories, we find a remarkable introduction to the awakening of the Chinese people.

SPRING SILK WORMS

OLD Tung Pao sat on a rock beside the road that skirted the canal, his long-stemmed pipe lying on the ground next to him. Though it was only a few days after "Clear and Bright Festival" the April sun was already very strong. It scorched Old Tung Pao's spine like a basin of fire. Straining down the road, the men towing the fast junk wore only thin tunics, open in front. They were bent far forward, pulling, pulling, pulling, great beads of sweat dripping from their brows.

The sight of others toiling strenuously made Old Tung Pao feel even warmer; he began to itch. He was still wearing the tattered padded jacket in which he had passed the winter. His unlined jacket had not yet been redeemed from the pawn shop. Who would have believed it could get so hot right after "Clear and Bright"?

Even the weather's not what it used to be, Old Tung Pao said to himself, and spat emphatically.

Before him, the water of the canal was green and shiny. Occasional passing boats broke the mirror-smooth surface into ripples and eddies, turning the reflection of the earthen bank and the long line of mulberry trees flanking it into a dancing grey blur. But not for long! Gradually the trees reappeared, twisting and weaving drunkenly. Another few minutes, and they were again standing still, reflected as clearly as before. On the gnarled fists of the mulberry branches, little fingers of tender green buds were already bursting forth. Crowded close together, the trees along the canal seemed to march endlessly into the distance. The unplanted

fields as yet were only cracked clods of dry earth; the mulberry trees reigned supreme here this time of the year! Behind Old Tung Pao's back was another great stretch of mulberry trees, squat, silent. The little buds seemed to be growing bigger every second in the hot sunlight.

Not far from where Old Tung Pao was sitting, a grey two-storey building crouched beside the road. That was the silk flature, where the delicate fibres were removed from the cocoons. Two weeks ago it was occupied by troops; a few short trenches still scarred the fields around it. Everyone had said that the Japanese soldiers were attacking in this direction. The rich people in the market town had all run away. Now the troops were gone and the silk flature stood empty and locked as before. There would be no noise and excitement in it again until cocoon selling time.

Old Tung Pao had heard Young Master Chen—son of the Master Chen who lived in town—say that Shanghai was seething with unrest, that all the silk weaving factories had closed their doors, that the silk flatures here probably wouldn't open either. But he couldn't believe it. He had been through many periods of turmoil and strife in his sixty years, yet he had never seen a time when the shiny green mulberry leaves had been allowed to wither on the branches and become fodder for the sheep. Of course if the silkworm eggs shouldn't ripen, that would be different. Such matters were all in the hands of the Old Lord of the Sky. Who could foretell His will?

"Only just after Clear and Bright and so hot already!" marvelled Old Tung Pao, gazing at the small green mulberry leaves. He was happy as well as surprised. He could remember only one year when it was too hot for padded clothes at Clear and Bright. He was in his twenties then, and the silkworm eggs had hatched

"two hundred per cent"! That was the year he got married. His family was flourishing in those days. His father was like an experienced plough ox—there was nothing he didn't understand, nothing he wasn't willing to try. Even his old grandfather—the one who had first started the family on the road to prosperity—seemed to be growing more hearty with age, in spite of the hard time he was said to have had during the years he was a prisoner of the "Long Hairs."*

Old Master Chen was still alive then. His son, the present Master Chen, hadn't begun smoking opium yet, and the "House of Chen" hadn't become the bad lot it was today. Moreover, even though the House of Chen was of the rich gentry and his own family only ordinary tillers of the land, Old Tung Pao had felt that the destinies of the two families were linked together. Years ago, "Long Hairs" campaigning through the countryside had captured Tung Pao's grandfather and Old Master Chen and kept them working as prisoners for nearly seven years in the same camp. They had escaped together, taking a lot of the "Long Hairs'" gold with them—people still talk about it to this day. What's more, at the same time Old Master Chen's silk trade began to prosper, the cocoon raising of Tung Pao's family grew

* In the middle of the 19th century, China's oppressed peasants rose against their feudal Manchu rulers in one of the longest (1851-1864) and bitterest revolutions in history. Known as the Taiping Revolution, it was defeated only with the assistance of the interventionist forces of England, France and the United States of America.

The Manchus hated and feared the "Long Hairs," as they slanderously called the Taiping Army men, and fabricated all sorts of lies about them in a vain attempt to discredit them with the people.

Old Tung Pao, although steadily deteriorating economically, is typical of the rich peasants. Like others of his class, he felt and thought the same as the feudal landlord rulers.

successful too. Within ten years grandfather had earned enough to buy three acres of rice paddy, two acres of mulberry grove, and build a modest house. Tung Pao's family was the envy of the people of East Village, just as the House of Chen ranked among the first families in the market town.

But afterwards, both families had declined. Today, Old Tung Pao had no land of his own, in fact he was over three hundred silver dollars in debt. The House of Chen was finished too. People said the spirit of the dead "Long Hair" had sued the Chens in the underworld, and because the King of Hell had decreed that the Chens repay the fortune they had amassed on the stolen gold, the family had gone down financially very quickly. Old Tung Pao was rather inclined to believe this. If it hadn't been for the influence of devils, why would a decent fellow like Master Chen have taken to smoking opium?

What Old Tung Pao could never understand was why the fall of the House of Chen should affect his own family? They certainly hadn't kept any of the "Long Hairs'" gold. True, his father had related that when grandfather was escaping from the "Long Hairs'" camp he had run into a young "Long Hair" on patrol and had to kill him. What else could he have done? It was "fate"! Still from Tung Pao's earliest recollections, his family had prayed and offered sacrifices to appease the soul of the departed young "Long Hair" time and time again. That little wronged spirit should have left the nether world and been reborn long ago by now! Although Old Tung Pao couldn't recall what sort of man his grandfather was, he knew his father had been hard-working and honest—he had seen that with his own eyes. Old Tung Pao himself was a respectable person; both Ah Sze, his elder son, and his daughter-in-law were industrious and frugal. Only his younger son, Ah To, was inclined to be a little flighty. But youngsters were all

like that. There was nothing really bad about the boy. . . .

Old Tung Pao raised his wrinkled face, scorched by years of hot sun to the colour of dark parchment. He gazed bitterly at the canal before him, at the boats on its waters, at the mulberry trees along its banks. All were approximately the same as they had been when he was twenty. But the world had changed. His family now often had to make their meals of pumpkin instead of rice. He was over three hundred silver dollars in debt. . . .

Toot! Toot-foot-toot. . . .

Far up the bend in the canal a boat whistle broke the silence. There was a silk flature over there too. He could see vaguely the neat lines of stones embedded as reinforcement in the canal bank. A small oil-burning river boat came puffing up pompously from beyond the silk flature, tugging three larger craft in its wake. Immediately the peaceful water was agitated with waves rolling toward the banks on both sides of the canal. A peasant, poling a tiny boat, hastened to shore and clutched a clump of reeds growing in the shallows. The waves tossed him and his little craft up and down like a see-saw. The peaceful green countryside was filled with the chugging of the boat engine and the stink of its exhaust.

Hatred burned in Old Tung Pao's eyes. He watched the river boat approach, he watched it sail past and glared after it until it went tooting around another bend and disappeared from sight. He had always abominated the foreign devils' contraptions. He himself had never met a foreign devil, but his father had given him a description of one Old Master Chen had seen—red eyebrows, green eyes and a stiff-legged walk! Old Master Chen had hated the foreign devils too. "The foreign devils have swindled our money away," he used to say. Old Tung Pao was only eight or nine the last time he

saw Old Master Chen. All he remembered about him now were things he had heard from others. But whenever Old Tung Pao thought of that remark—"The foreign devils have swindled our money away"—he could almost picture Old Master Chen, stroking his beard and wagging his head.

How the foreign devils had accomplished this, Old Tung Pao wasn't too clear. He was sure, however, that Old Master Chen was right. Some things he himself had seen quite plainly. From the time foreign goods—cambrie, cloth, oil—appeared in the market town, from the time the foreign river boats increased on the canal, what he produced brought a lower price in the market every day, while what he had to buy became more and more expensive. That was why the property his father left him had shrunk until it finally vanished completely; and now he was in debt. It was not without reason that Old Tung Pao hated the foreign devils!

In the village, his attitude toward foreigners was well-known. Five years before, in 1927, someone had told him: The new Kuomintang government says it wants to "throw out" the foreign devils. Old Tung Pao didn't believe it. He heard those young propaganda speech makers the Kuomintang sent when he went into the market town. Though they cried "Throw out the foreign devils," they were dressed in Western style clothing. His guess was that they were secretly in league with the foreign devils, that they had been purposely sent to delude the countryfolk! Sure enough, the Kuomintang dropped the slogan not long after, and prices and taxes rose steadily. Old Tung Pao was firmly convinced that all this occurred as part of a government conspiracy with the foreign devils.

Last year something had happened that made him almost sick with fury: Only the cocoons spun by the foreign strain silkworms could be sold at a decent price.

Buyers paid ten dollars more per load for them than they did for the local variety. Usually on good terms with his daughter-in-law, Old Tung Pao had quarrelled with her because of this. She had wanted to raise only foreign silkworms, and Old Tung Pao's younger son Ah To had agreed with her. Though the boy didn't say much, in his heart he certainly had also favoured this course. Events had proved they were right, and they wouldn't let Old Tung Pao forget it. This year, he had to compromise. Of the five trays they would raise, only four would be silkworms of the local variety; one tray would contain foreign silkworms.

"The world's going from bad to worse! In another couple of years they'll even be wanting foreign mulberry trees! It's enough to take all the joy out of life!"

Old Tung Pao picked up his long pipe and rapped it angrily against a clod of dry earth. The sun was directly overhead now, foreshortening his shadow till it looked like a piece of charcoal. Still in his padded jacket, he was bathed in heat. He unfastened the jacket and swung its opened edges back and forth a few times to fan himself. Then he stood up and started for home.

Behind the row of mulberry trees were paddy fields. Most of them were as yet only neatly ploughed furrows of upturned earth clods, dried and cracked by the hot sun. Here and there, the early crops were coming up. In one field, the golden blossoms of rape-seed plants emitted a heady fragrance. And that group of houses way over there, that was the village where three generations of Old Tung Pao's family were living. Above the houses, white smoke from many kitchen stoves was curling lazily upwards into the sky.

After crossing through the mulberry grove, Old Tung Pao walked along the raised path between the paddy fields, then turned and looked again at that row of trees bursting with tender green buds. A twelve-year-old boy

came bounding along from the other end of the fields, calling as he ran:

"Grandpa! Ma's waiting for you to come home and eat!"

It was Little Pao, Old Tung Pao's grandson.

"Coming!" the old man responded, still gazing at the mulberries. Only twice in his life had he seen these finger-like buds appear on the branches so soon after Clear and Bright. His family would probably have a fine crop of silkworms this year. Five trays of eggs would hatch out a huge number of silkworms. If only they didn't have another bad market like last year, perhaps they could pay off part of their debt.

Little Pao stood beside his grandfather. The child too looked at the soft green on the gnarled fist branches. Jumping happily, he clapped his hands and chanted:

Green, tender leaves at Clear and Bright,

The girls who tend silkworms,

Clap hands at the sight!

The old man's wrinkled face broke into a smile. He thought it was a good omen for the little boy to respond like this on seeing the first buds of the year. He rubbed his hand affectionately over the child's shaven pate. In Old Tung Pao's heart, numbed wooden by a lifetime of poverty and hardship, suddenly hope began to stir again.

II

THE weather remained warm. The rays of the sun forced open the tender, finger-like, little buds. They had already grown to the size of a small hand. Around Old Tung Pao's village, the mulberry trees seemed to respond especially well. From a distance they gave the appearance of a low grey picket fence on top of which a long swath of green brocade had been spread. Bit by bit,

day by day, hope grew in the hearts of the villagers. The unspoken mobilization order for the silkworm campaign reached everywhere and everyone. Silkworm rearing equipment that had been laid away for a year was again brought out to be scrubbed and mended. Beside the little stream which ran through the village, women and children, with much laughter and calling back and forth, washed the implements.

None of these women or children looked really healthy. Since the coming of spring, they had been eating only half their fill; their clothes were old and torn. As a matter of fact, they weren't much better off than beggars. Yet all were in quite good spirits, sustained by enormous patience and grand illusions. Burdened though they were by daily mounting debts, they had only one thought in their heads—If we get a good crop of silkworms, everything will be all right! . . . They could already visualize how, in a month, the shiny green leaves would be converted into snow-white cocoons, the cocoons exchanged for clinking silver dollars. Although their stomachs were growling with hunger, they couldn't refrain from smiling at this happy prospect.

Old Tung Pao's daughter-in-law was among the women by the stream. With the help of her twelve-year-old son, Little Pao, she had already finished washing the family's large trays of woven bamboo strips. Seated on a stone beside the stream, she wiped her perspiring face with the edge of her tunic. A twenty-year-old girl, working with other women on the opposite side of the stream, hailed her.

"Are you raising foreign silkworms this year too?"

It was Sixth Treasure, sister of young Fu-ching, the neighbour who lived across the stream.

The thick eyebrows of Old Tung Pao's daughter-in-law at once contracted. Her voice sounded as if she had just been waiting for a chance to let off steam.

"Don't ask me; what the old man says, goes!" she shouted. "He's dead set against it, won't let us raise more than one batch of foreign breed! The old fool only has to hear the word 'foreign' to send him up in the air! He'll take dollars made of foreign silver, though; those are the only 'foreign' things he likes!"

The women on the other side of the stream laughed. From the threshing ground behind them a strapping young man approached. He reached the stream and crossed over on the four logs that served as a bridge. Seeing him, his sister-in-law dropped her tirade and called in a high voice:

"Ah To, will you help me carry these trays? They're as heavy as dead dogs when they're wet!"

Without a word, Ah To lifted the six big trays and set them, dripping, on his head. Balancing them in place, he walked off, swinging his hands in a swimming motion. When in a good mood, Ah To refused nobody. If any of the village women asked him to carry something heavy or fish something out of the stream, he was usually quite willing. But today he probably was a little grumpy, and so he walked empty-handed with only six trays on his head. The sight of him, looking as if he were wearing six layers of wide straw hats, his waist twisting at each step in imitation of the ladies of the town, sent the women into peals of laughter. Lotus, wife of Old Tung Pao's nearest neighbour, called with a giggle:

"Hey, Ah To, come back here. Carry a few trays for me too!"

Ah To grinned. "Not unless you call me a sweet name!" He continued walking. An instant later he had reached the porch of his house and set down the trays out of the sun.

"Will 'kid brother' do?" demanded Lotus, laughing boisterously. She had a remarkably clean white com-

plexion, but her face was very flat. When she laughed, all that could be seen was a big open mouth and two tiny slits of eyes. Originally a slavey in a house in town, she had been married off to Old Tung Pao's neighbour—a prematurely aged man who walked around with a sour expression and never said a word all day. That was less than six months ago, but her love affairs and escapades already were the talk of the village.

"Shameless hussy!" came a contemptuous female voice from across the stream.

Lotus's piggy eyes immediately widened. "Who said that?" she demanded angrily. "If you've got the brass to call me names, let's see you try it to my face! Come out into the open!"

"Think you can handle me? I'm talking about a shameless, man-crazy baggage! If the shoe fits, wear it!" retorted Sixth Treasure, for it was she who had spoken. She too was famous in the village, but as a mischievous, lively young woman.

The two began splashing water at each other from opposite banks of the stream. Girls who enjoyed a row took sides and joined the battle, while the children whooped with laughter. Old Tung Pao's daughter-in-law was more decorous. She picked up her remaining trays, called to Little Pao and returned home. Ah To watched from the porch, grinning. He knew why Sixth Treasure and Lotus were quarrelling. It did his heart good to hear that sharp-tongued Sixth Treasure get told off in public.

Old Tung Pao came out of the house with a wooden tray-stand on his shoulder. Some of the legs of the up-rights had been eaten by termites, and he wanted to repair them. At the sight of Ah To standing there laughing at the women, Old Tung Pao's face lengthened. The boy hadn't much sense of propriety, he well knew. What disturbed him particularly was the way Ah To and

Lotus were always talking and laughing together. "That bitch is an evil spirit. Fooling with her will bring ruin on our house," he had often warned his younger son.

"Ah To!" he now barked angrily. "Enjoying the scenery? Your brother's in the back mending equipment. Go and give him a hand!" His inflamed eyes bored into Ah To, never leaving the boy until he disappeared into the house.

Only then did Old Tung Pao start work on the tray-stand. After examining it carefully, he slowly began his repairs. Years ago, Old Tung Pao had worked for a time as a carpenter. But he was old now; his fingers had lost their strength. A few minutes' work and he was breathing hard. He raised his head and looked into the house. Five squares of cloth to which sticky silkworm eggs were adhered, hung from a horizontal bamboo pole.

His daughter-in-law, Ah Sze's wife, was at the other end of the porch, pasting paper on big trays of woven bamboo strips. Last year, to economize a bit, they had bought and used old newspaper. Old Tung Pao still maintained that was why the eggs had hatched poorly—it was unlucky to use paper with writing on it for such a prosaic purpose. Writing meant scholarship, and scholarship had to be respected. This year the whole family had skipped a meal and with the money saved, purchased special "tray pasting paper." Ah Sze's wife pasted the tough, glistening-yellow sheets smooth and flat; on every tray she also affixed three little coloured paper pictures, bought at the same time. One was the "Platter of Plenty"; the other two showed a militant figure on horseback, pennant in hand. He, according to local belief, was the "Guardian of Silkworm Hatching."

"I was only able to buy twenty loads of mulberry leaves with that thirty silver dollars I borrowed on your father's guarantee," Old Tung Pao said to his daughter-in-law. He was still panting from his exertions with the tray-

stand. "Our rice will be finished by the day after tomorrow. What are we going to do?"

Thanks to her father's influence with his boss and his willingness to guarantee repayment of the loan, Old Tung Pao was able to borrow the money at a low rate of interest—only twenty-five per cent a month! Both the principal and interest had to be repaid by the end of the silkworm season.

Ah Sze's wife finished pasting a tray and placed it in the sun. "You've spent it all on leaves," she said angrily.

"We'll have a lot of leaves left over, just like last year!" "Full of lucky words, aren't you?" demanded the old man, sarcastically. "I suppose every year'll be like last year? We can't get more than a dozen or so loads of leaves from our own trees. With five sets of grubs to feed, that won't be nearly enough."

"Oh, of course, you're never wrong!" she replied hotly. "All I know is with rice we can eat, without it we'll go hungry!" His stubborn refusal to raise any foreign silkworms last year had left them with only the unsalable local breed. As a result, she was often contrary with him.

The old man's face turned purple with rage. After this, neither would speak to the other.

But hatching time was drawing closer every day. The little village's two dozen families were thrown into a state of great tension, great determination, great struggle. With it all, they were possessed of a great hope, a hope that could almost make them forget their hungry bellies.

Old Tung Pao's family, borrowing a little here, getting a little credit there, somehow managed to get by. Nor did the other families eat any better; there wasn't one with a spare bag of rice! Although they had harvested a good crop the previous year, landlords, creditors, taxes,

levies, one after another, had cleaned the peasants out long ago. Now all their hopes were pinned on the spring silkworms. The repayment date of every loan they made was set for the "end of the silkworm season."

With high hopes and considerable fear, like soldiers going into a hand-to-hand battle to the death, they prepared for their spring silkworm campaign!

"Grain Rain" day—bringing gentle drizzles—was not far off. Almost imperceptibly, the silkworm eggs of the two dozen village families began to show faint tinges of green. Women, when they met on the public threshing ground, would speak to one another agitatedly in tones that were anxious yet joyful.

"Over at Sixth Treasure's place, they're almost ready to incubate their eggs!"

"Lotus says her family is going to start incubating tomorrow. So soon!"

"Huang 'the Priest' has made a divination. He predicts that this spring mulberry leaves will go to four dollars a load!"

Old Tung Pao's daughter-in-law examined their five sets of eggs. They looked bad. The tiny seed-like eggs were still pitch black, without even a hint of green. Her husband, Ah Sze, took them into the light to peer at them carefully. Even so, he could find hardly any ripening eggs. She was very worried.

"You incubate them anyhow. Maybe this variety is a little slow," her husband forced himself to say consolingly. Her lips pressed tight, she made no reply.

Old Tung Pao's wrinkled face sagged with dejection. Though he said nothing, he thought their prospects were dim.

The next day, Ah Sze's wife again examined the eggs. Ha! Quite a few were turning green, and a very shiny green at that! Immediately, she told her husband, told Old Tung Pao, Ah To . . . she even told her son Little

Pao. Now the incubating process could begin! She held the five pieces of cloth to which the eggs were adhered against her bare bosom. As if cuddling a nursing infant, she sat absolutely quiet, not daring to stir. At night, she took the five sets to bed with her. Her husband was routed out, and had to share Ah To's bed. The tiny silkworm eggs were very scratchy against her flesh. She felt happy and a little frightened, like the first time she was pregnant and the baby moved inside her. Exactly the same sensation!

Uneasy but eager, the whole family waited for the eggs to hatch. Ah To was the only exception. We're sure to hatch a good crop, he said, but anyone who thinks we're going to get rich in this life, is out of his head. Though the old man swore Ah To's big mouth would ruin their luck, the boy stuck to his guns.

A clean dry shed for the growing grubs was all prepared. The second day of incubation, Old Tung Pao smeared a garlic with earth and placed it at the foot of the wall inside the shed. If, in a few days, the garlic put out many sprouts, it meant the eggs would hatch well. He did this every year, but this year he was more reverential than usual, and his hands trembled. Last year's divination had proved all too accurate. He didn't dare to think about that now.

Every family in the village was busy "incubating." For the time being there were few women's footprints on the threshing ground or the banks of the little stream. An unofficial "martial law" had been imposed. Even peasants normally on very good terms stopped visiting one another. For a guest to come and frighten away the spirits of the ripening eggs—that would be no laughing matter! At most, people exchanged a few words in low tones when they met, then quickly separated. This was the "sacred" season!

Old Tung Pao's family was on pins and needles. In the five sets of eggs a few grubs had begun wriggling. It was exactly one day before Grain Rain. Ah Sze's wife had calculated that most of the eggs wouldn't hatch until after that day. Before or after Grain Rain was all right, but for eggs to hatch on the day itself was considered highly unlucky. Incubation was no longer necessary, and the eggs were carefully placed in the special shed. Old Tung Pao stole a glance at his garlic at the foot of the wall. His heart dropped. There were still only the same two small green shoots the garlic had originally! He didn't dare to look any closer. He prayed silently that by noon the day after tomorrow the garlic would have many, many more shoots.

At last hatching day arrived. Ah Sze's wife set a pot of rice on to boil and nervously watched for the time when the steam from it would rise straight up. Old Tung Pao lit the incense and candles he had bought in anticipation of this event. Devoutly, he placed them before the idol of the Kitchen God. His two sons went into the fields to pick wild flowers. Little Pao chopped a lamp-wick into fine pieces and crushed the wild flowers the men brought back. Everything was ready. The sun was entering its zenith; steam from the rice pot puffed straight upwards. Ah Sze's wife immediately leaped to her feet, stuck a "sacred" paper flower and a pair of goose feathers into the knot of hair at the back of her head and went to the shed. Old Tung Pao carried a wooden scale-pole; Ah Sze followed with the chopped lamp-wick and the crushed wild flowers. Daughter-in-law uncovered the cloth pieces to which the grubs were adhered, and sprinkled them with the bits of wick and flowers Ah Sze was holding. Then she took the wooden scale-pole from Old Tung Pao and hung the cloth pieces over it. She next removed the pair of goose feathers from her hair. Moving them lightly across the cloth, she

brushed the grubs, together with the crushed lamp-wick and wild flowers, on to a large tray. One set, two sets . . . the last set contained the foreign breed. The grubs from this cloth were brushed on to a separate tray. Finally, she removed the "sacred" paper flower from her hair and pinned it, with the goose feathers, against the side of the tray.

A solemn ceremony! One that had been handed down through the ages! Like warriors taking an oath before going into battle! Old Tung Pao and family now had ahead of them a month of fierce combat, with no rest day or night, against bad weather, bad luck and anything else that might come along!

The grubs, wriggling in the trays, looked very healthy. They were all the proper black colour. Old Tung Pao and his daughter-in-law were able to relax a little. But when the old man secretly took another look at his garlic, he turned pale! It had grown only four measly shoots! Ah! Would this year be like last year all over again?

III

BUT the "fateful" garlic proved to be not so psychic after all. The silkworms of Old Tung Pao's family grew and thrived! Though it rained continuously during the grubs' First Sleep and Second Sleep, and the weather was a bit colder than at Clear and Bright, the "little darlings" were extremely robust.

The silkworms of the other families in the village were not doing badly either. A tense kind of joy pervaded the countryside. Even the small stream seemed to be gurgling with bright laughter. Lotus's family was the sole exception. They were only raising one set of grubs, but by the Third Sleep their silkworms weighed less than twenty catties. Just before the Big Sleep, people saw

Lotus's husband walk to the stream and dump out his trays. That dour, old-looking man had bad luck written all over him.

Because of this dreadful event, the village women put Lotus's family strictly "off limits." They made wide detours so as not to pass her door. If they saw her or her taciturn husband, no matter how far away, they made haste to go in the opposite direction. They feared that even one look at Lotus or her spouse, the briefest conversation, would contaminate them with the unfortunate couple's bad luck!

Old Tung Pao strictly forbade Ah To to talk to Lotus. "If I catch you gabbing with that baggage again, I'll disown you!" He threatened in a loud, angry voice, standing outside on the porch to make sure Lotus could hear him.

Little Pao was also warned not to play in front of Lotus's door, and not to speak to anyone in her family.

...

The old man harped at Ah To morning, noon and night, but the boy turned a deaf ear to his father's grumbling. In his heart, he laughed at it. Of the whole family, Ah To alone didn't place much stock in taboos and superstitions. He didn't talk with Lotus, however. He was much too busy for that.

By the Big Sleep, their silkworms weighed three hundred cattles. Every member of Old Tung Pao's family, including twelve-year-old Little Pao, worked for two days and two nights without sleeping a wink. The silkworms were unusually sturdy. Only twice in his sixty years had Old Tung Pao ever seen the like. Once was the year he married; once when his first son was born.

The first day after the Big Sleep, the "little darlings" ate seven loads of leaves. They were now a bright green, thick and healthy. Old Tung Pao and his family, on the

contrary, were much thinner, their eyes bloodshot from lack of sleep.

No one could guess how much the "little darlings" would eat before they spun their cocoons. Old Tung Pao discussed the question of buying more leaves with Ah Sze.

"Master Chen won't lend us any more. Shall we try your father-in-law's boss again?"

"We've still got ten loads coming. That's enough for one more day," replied Ah Sze. He could barely hold himself erect. His eyelids weighed a thousand cattles. They kept wanting to close.

"One more day? You're dreaming!" snapped the old man impatiently. "Not counting tomorrow, they still have to eat three more days. We'll need another thirty loads! Thirty loads, I say!"

Loud voices were heard outside on the threshing ground. Ah To had arrived with men delivering five loads of mulberry branches. Everyone went out to strip the leaves. Ah Sze's wife hurried from the shed. Across the stream, Sixth Treasure and her family were raising only a small crop of silkworms; having spare time, she came over to help. Bright stars filled the sky. There was a slight wind. All up and down the village, gay shouts and laughter rang in the night.

"The price of leaves is rising fast!" a coarse voice cried. "This afternoon, they were getting four dollars a load in the market town!"

Old Tung Pao was very upset. At four dollars a load, thirty loads would come to a hundred and twenty dollars. Where could he raise so much money! But then he figured—he was sure to gather over five hundred cattles of cocoons. Even at fifty dollars a hundred, they'd sell for two hundred and fifty dollars. Feeling a bit consoled, he heard a small voice from among the leaf-strippers.

"They say the folks east of here aren't doing so well with their silkworms. There won't be any reason for the price of leaves to go much higher."

Old Tung Pao recognized the speaker as Sixth Treasure, and he relaxed still further.

The girl and Ah To were standing beside a large basket, stripping leaves. In the dim starlight, they worked quite close to each other, partly hidden by the pile of mulberry branches before them. Suddenly, Sixth Treasure felt someone pinch her thigh. She knew well enough who it was, and she suppressed a giggle. But when, a moment later, a hand brushed against her breasts, she jumped; a little shriek escaped her.

"Aiya!"

"What's wrong?" demanded Ah Sze's wife, working on the other side of the basket.

Sixth Treasure's face flamed scarlet. She shot a glance at Ah To, then quickly lowered her head and resumed stripping leaves. "Nothing," she replied. "I think a caterpillar bit me!"

Ah To bit his lips to keep from laughing aloud. He had been half starved the past two weeks and had slept little. But in spite of having lost a lot of weight, he was in high spirits. While he never suffered from any of Old Tung Pao's gloom, neither did he believe that one good crop, whether of silkworms or of rice, would enable them to wipe off their debt and own their own land again. He knew they would never "get out from under" merely by relying on hard work, even if they broke their backs trying. Nevertheless, he worked with a will. He enjoyed work, just as he enjoyed fooling around with Sixth Treasure.

The next morning, Old Tung Pao went into town to borrow money for more leaves. Before leaving home, he had talked the matter over with daughter-in-law. They had decided to mortgage their grove of mulberries that

produced fifteen loads of leaves a year as security for the loan. The grove was the last piece of property the family owned.

By the time the old man ordered another thirty loads, and the first ten were delivered, the sturdy "little darlings" had gone hungry for half an hour. Putting forth their pointed little mouths, they swayed from side to side, searching for food. Daughter-in-law's heart had ached to see them. When the leaves were finally spread in the trays, the silkworm shed at once resounded with a sibilant crunching, so noisy it drowned out conversation. In a very short while, the trays were again empty of leaves. Another thick layer was piled on. Just keeping the silkworms supplied with leaves, Old Tung Pao and his family were so busy they could barely catch their breath. But this was the final crisis. In two more days the "little darlings" would spin their cocoons. People were putting every bit of their remaining strength into this last desperate struggle.

Though he had gone without sleep for three whole days, Ah To didn't appear particularly tired. He agreed to watch the shed alone that night until dawn to permit the others to get some rest. There was a bright moon and the weather was a trifle cold. Ah To crouched beside a small fire he had built in the shed. At about eleven, he gave the silkworms their second feeding, then returned to squat by the fire. He could hear the loud rustle of the "little darlings" crunching through the leaves. His eyes closed. Suddenly, he heard the door squeak, and his eyelids flew open. He peered into the darkness for a moment, then shut his eyes again. His ears were still hissing with the rustle of the leaves. The next thing he knew, his head had struck against his knees. Waking with a start, he heard the door screen bang and thought he saw a moving shadow. Ah To leaped up and rushed outside. In the moonlight, he saw some-

one crossing the threshing ground toward the stream. He caught up in a flash, seized and flung the intruder to the ground. Ah To was sure he had nabbed a thief.

"Ah To, kill me if you want to, but don't give me away!"

The voice made Ah To's hair stand on end. He could see in the moonlight that queer flat white face and those round little piggy eyes fixed upon him. But of menace, the piggy eyes had none. Ah To snorted.

"What were you after?"

"A few of your family's 'little darlings'!"

"What did you do with them?"

"Threw them in the stream!"

Ah To's face darkened. He knew that in this way she was trying to put a curse on the lot. "You're pure poison! We never did anything to hurt you."

"Never did anything? Oh, yes you did! Yes, you did! Our silkworm eggs didn't hatch well, but we didn't harm anybody. You were all so smart! You shunned me like a leper. No matter how far away I was, if you saw me, you turned your heads. You acted as if I wasn't even human!"

She got to her feet, the agonized expression on her face terrible to see. Ah To stared at her. "I'm not going to beat you," he said finally. "Go on your way!"

Without giving her another glance, he trotted back to the shed. He was wide awake now. Lotus had only taken a handful and the remaining "little darlings" were all in good condition. It didn't occur to him either to hate or pity Lotus, but the last thing she had said remained in his mind. It seemed to him there was something eternally wrong in the scheme of human relations; but he couldn't put his finger on what it was exactly, nor did he know why it should be. In a little while, he forgot about this too. The lusty silkworms were eating and eating, yet, as if by some magic, never full!

Nothing more happened that night. Just before the sky began to brighten in the east, Old Tung Pao and his daughter-in-law came to relieve Ah To. They took the trays of "little darlings" and looked at them in the light. The silkworms were turning a whiter colour, their bodies gradually becoming shorter and thicker. They were delighted with the excellent way the silkworms were developing.

But when, at sunrise, Ah Sze's wife went to draw water at the stream, she met Sixth Treasure. The girl's expression was serious.

"I saw that slut leaving your place shortly before midnight," she whispered. "Ah To was right behind her. They stood here and talked for a long time! Your family ought to look after things better than that!"

The colour drained from the face of Ah Sze's wife. Without a word, she carried her water bucket back to the house. First she told her husband about it, then she told Old Tung Pao. It was a fine state of affairs when a baggage like that could sneak into people's silkworm sheds! Old Tung Pao stamped with rage. He immediately summoned Ah To. But the boy denied the whole story; he said Sixth Treasure was dreaming. The old man then went to question Sixth Treasure. She insisted she had seen everything with her own eyes. The old man didn't know what to believe. He returned home and looked at the "little darlings." They were as sturdy as ever, not a sickly one in the lot.

But the joy that Old Tung Pao and his family had been feeling was dampened. They knew Sixth Treasure's words couldn't be entirely without foundation. Their only hope was that Ah To and that hussy had played their little games on the porch rather than in the shed!

Old Tung Pao recalled gloomily that the garlic had only put forth three or four shoots. He thought the future looked dark. Hadn't there been times before

when the silkworms ate great quantities of leaves and seemed to be growing well, yet dried up and died just when they were ready to spin their cocoons? Yes, often! But Old Tung Pao didn't dare let himself think of such a possibility. To entertain a thought like that, even in the most secret recesses of the mind, would only be inviting bad luck!

IV

THE "little darlings" began spinning their cocoons, but Old Tung Pao's family was still in a sweat. Both their money and their energy were completely spent. They still had nothing to show for it; there was no guarantee of their earning any return. Nevertheless, they continued working at top speed. Beneath the racks on which the cocoons were being spun fires had to be kept going to supply warmth. Old Tung Pao and Ah Sze, his elder son, their backs bent, slowly squatted first on this side then on that. Hearing the small rustlings of the spinning silkworms, they wanted to smile, and if the sounds stopped for a moment their hearts stopped too. Yet, worried as they were, they didn't dare to disturb the silkworms by looking inside. When the silkworms squirted fluid in their faces as they peered up from beneath the racks, they were happy in spite of the momentary discomfort. The bigger the shower, the better they liked it.*

Ah To had already peeked several times. Little Pao had caught him at it and demanded to know what was going on. Ah To made an ugly face at the child, but did not reply.

* The emission of the fluid means the silkworm is about to spin its cocoon.

After three days of "spinning," the fires were extinguished. Ah Sze's wife could restrain herself no longer. She stole a look, her heart beating fast. Inside, all was white as snow. The brush that had been put in for the silkworms to spin on was completely covered over with cocoons. Ah Sze's wife had never seen so successful a "flowering"!

The whole family was wreathed in smiles. They were on solid ground at last! The "little darlings" had proved they had a conscience; they hadn't consumed those mulberry leaves, at four dollars a load, in vain. The family could reap its reward for a month of hunger and sleepless nights. The Old Lord of the Sky had eyes!

Throughout the village, there were many similar scenes of rejoicing. The Silkworm Goddess had been beneficent to the tiny village this year. Most of the two dozen families garnered good crops of cocoons from their silkworms. The harvest of Old Tung Pao's family was well above average.

Again women and children crowded the threshing ground and the banks of the little stream. All were much thinner than the previous month, with eyes sunk in their sockets, throats rasping and hoarse. But everyone was excited, happy. As they chattered about the struggle of the past month, visions of piles of bright silver dollars shimmered before their eyes. Cheerful thoughts filled their minds—they would get their summer clothes out of the pawnshop; at Spring Festival perhaps they could eat a fat golden fish. . . .

They talked, too, of the farce enacted by Lotus and Ah To a few nights before. Sixth Treasure announced to everyone she met, "That Lotus has no shame at all. She delivered herself right to his door!" Men who heard her laughed coarsely. Women muttered a prayer and called Lotus bad names. They said Old Tung Pao's

family could consider itself lucky that a curse hadn't fallen on them. The gods were merciful!

Family after family was able to report a good harvest of cocoons. People visited one another to view the shining white gossamer. The father of Old Tung Pao's daughter-in-law came from town with his little son. They brought gifts of sweets and fruits and a salted fish. Little Pao was happy as a puppy frolicking in the snow.

The elderly visitor sat with Old Tung Pao beneath a willow beside the stream. He had the reputation in town of a "man who knew how to enjoy life." From hours of listening to the professional story-tellers in front of the temple, he had learned by heart many of the classic tales of ancient times. He was a great one for idle chatter, and often would say anything that came into his head. Old Tung Pao therefore didn't take him very seriously when he leaned close and queried softly:

"Are you selling your cocoons, or will you spin the silk yourself at home?"

"Selling them, of course," Old Tung Pao replied casually.

The elderly visitor slapped his thigh and sighed, then rose abruptly and pointed at the silk flature rearing up behind the row of mulberries, now quite bald of leaves.

"Tung Pao," he said, "the cocoons are being gathered, but the doors of the silk flatures are shut as tight as ever! They're not buying this year! Ah, all the world is in turmoil! The silk houses are not going to open, I tell you!"

Old Tung Pao couldn't help smiling. He wouldn't believe it. How could he possibly believe it? There were dozens of silk flatures in this part of the country. Surely they couldn't all shut down? What's more, he had heard that they had made a deal with the Japanese; the Chinese soldiers who had been billeted in the silk houses had long since departed.

Changing the subject, the visitor related the latest town gossip, salting it freely with classical aphorisms and quotations from the ancient stories. Finally he got around to the thirty silver dollars borrowed through him as middleman. He said his boss was anxious to be repaid.

Old Tung Pao became uneasy after all. When his visitor had departed, he hurried from the village down the highway to look at the two nearest silk flatures. Their doors were indeed shut; not a soul was in sight. Business was in full swing this time last year, with whole rows of dark gleaming scales in operation.

He felt a little panicky as he returned home. But when he saw those snowy cocoons, thick and hard, pleasure made him smile. What beauties! No one wants them? —Impossible. He still had to hurry and finish gathering the cocoons; he hadn't thanked the gods properly yet. Gradually, he forgot about the silk houses.

But in the village, the atmosphere was changing day by day. People who had just begun to laugh were now all frowns. News was reaching them from town that none of the neighbouring silk flatures was opening its doors. It was the same with the houses along the highway. Last year at this time buyers of cocoons were streaming in and out of the village. This year there wasn't a sign of even half a one. In their place came dunning creditors and government tax collectors who promptly froze up if you asked them to take cocoons in payment.

Swearing, curses, disappointed sighs! With such a fine crop of cocoons the villagers had never dreamed that their lot would be even worse than usual! It was as if hailstones dropped out of a clear sky. People like Old Tung Pao, whose crop was especially good, took it hardest of all.

"What is the world coming to!" He beat his breast and stamped his feet in helpless frustration.

But the villagers had to think of something. The cocoons would spoil if kept too long. They either had to sell them or remove the silk themselves. Several families had already brought out and repaired silk reels they hadn't used for years. They would first remove the silk from the cocoons and then see about the next step. Old Tung Pao wanted to do the same.

"We won't sell our cocoons; we'll spin the silk ourselves!" said the old man. "Nobody ever heard of selling cocoons until the foreign devils' companies started the thing!"

Ah Sze's wife was the first to object. "We've got over five hundred cattles of cocoons here," she retorted. "Where are you going to get enough reels?"

She was right. Five hundred cattles was no small amount. They'd never get finished spinning the silk themselves. Hire outside help? That meant spending money. Ah Sze agreed with his wife. Ah To blamed his father for planning incorrectly.

"If you listened to me, we'd have raised only one tray of foreign breed and no locals. Then the fifteen loads of leaves from our own mulberry trees would have been enough, and we wouldn't have had to borrow!"

Old Tung Pao was so angry he couldn't speak.

At last a ray of hope appeared. Huang the Priest had heard somewhere that a silk house below the city of Wusih was doing business as usual. Actually an ordinary peasant, Huang was nicknamed "The Priest" because of the learned airs he affected and his interests in Taoist "magic." Old Tung Pao always got along with him fine. After learning the details from him, Old Tung Pao conferred with his elder son Ah Sze about going to Wusih.

"It's about 270 *li* by water, six days for the round trip," ranted the old man. "Son of a bitch! It's a god-dam expedition! But what else can we do? We can't eat the cocoons, and our creditors are pressing hard!"

Ah Sze agreed. They borrowed a small boat and bought a few yards of matting to cover the cargo. It was decided that Ah To should go along. Taking advantage of the good weather, the cocoon selling "expeditionary force" set out.

Five days later, the men returned—but not with an empty hold. They still had one basket of cocoons. The silk filature, which they reached after a 270-*li* journey by water, offered extremely harsh terms—Only thirty-five dollars a load for foreign breed, twenty for local; thin cocoons not wanted at any price. Although their cocoons were all first class, the people at the silk house picked and chose only enough to fill one basket; the rest were rejected. Old Tung Pao and his sons received a hundred and ten dollars for the sale, ten of which had to be spent as travel expenses. The hundred dollars remaining was not even enough to pay back what they had borrowed for that last thirty loads of mulberry leaves! On the return trip, Old Tung Pao became ill with rage. His sons carried him into the house.

Ah Sze's wife had no choice but to take the ninety odd cattles they had brought back and reel the silk from the cocoons herself. She borrowed a few reels from Sixth Treasure's family and worked for six days. All their rice was gone now. Ah Sze took the silk into town, but no one would buy it. Even the pawnshop didn't want it. Only after much pleading was he able to persuade the pawnbroker to take it in exchange for a load of rice they had pawned before Clear and Bright.

That's the way it happened. Because they raised a crop of spring silkworms, the people in Old Tung Pao's village got deeper into debt. Old Tung Pao's family

raised five trays and gathered a splendid harvest of cocoons. Yet they ended up owing another thirty silver dollars and losing their mortgaged mulberry trees—to say nothing of suffering a month of hunger and sleepless nights in vain!

November 1, 1932

AUTUMN HARVEST

IT wasn't until the end of the fifth lunar month that Old Tung Pao gradually began to recover. He had taken no medicine except that he ate some incense ash which his daughter-in-law had begged from the temple. His poverty-toughened body licked the demon of his illness single-handed.

But with the very first step he took from his bed, he felt that something was wrong. His legs seemed to be treading on heaped cotton; they were soft and weak. And try as he might, he couldn't straighten up.

"Lying around so long, my bones are rusty!" he said to himself, making an effort to assume an air of youthful vigour. But when he saw his reflection in the water of the wash-basin, he couldn't help sighing. Was that really his face? Gaunt cheek-bones, thin sharp nose, large sunken eyes, hair all awry, greyish-brown whiskers framing his jaws, Adam's apple protruding like a small fist—he didn't look even half human! Old Tung Pao stared and stared. Uncontrollable tears dripped from his face into the wash-basin.

It was the first time in many years the rugged old man had wept. During his forty years of bitter struggle to win some security for his family there were only two things he had worshipped—the gods, and health. He was firmly convinced that without the protection of the gods, no matter how shrewd you were, you could never make your money or property "put on flesh." And without health, even if the gods protected you, you still couldn't earn a living.

The only god in which Old Tung Pao had any real faith was the God of Wealth. Twice a month—at the time of the new moon, and when the moon was full—he went to the dilapidated shrine of the God of Wealth near the little bridge outside the village. There he banged his head in fervent kowtows, always the same way for more than forty years.

Now a severe illness had transformed him into something that looked seven tenths ghoul. This hurt him even worse than having had to sell his silk-worm cocoons at a sacrifice. He felt that he and his family were beyond all hope of recovery.

"I only spent a month or so in bed, but see what's become of me!" he protested weakly to the wife of his elder son, Ah Sze. She was puffing up the fire of the kitchen stove.

No answer. Ah Sze's wife, hair dishevelled, was blowing with such intensity that she seemed in some danger of putting her head right into the stove. White smoke filled the room and poured out through the front and back doors. But the half-green reeds refused to kindle. Little Pao, Old Tung Pao's twelve-year-old grandson, came running in from the threshing ground and was choked by the smoke. Between coughs, he complained that he was hungry. The old man, also coughing, approached the stove on trembling legs, intending to lend his daughter-in-law a hand. Just then there was a flash in the door of the stove, and the reeds began to blaze with a soft crackling sound. After throwing in a few mulberry twigs, Ah Sze's wife finally raised her head. Her face was stained with tears—whether from the smoke or for some other reason we don't really know. In any event, this woman who spoke little and worked hard, was weeping.

The old man and his daughter-in-law, the eyes of both wet with tears, examined each other in silence. The stove

was burning brightly now, tongues of flame licking out through the open stove door. Daughter-in-law's face was burnished by the firelight. Although the glow disguised her pallor, it could not conceal how thin her face had become. Little Pao too had been reduced to a mere bag of bones. The boy had been growing very slowly anyhow, but now he looked like nothing more than a wizened little monkey! In the dimness of his sickroom Old Tung Pao had realized that the boy was much thinner when he had held his hand. But he hadn't been able to see so clearly then. Old Tung Pao was suddenly swept by a wave of grief. He almost cried aloud.

"What's happened to you, Little Pao? You look like one of those T.B. kids!" The old man spoke in gasps, his large sunken eyes fixed on his daughter-in-law.

Still no response. Ah Sze's wife wiped her eyes with the hem of her tattered blouse.

The pot on the stove began to emit puffs of fragrant white steam. Little Pao sidled close to the steam and sniffed. Then, pouting, he turned to his mother.

"Pumpkin again! *Niang*, why do you always make that old pumpkin? I wish we could eat some white rice for a change!"

The woman grabbed a mulberry branch as though to use it on her cheeky young son. But she only slapped it against the floor, breaking it into pieces which she tossed in the fire. She did not look around or reply.

"There'll be white rice when your father comes back," Old Tung Pao assured the boy. "Your *Tieh* has gone to see your other grandpa—to get him to borrow some money for us. When we get the money we'll buy rice and cook it up for you."

He stroked the little boy's shaven pate with a trembling withered hand. It was true enough. Early that morning Ah Sze had gone into the town to seek his father-in-law to ask him to be guarantor on a loan of five or ten

dollars from Master Wu, who specialized in "rural credit."

Little Pao didn't believe his grandfather. He had been hearing his *Tieh* and *Niang* talking about "borrowing money to buy rice" for the past month and a half. But they still ate nothing but pumpkin and yams! He didn't mind the yams so much. Piping hot with a little salt they tasted fine. But that pumpkin—all mush. Without even any sugar to put on, how could you bear it day after day? Worst of all, for the past two weeks, two meals out of three were nothing but that dull old pumpkin! It made Little Pao sick just to think about it. His stomach rumbling empty, with tears in his eyes, he looked at his grandfather. It seemed to him that his *Tieh*, his *Niang* and his grandfather, were all hard-hearted and bad. He only hoped his uncle Ah To would come home soon. Perhaps that wild young stallion of an uncle would bring a few sesame buns like last time and let him savour them again in secret.

Ah To had been away for three days and two nights. Little Pao missed him terribly!

In the pot, the pumpkin was done and was sending out hissing jets of steam. Old Tung Pao raised the lid. There was less than half a pot of pumpkin, dry, the bits against the sides of the pot crusted brown. The old man frowned. His daughter-in-law was too wasteful, he thought. Before they had become busy with the silk-worm season, then too, for a while, his family had eaten pumpkin instead of rice. But they had cooked it with plenty of water, and all five of them, big and small, had been able to fill up by drinking several bowls of pumpkin soup each. Now, though he had been ill for only little more than a month, the young people were already well on the road to "extravagance." This would never do! Anger brought a bit of colour to his pallid cheeks. He walked shakily to the large vat and scooped out a dipper-

ful of water to put in the pot. But his daughter-in-law quickly forestalled him by pouring the pumpkin stew into bowls and placing the bowls on the table.

"Don't add any water," she said in a hoarse voice. "There's only the three of us and we don't have to leave any over. The boy's father is sure to bring back a few pecks of rice tonight. . . . Little Pao, the stew isn't so thin this time, it'll taste better. Try and eat an extra bowl!"

Defly, she scraped the bits of crust from the sides of the pot. Old Tung Pao was furious beyond words. On trembling legs he strode to the porch with his bowl and sat down on the high doorstep. Slowly sipping the pumpkin stew, he was gripped by an uneasiness he couldn't define.

The threshing ground in front of him was bathed in dazzling sunlight. Beyond, the little stream was a strip of flowing gold. But its water level had dropped considerably; the weeping willows along its banks had a parched look. Both sides of the stream were silent and deserted; not even a dog or chicken was in sight. Usually at this noon hour there were women and children washing clothes and dishes by the stream, while the men lolled in the shade of the trees along the threshing ground and smoked their after-dinner pipes. Or at least there would be people like Old Tung Pao sitting on the doorsteps of their porches, chatting with their neighbours while they ate. But now, though the village basked in the sun and the waters of the stream flowed quietly, the place was a barren wilderness! It was only a month and a half since Old Tung Pao had last come out on his porch, yet the village had changed almost beyond recognition—just as Little Pao had become thinner almost beyond recognition!

Old Tung Pao had long since finished the pumpkin stew, but he continued sipping mechanically, staring with large sunken eyes at the little stream and the lonely

thatched hut a short distance beyond it. He made no attempt to guess why the villagers had all disappeared. He could only wonder at how much the world had changed since he had fallen ill! First himself, then the members of his family—his daughter-in-law and Little Pao—and now this village where he had lived so long and which he knew so well. Again he suddenly felt himself on the verge of tears—he who almost never wept. Instinctively, he put the bowl down beside him and supported his head with both hands, his thoughts a jumble.

He remembered the stories his father and grandfather used to spread about the "Long Hairs." They alleged that the "Long Hairs" "cleaned out" villages "slaughtering" the entire population, "plundering" them of everything of value. Early this year, when the Japanese devils attacked Shanghai, "respectable" people said "It's the 'Long Hairs' all over again!" But then, later, Old Tung Pao heard that there had been an armistice agreement. And while he was ill, nobody had mentioned anything about "Long Hairs." Yet the village resembled nothing more than his imagined picture of the aftermath of a "Long Hairs" raid! He also recollected his grandfather saying that sometimes the "Long Hairs" didn't kill everyone but forced them to join the gang instead. Grandfather had claimed that the people had to pack up and move out, leaving behind an empty village. Was it possible that all his neighbours had gone off to become "Long Hairs"? He had heard of other districts where the "Long Hairs" had been active for many years. But the people in his village were "good" peasants. Surely they couldn't have joined the "Long Hairs" during the few days he had been unconscious? The more he thought of it, the more unlikely it seemed.

Suddenly, he heard footsteps approaching and he quickly raised his head. Directly in front of him a pair of piggy eyes gleamed from a wide flat face. The visitor

was the notorious man-chaser, Lotus, wife of Old Tung Pao's neighbour across the stream! Though she too was thinner, the slimming down had made her prettier. Her little eyes were more appealing than ever; they shone with sympathy and with shock at the old man's appearance. But Old Tung Pao immediately recalled the grudge his family held against her because of what she had tried to do to their silkworms. What's more, he felt it very unlucky that the first person he saw on his recovery—not counting his immediate family—was that "witch"! Vehemently, he spat on the ground, then dropped his head and turned his face away.

When he looked up again some time later, Lotus was gone and the sunlight had crept close to his feet. The boat from the town to the village must be setting sail now. Perhaps his elder son Ah Size was on it, with the money; perhaps he had already bought some rice. Old Tung Pao mentally smacked his lips. He too was sick and tired of pumpkin stew. The thought of nice cooked rice made his mouth water.

"Little Pao! Little Pao! Come here to Grandpa!" he called. Thinking of the rice had brought to his mind his pitiful half-starved grandson. It was the first time since he left his bed that Old Tung Pao raised his voice in a healthy shout.

No answer. He glanced up at the sky, then shouted louder. To his surprise, Little Pao came running out of Lotus's house with a round flat object in his hand that looked like a sesame bun. The skinny monkey of a child bounded up to him and waved the thing in his face.

"Look, Grandpa," the child cried, "a sesame bun!"—and excitedly crammed it into his own mouth.

Old Tung Pao swallowed involuntarily, the merest flicker of an envious smile curling the corners of his lips. But immediately his face fell, and he asked in a low voice:

"Who gave it to you?"

"Lo—Lo—" was the best reply Little Pao could manage with his mouth full of bun.

Actually, the old man already knew. His expression grew sterner. His mind was troubled. Little Pao was eating a gift from an "enemy"—what a loss of face! And by what justice was Lotus's family able to afford sesame buns in the first place? Gritting his teeth, the old man was ready to fly into a rage. But he didn't have the heart to beat Little Pao. By then the child had already finished the bun and announced with much satisfaction:

"I got it from Lotus, Grandpa. Lotus is a good woman; she has sesame buns!"

"Stuff and nonsense!" His face brick-red, the old man raised his hand as if to strike.

But Little Pao wasn't afraid. "She has, too!" he insisted. "She brought 'em from town. She says tomorrow she's going for rice, white rice!"

The old man sprang to his feet, trembling all over. His belly hadn't known rice for a month and a half. Just hearing that another family had rice was enough to turn him green with envy. But, worst of all, it had to be Lotus's family—people he had always looked down on!

"What's so wonderful about that!" he exploded, dark as a thundercloud. "They probably stole the stuff! One of these days they'll be caught and beheaded! That's just what they deserve!"

But Old Tung Pao kept his voice down as he ranted. He was already wondering what to say if Lotus came out to "give battle." After all, to label people robbers without any proof was no joke. Strangely enough, there was no response from Lotus. But tactless Little Pao stirred his grandfather up again by prattling:

"Oh no, Grandpa, Lotus is good. She's got sesame buns and she's willing to give me some!"

The old man went pale. Without a sound he reached for a bamboo stick. Sensing the change in the atmosphere, Little Pao lit out as fast as his legs could carry him—and just for spite, right back to Lotus's house. Old Tung Pao was in hot pursuit when suddenly he saw stars and his legs turned to rubber. He had to sit down on the ground, the stick cast aside. It was then that a man appeared on the other side of the stream. He came across the little bridge and hailed Old Tung Pao. "Congratulations! So you're out moving around today!"

Though a few black stars were still floating before his eyes, Old Tung Pao recognized the caller—Huang the Priest. He was glad to see him. They were old friends. When Old Tung Pao became ill, Huang the Priest was one of his most frequent visitors. The two were known in the village as a couple of "queers." Old Tung Pao earned his reputation by his stubborn hatred of any and all things "foreign." Huang the Priest was famous for being always ready to trot out the few cultured phrases he had picked up in the town. He was full of archaic ceremonial turns of speech. The way he kept muttering them under his breath sounded to the villagers like the incantations of a Taoist priest—thus, his nickname. Old Tung Pao was one of the few who understood Huang's elegant language. As he often said to his elder son, he considered it a great "waste of talent" that a man like Huang the Priest should spend his time tilling the fields. Now, Old Tung Pao poured out to him all his irritations.

"Priest, it's enough to smother a man! I'm laid up for only little over a month and the whole world goes to pot! The village looks as if the Long Hairs have been through it. And that bitch vixen, I don't know how, but somewhere she got hold of some sesame buns. Little Pao can't keep away from 'em, the shameless brat.

What do you say, Priest, should I beat him or not?" Old Tung Pao picked up the bamboo stick and struck it against the ground.

Huang the Priest listened with the learned air he had copied from the fortune-teller in the town temple, who advertised his occult arts as having been "handed down through three generations." All during Old Tung Pao's speech, Huang kept nodding his head and sighing. Finally, Huang said softly:

"The world will be plunged into insurrection and turmoil! Elder Brother, do you know where our villagers have gone? To raid the rice bins of the grain merchants and the wealthy! The day before yesterday the peasants in Paichiping started it; today our village follows their example. Your honourable younger scion is among them. But, Elder Brother, you have just recovered from your illness. Pretend you know nothing of the activities of your younger son. Forgive me, I have said too much!"

At last Old Tung Pao understood. He jumped up, his eyes glaring. But at once, something seemed to bang him on the skull and he again collapsed weakly to the ground, his lips trembling. Raiding the rice bins of the wealthy? The news frightened and pleased him at the same time. He was pleased because he knew now that he had guessed right about Lotus's sesame buns. They had not been obtained by honourable means. He was frightened that because his son Ah To was involved, retribution might fall on his own head.

"Pardon, pardon!" cried Huang the Priest, squinting in alarm. "Your precious health is most important, most important! My words have agitated you! I beg your pardon! But compose yourself. We hear that the officials are not inclined to take harsh measures. Simply warn your honourable son and all will be well!"

"Ah, Priest, to tell you the truth, I've always known that young wretch had no sense of morality. For a long time I've feared that the spirit of the 'Long Hair' my grandfather killed would be born again in another body to torment us! And that's just what's happened! If he doesn't come home—all right. If he does—I'll bury the young fend alive! Priest, thank you for bringing me the news. I've been living in the dark till now!"

Old Tung Pao's lips quivered with anger. Closing his eyes, he could almost see the spirit of the murdered "Long Hair." Huang the Priest hadn't suspected that his news would have such a violent effect on the old man, and he rather regretted having been so loquacious. He hastened to disown Old Tung Pao's thanks.

"Nothing at all, nothing at all! I have a small matter to attend to; I beg your leave. Preserve your honourable health!"

Huang the Priest fled, leaving the old man alone, dazedly trying to collect his thoughts. A powerful sun beat down on him, but Old Tung Pao was unaware of its heat. The wild stories his father and grandfather had told him about the "Long Hairs" raced confusedly through his mind. And he recalled the latter half of the seventies when the emperor Kuang Hsu had just come to the throne. The peasants had risen, all over the county. The Manchu rulers had retaliated swiftly and cruelly—with his own eyes he had seen bloody heads roll in the dust. His reasoning could lead to only one conclusion:

"If rebellion was any use, the 'Long Hairs' would have won the throne years ago!"

It seemed to him that no sooner had he become ill and gone to bed than the world turned upside-down. Although his family had seldom been more than barely self-sufficient and now was virtually bankrupt, he still harboured illusions about the sanctity of authority. Besides, the present unrest frightened him!

II

AT sunset, Old Tung Pao's elder son Ah Sze returned. He had not been able to borrow any money. Nevertheless, he brought back three pecks of rice.

"Master Wu said he had no money. He looked mad," said Ah Sze gloomily, pouring the rice into two large vats. "But then he got generous and gave me three pecks on credit. Those bins behind his rice shop are crammed full. No wonder the peasants haven't any rice! For these three pecks we have to give him five at harvest time—and he still claims he's doing us a favour. That's how the rich keep getting richer!" He went out to the pig pen in the back-yard where he talked in undertones with his wife.

Old Tung Pao gazed morosely at his son and daughter-in-law, then at the two vats of rice. There was something wrong with his son's manner today. The story about how he got those three pecks wasn't quite clear, but Old Tung Pao was afraid to question him too closely. He had already quarrelled with his daughter-in-law over Ah To's "misbehaviour." She had called the old man a "muddle-head" and even dared to laugh at him.

"Go ahead, put in a complaint about Ah To," she had taunted. "You'll have him buried alive and the rich masters will reward you with a gold ingot!"

Although Old Tung Pao had retorted with a traditional axiom from the sages—"However poor, a man must remain righteous"—his words hadn't had the slightest effect. You can't eat "righteousness," his daughter-in-law had snapped. She maintained it wasn't even as good as pumpkin, which at least could serve as a substitute for rice!

The quarrel had added to Old Tung Pao's worries. He knew that while Ah Sze was a "loyal, respectable" citizen, he couldn't resist his wife's urgings. And now they were

whispering beside the pig pen! Old Tung Pao ground his teeth, but there was nothing he could do about it. As he watched them, his thoughts switched to the pig pen itself. Five or six years ago, he had built it with his own hands. It was a handsome job; he had spent over ten dollars on wood alone. But last year they had stopped using it; this year they probably couldn't afford to buy little piglets either. When he hired that neeromancer to choose a propitious site for the pig pen, he had just been wasting his money!

Nursing a bellyful of resentment against the pen, he walked unsteadily toward his son and daughter-in-law.

"I hear that Master Chen is looking for some old wood," he called to Ah Sze. "Tomorrow, take down that pig pen and sell it to him—it's unlucky. Since we can't afford to raise pigs, the damn thing isn't doing us any good just standing there!"

The two stopped whispering and turned toward the old man. The wife's face looked very excited in the twilight; her cheek-bones were splotted with red.

"It's not worth the trouble," Ah Sze quickly replied. "Dirty old wood. Master Chen probably wouldn't take it."

"He will!" Old Tung Pao insisted angrily. "He'll take it for my sake. Our families have been connected for three generations. He couldn't refuse!"

The old man based his confidence on the "glorious past," when his grandfather and the grandfather of Master Chen had escaped together from the "Long Hairs'" camp. This had given his grandfather a high standing in the House of Chen. Old Tung Pao himself had received exceptionally good treatment. At times, Master Chen even addressed him as Elder Brother Tung Pao! Such kindness had strengthened Old Tung Pao's conviction that respect for one's betters was the only proper course.

He waited until his daughter-in-law, pouting, had walked away, then hotly questioned his elder son.

"What's Ah To up to anyway? Tell me! Don't you think I can guess? Until I've stopped breathing, I'm still going to control you two!"

A crow, perched on the ridge of the roof, cawed raucously. Ah Sze threw a piece of broken tile at the bird and spat. He silently shook his head. How could he speak? What could he say? His father talked one way, his wife another, and his younger brother had still a third way of looking at things. He was a simple honest fellow. To him, they all sounded reasonable. He could never form his own opinions.

"They'll lop off heads! Whole families will die! I've seen it happen plenty of times!"

"But . . . there are so many. Can they kill us all?" Ah Sze replied weakly. But seeing his father's starting eyes and the veins standing out on his forehead, Ah Sze added quickly, "There's nothing to worry about. Ah To only went along to see the excitement. They didn't go into town today—"

"You're crazy!" the old man cut in. "Huang the Priest told me so himself! Do you mean to say he's lying?" Old Tung Pao was sure now the brothers and his daughter-in-law were in league with each other.

"Really they didn't go to town. Huang the Priest has got it all wrong!" Upset by his father's persistence, Ah Sze spilled out the truth: "They just went to that village east of here—Yangchia Bridge. The old women and the girls took the lead; the men are only helping them row the boats. Ah To is helping too. That's the whole story!"

Ah Sze was violating his wife's instructions by telling this much, but there were still two facts he was holding back: One was that "helpful" Ah To was actually the leader of the expedition. The other was that Ah Sze

himself had already agreed with his wife that in the event he should be unable to borrow money and buy rice, tomorrow he too would "help with the rowing."

Old Tung Pao looked at Ah Sze sceptically, but remained silent.

It was nearly dark. White smoke rose from the kitchen chimney. Little Pao was singing in the front room. His wife called to Ah Sze, who was glad to have an excuse to get away from the old man. He started toward the house, then halted and said to his father with a sigh:

"The three pecks of rice will last eight or nine days. When Ah To comes home tonight just tell him not to help with the rowing any more."

"I still want the pen taken apart. It'll only get worse, standing out in the wind and rain. At least we can get a little money for the wood."

What Old Tung Pao seemed actually to be implying was—we aren't so poor yet that we have to fly in the face of the "Emperor's Laws"! He rapped the pig pen with his knuckles like an experienced carpenter appraising the value of the wood, then stalked off into the house.

Voices were heard on the threshing ground. The villagers were returning from their "excursion." Little Pao scurried out like a rabbit to find his uncle Ah To. The boy's mother crammed some wood into the stove, then rushed to the threshing ground too. She was anxious to learn the news. The pot on the stove puffed merrily, this time with the fragrance of fresh rice. It made Old Tung Pao's mouth water, and his stomach began to rumble. But his mind was on other matters. He was thinking how to control Ah To, his wild colt of a younger son, and how to prepare for the harvest season. The gathering of the crops was still more than

a month off. Probably, at the moment, Old Tung Pao was the only one in the village worrying about it.

But Ah To had not come back with the others after all, nor had Lu Fu-ching, one of the neighbours across the stream. The two young men were said to be spending the night at Yangchia Bridge; tomorrow they intended to "help row" to Duck's Mouth Bar, where the peasants of three villages would join forces and march on the town. This news was transmitted to Ah Sze's wife by Sixth Treasure, Fu-ching's sister. The whole village was discussing the plan excitedly. But no one dared tell Old Tung Pao. Everyone knew his peculiar disposition.

"It's just as well he hasn't come home. The rascal! I'll disown him!" the old man growled at supper time, his eyes on his elder son. He seemed to know what was in the wind.

Ah Sze only clucked his tongue. His wife glanced sideways at her father-in-law and snorted incredulously. That night, the old man slept badly. He began to dream the moment he closed his eyes. His dreams were quite short, but as each one ended he leaped into wakefulness as if someone had hit him with a stick. Though extremely tired, he was afraid to sleep. His eyelids seemed to weigh a thousand catties. In a hazy half-awake state, he could hear his son talking in the next room. He assumed that husband and wife were discussing household matters, and didn't listen. But suddenly Ah Sze raised his voice in words that caught the old man's attention:

"Ah To, *Tieh* wants to bury you alive! Of course you're right, but the old man doesn't understand the times. I'm worried about you; it's a serious crime. Suppose when it comes to a showdown the others run off and leave you to face the music alone? . . ."

He must be dreaming! But Old Tung Pao had heard everything very clearly. His hair stood on end; his eyes were wide open now. He raised himself on one elbow and shouted to his elder son.

No answer. Little Pao laughed in his sleep. Ah Sze's wife said something in a fretful indistinct voice. Then the bed creaked, and the snoring resumed.

Sleep out of the question, the old man stared into the empty darkness, his mind racing. He remembered the daily increasing good fortune of his family in the "Golden Age" thirty years before. All that remained of that happy period were some old account books. He had lost money again this year on his silkworms. . . .

His mind drifted to a contemplation of his family's "righteousness"—upheld by every succeeding generation since his grandfather. When Old Master Chen was still alive, he had often praised them. From the time he was twenty, Old Tung Pao had resolutely modelled himself after the "gentlemen masters" in the town. Even though he only wielded a hoe, he too was "righteous." But now what had befallen him? The Old Lord of the Sky must be blind to let a good man like him have a son like Ah To! Could Ah To really be possessed by the spirit of the young "Long Hair" Old Tung Pao's grandfather had been forced to kill sixty years ago? The old man broke into a cold sweat—Ah To's actions were exactly those of the "Long Hairs"! About five years ago, when many people were crying "Down with the landlord gentry!" hadn't Ah To taken out and played with the big sword Old Tung Pao's grandfather brought home when he escaped from the "Long Hairs" camp? The very sword which had cut down the young "Long Hair"! It must have been fated that one day Ah To should take up this sword!

He thought it all out, and the more he thought, the more frightened Old Tung Pao became. There was one

little thing he hadn't thought of, something he couldn't have guessed in a million years. At the very moment he was gritting his teeth in rage at his younger son, thirty peasants from Yangchia Bridge were approaching through the dawn mist; and they were being led by his son Ah To and his neighbour Fu-ching! Moreover, the peasants in his own village, after excitedly dreaming of the band's arrival all night, had now arisen and were preparing to go out and give the visitors a hearty greeting!

Through a crack in the wall, the sky was a fish-belly grey. Sparrows chirped on the threshing ground. The only rooster left in the village—the precious possession of Huang the Priest—began to crow. From afar, it sounded like a woman crying.

Old Tung Pao fell into an uneasy doze. In a kind of dream he could see the "Long Hairs'" sword gleaming brightly before him. The hand of a muscular arm grasped its hilt. Then he saw a face with large round eyes beneath bushy brows. Ah To! Uttering a cry of anger tempered with fear, Old Tung Pao jumped to the floor. It was broad daylight. Ah Sze's wife was cooking gruel; flames danced in the opening of the stove. Taking a grip on himself, the old man returned to bed.

Suddenly, a great storm of voices surged in from the threshing ground, followed by the crash of a violently beaten gong.

"Whose house is on fire?" yelled the old man, rushing out to see.

When he reached the threshing ground, he finally understood. The scene that met his eye was exactly the same as the one he saw when the peasants "revolted" against the emperor Kuang Hsu in the early days of his reign! The peasants from Yangchia Bridge—men and women, young and old—were moving in a dense black crowd across the threshing ground. "Come out! Let's all

go together!" they were shouting. Ah To was among them. In fact he was the one beating the gong! Ah To strode to the fore and bounded right up to his father. Old Tung Pao's face flamed; his eyes shot sparks.

"Fool! They'll cut your head off!"

"That's one way of dying," Ah To laughed. "But unless we get rice we'll be just as dead when we starve to death! We're going! Where's brother? And sister-in-law? We'll all go!"

Deafened by fury, the old man raised his fist to strike. Ah Sze darted out and rushed between them.

"Ah To," he pleaded, "listen to me! Don't go. Yesterday, I borrowed three pecks of rice. Our family can eat!"

Ah To's thick brows jumped and his expression changed. But before he could reply, a man stepped out from behind him. It was their neighbour, Fu-ching. Laughing, Fu-ching pushed Ah Sze aside and shouted:

"So you've got three pecks of rice? That's fine! The Yangchia Bridge people haven't had their morning gruel yet. Everybody come this way!"

What! Eat his family's rice? Ah Sze couldn't believe his ears. But the Yangchia Bridge peasants surged into his house, cheering. Old Tung Pao howled as if his heart were being hacked by a knife, then his eyes went black and his legs turned to cotton. He had to sit down. Raging insanely, Ah Sze flung himself on Fu-ching and tried to throttle him.

"Are you crazy?" said Fu-ching, holding him off. "What are you doing? Listen to me, Brother Ah Sze! Ah To, what's wrong with him?"

Ah Sze abruptly released Fu-ching and whirled on Ah To. He seized his young brother and began to punch him, yelling tearfully:

"Even a snake doesn't foul its own nest, but you bring people to eat up your family's rice! You let them eat us out of house and home!"

He had one arm locked tight around Ah To's head, smothering him. Fu-ching couldn't pry them apart. The old man, sitting on the floor swearing a blue streak, showed no inclination to intervene. Luckily Fu-ching's younger sister Sixth Treasure came in just then, and with her help Fu-ching managed to separate the two brothers.

"You've got a way out, you borrowed rice," Ah To panted. "But the others have no way out. What are they going to do? You've got a little rice, so you don't want to go. But if we can't pull this thing off because we're short of men, then what?—And you'll get the rice back. Come with us to the town. You'll get your share!"

But Ah Sze was squatting on his heels, his face wooden. Fu-ching patted him on the shoulder with one hand while rubbing his own bruised neck with the other.

"We all agreed we'd eat whatever rice we could find here, then take the owners of the rice along with us to the town. Don't hold it against me, Ah Sze. Everybody agreed!"

"Even the 'Long Hairs' weren't so rude, so blasted savage!" muttered Old Tung Pao, but he kept his eyes down. He didn't have the courage to upbraid the men to their faces.

He knew what was going on now. Good, he thought, go ahead, go to the town! You'll get what's coming to you there! The Old Lord of the Sky has eyes! Then you'll know that you should have listened to this old man. He's no flea living blindly on some dog's back. He's learned a thing or two in all these years!

At that moment, the Yangchia Bridge peasants swept noisily out of the house, carrying with them the two large

rice vats. Ah Sze's wife, her hair streaming wildly, weeping and yelling, trailed in their wake.

"They belong to us! They're ours! How can you steal our food? Thieves! Murderers!"

No one paid any attention to her. The peasants set the vats in the middle of the threshing ground and someone began beating the gong again. It took all of Sixth Treasure's strength to pull Ah Sze's wife back.

"Whoever has rice has to share it with everybody! Can't you understand?" the girl shouted at her. "Who told you to kowtow and humble yourself? Who told you to borrow rice on credit? That may work for you, but others have no place to borrow! Others are starving; are they supposed to stand by and watch your family stuffing itself? Hush now! Crying and carrying on like you'd just lost your grandfather! We're eating your rice, it's true, but we'll help you get it back soon enough! What are you crying about?"

The woodenly squatting Ah Sze rose to his feet with a sigh and walked over to his wife.

"It was all your idea. Now we've ended up with nothing," he berated her. Then he urged, "Let's go along with them. What else can we do? We're all in the same boat now. If the sky falls, everyone will get crushed!"

Two large cauldrons made their appearance on the threshing ground, and soon the local villagers and the Yangchia Bridge peasants were busy cooking gruel. The early mist had vanished. Golden sunlight, slanting down on the threshing ground, added a touch of colour to the pasty faces of the eaters. At the eastern end of the stream, where it flowed fairly wide and deep, people were singing happily as they pushed half a dozen boats into the water. These boats would take the peasants to the town!

Old Tung Pao squatted in silence, glaring venomously. He watched the crowd boisterously finish the gruel; he

watched them noisily board the boats. It was all like a dream. He saw Ah To vigorously plying a sculling car. Ah Sze, looking tragic, his wife, and Sixth Treasure, sat together. The two women were chatting quite amiably now. Little Pao stood in the stern, imitating the motions of his uncle Ah To.

Then, as if awakening, Old Tung Pao jumped up and ran at top speed along the stream, all the way to its western end. Why, he didn't know. A weight seemed to be pressing down on his heart. He simply had to find someone to talk to. But the whole village was silent and deserted. Not even a child remained.

Finally, however, when he came back to the eastern end of the stream, he saw someone far on the opposite side, rushing madly in his direction. Old Tung Pao couldn't distinguish the man's features at first; the only thing he could see clearly was a white turban. But when the fellow came running across the little bridge, Old Tung Pao identified him as Huang the Priest. Much relieved, the old man called out:

"Even the 'Long Hairs' weren't so rude! I haven't spent all my years living like a flea on some dog's back! I've seen a thing or two! Mark my words! They'll catch it when they get to town! The murdering thieves!" Huang the Priest stopped and looked at him without recognition. Only after carefully scrutinizing the old man for half a minute did Huang the Priest speak, and then in an indignant wail:

"Utterly unprincipled! Utterly unprincipled! They ate my rooster I tell you! Utterly unprincipled!"

"Murderers! Your rooster, eh? That's nothing. They'll be killing men next! The assassins!" Old Tung Pao stumped off home.

That night all the villagers returned safely. Much to the old man's astonishment, each was carrying five pints of rice. It seemed to him that the "gentlemen masters"

of the town weren't like the "gentlemen masters" of the old days. A hundred or so peasants from three small villages march on the town and the gentry become so frightened that they immediately talk terms and give each peasant half a peck of rice. These modern "gentlemen masters" have no backbone; all his years might just as well have been spent as a flea on a dog's back for the way the town gentry fall down on his predictions! The world has changed beyond all understanding. Ah To and his kind are riding high!

III

THE storm of raids on the rice bins spread. Within a radius of seventy-five miles, almost every day hungry peasants "preached the public peace" in more than a dozen small towns. To the gentry in these towns, this conduct seemed entirely too impolite. They dropped their mask of benevolent concern and took steps to "preserve order." The county and district governments, even the towns' merchant guilds, issued impressive proclamations which were circulated throughout the countryside: Attacks on the bins of the rice merchants and the wealthy must cease; all problems can be peaceably negotiated. . . . At the same time, "fair-minded" gentry came forward to request the rice merchants and the pawnshops to "take a loss" and "give special facilities" to help the "poor suffering peasants" get through this time of stress.

But the hungry bellies of the peasants couldn't wait for the gentry and merchants to define what exactly they meant by "special facilities." The proclamations were in vain; the urgings of the village heads (usually former leaders of the local gentry's armed "protection corps") proved equally useless. Raids continued and increased.

Peasants' bands were no longer one hundred in number but five hundred, a thousand! And now they were ranging far beyond neighbouring towns. They were forming "expeditionary armies" which marched on the cities!

In a small prosperous city about twenty miles from Old Tung Pao's village, hungry peasants clashed with the police. The police fired in the air as a warning, then arrested a few dozen demonstrators. The next day, thousands of angry peasants surrounded the city and cut it off completely from all contact with the outside world.

This left the city with no choice but to offer "special facilities" immediately. There were three: The peasants could borrow rice on credit from the grain merchants, to be returned at harvest time on a bushel for bushel basis. Pawnshops would give interest-free loans. The city's merchant guild would donate 425 bushels of rice to the peasants' village, which the village head would distribute. . . . Realizing the danger in the situation, the merchants and gentry did everything they could to minimize it. As to the loss they would take on the gift of 425 bushels, they could make that up with a levy on the people of the city.

In the meanwhile, the provincial government was stationing troops at key arteries in the countryside. This, added to the "special facilities," resulted in a gradually subsiding of the storm of raids on the rice bins. It was nearly the end of the sixth lunar month by then; the peasants' busy season was fast approaching.

Thanks to the storm, Old Tung Pao's family was able to eat one meal with rice and two with gruel every day. Nor was their indebtedness in any way increased by this rice, except for the unfortunate three pecks which Ah Sze had previously borrowed. However, they would have to start planting their rice paddy fields soon, and both Ah Sze and his wife feared that the family's pile of debts would rise still higher.

As a result, they worked without enthusiasm, and this added to Old Tung Pao's irascibility. His prestige had suffered a serious blow in the past month, but now it was rice-planting not rice-bin-raiding time! He fancied himself a kind of elder statesman in agriculture, an old war horse who could find his way under any conditions. He talked ceaselessly to his daughter-in-law and Ah Sze about how the planting should be done. He told them how diligent he had been as a youth, how his grandfather had never lost heart but worked and worked until he had won security for the family.

One day, as Old Tung Pao returned from the fields, he shouted at Ah Sze:

"We'll transplant our rice sprouts tomorrow or the day after at the latest. Why haven't you figured out yet how much we'll have to spend for fertilizer? Have you lost your wits?"

"We still have a sack left from last year," his son replied listlessly.

The old man glared, furious. "That chemical stuff! Poison! Poison made by the foreign devils to kill people! I only know the bean-cake fertilizer our ancestors used. Fine, strong! That chemical powder ruins the land. Tomorrow, we'll buy bean cake!"

"Where will we get the money? People say that chemical fertilizer loses strength if you keep it too long; you have to add half as much new powder for it to be any good. But in our state, there's no use even thinking of that!"

"Poppycock and piffle!" roared the old man, shaking his finger under his son's nose. "According to you, we shouldn't plant at all! What are you going to eat if we don't plant? How will we pay off our debts?"

Ah Sze sighed. He knew the old man was right; it was only from the fields that they could earn their food and clothing, get money to return what they had bor-

rowed. But his experience in recent years had also taught him that borrowing in order to plant simply made you the creditor's draught ox in your own fields—no, not even that, for draught oxen at least could eat their fill, something his family seldom did. Why plant rice?—his wife had often asked him. They both felt that what Ah To said was right—"The peasant who borrows is finished!" But since working in the fields was the only way they could live, husband and wife had come to a decision. Under no circumstances would they seek any more loans to invest in the land.

When his son remained silent, the old man sulked, said he was "fed up with them." The same afternoon, he went to town and complained to Ah Sze's father-in-law and to Master Chen about how his son was "ruining the family." Both men urged Old Tung Pao not to take things too seriously—sons had their own lives to live too. The old man spent the night in town. Early the next morning he barged in on Master Chen and asked him for a loan. It wasn't a large sum—only enough to buy a cake of pressed bean fertilizer. Master Chen had just finished his morning opium pipe and was dying to sleep. But when he saw that he couldn't put the old man off, he got up, went with him to the bean-pressing shop and vouched for his credit.

Old Tung Pao returned home with the bean cake, smiling all the way. After placing it on the porch, he turned to his daughter-in-law and Ah Sze and told them grimly:

"Until I've turned up my toes, you'll listen to me! Don't ask where I got the money. Just do your work!" Now that the tender rice was sprouting in the fields, the illusions he had cherished during the silkworm season again flourished in his stubborn old brain. Bathed in golden sunlight, caressed by soft breezes, the rice grew extremely fast, almost as if someone were pulling it up-

wards. But the village stream rapidly shrank, and treadmills had to be placed on the embankment to push the water into the paddy fields. Ah Sze couldn't manage their mill alone indefinitely, and Old Tung Pao tried to relieve him. But after a few minutes on the treadmill, the old man was panting hard, his back stiff, his legs aching. He had to come down and let his daughter-in-law take his place.

The rice grew like mad, and it consumed water like mad. Yet every day, like a fiery dragon, the sun drank of the little stream, steadily lowering its level. Everywhere in the village the cry was raised—"We need help!" Everywhere people were begged to take a turn at the treadmill. Lotus and her silent dour husband had only planted a few small cereal crops and they were relatively free. People forgot that she was a "witch." She and her husband were in great demand wherever there was a treadmill. Young neighbour Fu-ching had returned his leased land that year and, with his sister, he frequently called at Old Tung Pao's and lent a hand. Ah To seldom came to the village; when he did, he helped other families, since the old man refused to see him.

Each morning the clear blue of the sky made the peasants frown. A few white clouds at dusk would send the whole village into transports of delight. Old ladies would peer up near-sightedly, chanting thankful prayers. But always their joy proved premature. In almost a month they didn't have a single drop of rain!

Old Tung Pao's paddy field, being on high ground, was particularly difficult to manage. Muddy water had to be pushed up painfully from the drying stream through a ditch seventy feet long; the parched soil consumed half the water before it even reached the field. The rice shoots, originally so lusty, seemed stricken with anemia. They grew more brown and withered by the day. It hurt Old Tung Pao to see them; he stamped in helpless

frustration. His son Ah Sze looked tragic but said nothing. His daughter-in-law said a great deal—all cold and biting. She predicted that this year's harvest would be a miserable failure, a waste of effort; she bemoaned the new debt incurred for the bean cake!

"If we only had water, we'd have a fine crop," the old man retorted weakly. He couldn't bear listening to her any longer.

"Water! Water!" snapped Ah Sze's wife. "It's more precious to you than our blood! Fu-ching and his sister help part-time; they can count as only one. Altogether that makes just three of us on the treadmill. How much blood can you get out of three people? This month the mill has worked us dry! Ah To is young and strong, but you won't let him come! . . ."

"Why not send for Ah To?" agreed Ah Sze. "He's like an ox!"

Old Tung Pao spat without replying.

The next day Ah To, all smiles, came to help at the treadmill. But it was already too late. Only a trickle of water still flowed in the centre of the stream bed. The men attached three lengths of trough to extend their ditch to the shrunken stream. But a few hours later the water level had dropped so low that even Ah To, with his ox-like strength, couldn't pump any water into their paddy field. About twenty yards to the west, the stream ran deeper—it was up to Ah To's waist. But at that point there was no embankment on which to mount the treadmill. Unless it rained that night, Old Tung Pao's rice would be finished.

Nor was his the only family in trouble. Every paddy field in the village was drying and cracking like an old tortoise-shell. People climbed high trees to peer at the distant horizons. There was not a speck of cloud in the wide blue sky.

The last remaining chance was to hire a "foreign pump" from town. Old Tung Pao was displeased when he heard the word "foreign"; he didn't believe the gadget could do much good anyhow. During last year's flood, peasants in a neighbouring village had hired the pump to free their inundated fields. Though he himself had not seen the pump in operation, Huang the Priest, who loved to poke his nose into other people's business, had praised it highly. But then it was only siphoning water out. Would it prove so effective when it had to pump water in—and over a distance of several hundred yards? Before he had a chance to express his doubts, however, his daughter-in-law spoke up grumpily.

"The foreign pump is good, but what about the hiring fee? We haven't any money! They say it costs over a dollar to fill one section of paddy field!"

Old Tung Pao couldn't make up his mind. He hurried to the dilapidated shrine of the God of Wealth near the little bridge outside the village, and banged his head against the ground in resounding kowtows. "Display your power," he begged. "Give us some rain today!" He promised to offer a substantial sacrifice if his prayer should be answered.

That night, because there was no water left for the treadmill to pump, the family was able to sleep right through until morning. But Old Tung Pao never closed his eyes. He heard a hissing sound of some sort and mistook it for rain. Bounding out of bed, he rushed to the porch for a look. It wasn't raining, but the sky was grey and overcast. Though disappointed, he clutched at this straw of hope and dropped on his knees and prayed. The third time he got out of bed to examine the sky, it was already light in the east. He hurried to the field to look at his precious crop. There had been some dew during the night; the rice seemed a little stronger than when he had last seen it—in the light of the pitiless sun.

But the field was badly parched. Even when he put his fingers deep into the cracks he could feel no softness in the soil. Old Tung Pao's heart thumped. He knew that in a short while the sun would come out and his rice would die. That would mean the end of him and his family.

He returned to the threshing ground in front of his door. A blood-red sun was just showing its head in the east. Weeds choked the trickle that remained of the stream. Some villagers had planted maize in the exposed stream bed; it was already as tall as a man. Half a dozen people were standing beside the maize, arguing in loud voices. Old Tung Pao listlessly drifted over to them. They were discussing whether to pool their funds and hire the "foreign" pump. The man known as Li the Tiger was insisting:

"If we're going to hire it, we'd better be quick about it. That pump is kept busy every day. Last night, though, I heard that no one had hired it yet for today. We'll lose it if we don't hurry. Then we'll be in a fix. Will you come in for a share, Old Tung Pao?"

The old man stared straight ahead, as if he hadn't understood. Two things prevented him from replying—he was afraid the "foreign" pump wouldn't help, and he had no money. He figured it would be better to let others try the pump first. If it really worked, he could use it too. As to the money, perhaps he could manage a loan for a couple of days.

That morning, he and his family wandered through the paddy field as if keeping vigil at the bedside of a dying patient. The rice shoots went from bad to worse, drooping their heads at first, then finally bending in the middle. The soil emitted parched cracked sighs. Now the entire village was idle. Treadmills stood motionless; the stream was too low for them to be of any use. A few peasants stood on the small bridge outside the

village, anxiously awaiting the arrival of the "foreign" pump—the doctor who could save their sick crops!

Toward noon, when the wretched sun was blazing like fire, the people on the bridge set up a cry: "It's coming! . . . A small boat came sailing down the canal. On it was mounted an engine—the "foreign" pump! It didn't look particularly impressive, but people said it could pump water faster than eight robust young men. The whole village turned out, including Old Tung Pao and his sons. The boat did not land but remained floating in the canal. Several dozen yards of shiny rubber hose thick as a man's arm were unreeled. Then, one end was hauled ashore and hung over the embankment of a paddy field.

"The water will come out here and irrigate the field!" the operator from town announced dramatically.

Soon, the engine on the boat began to pant like an old asthma victim and water spewed in jerks out of the rubber hose, then settled down to a steady flow. The peasants shouted and laughed for joy, forgetting that this water would cost money.

Standing off to one side, Old Tung Pao watched bug-eyed. He was sure some demon must be concealed in the noisy pump engine and the long snaky hose. Maybe it was the mud-fish spirit that inhabited the sliny pool in front of the village's Temple of Earth. The water probably was the saliva of the mud-fish spirit; tonight the spirit might decide to suck it all back. Then tomorrow the man could come from town again and swindle some more money!

But none of these suspicions could withstand the spreading expanse of green water. By the time the pump finished irrigating the second section of paddy field, Old Tung Pao decided to beg the assistance of this mechanized mud-fish spirit. He would take his hoe and

guard his field all night just to make sure it didn't come sneaking through the darkness to steal back its saliva.

Without consulting either his son Ah Sze or his daughter-in-law, he got Li the Tiger and Huang the Priest to be his guarantors, and promised the pump operator to pay eight dollars after harvest plus twenty per cent monthly interest. The hose was then placed in his field.

An inch of oily green water covered Old Tung Pao's paddy land before sunset. Light breezes stirred ripples like the wrinkles on an old lady's face. Very happy, Old Tung Pao ignored his daughter-in-law's nagging protests—"Now we owe another eight dollars!" Of course eight dollars was no small sum, but wouldn't they be getting at least ten dollars a load for their rice at harvest? Why, last year, even second-rate rice sold for ten and a half! Old Tung Pao's illusions had again taken full possession of him.

But Ah Sze still stared at the field mournfully. The rice continued to droop in spite of the water. It was too late. The sun had sapped the life out of the delicate shoots.

"Put a little chemical fertilizer on the rice tonight and tomorrow it'll be all right," said Ah To.

The unexpected sound of Ah To's voice in his ear made Ah Sze jump. That's right, they still had a sack of fertilizer! If they were ever going to use it, this was certainly the time. Spoil the land? So what! Use it!

But Old Tung Pao overheard Ah To's remark and rushed at him like a maddened tiger.

"That stuff is poison, you Long Hair spawn! Murderer! Do you want to spread poison?"

It took several people to hold off the old man and calm him down. There was no further talk about using the fertilizer.

"You'll see, by tomorrow morning the rice will be fine," Old Tung Pao said to Ah Sze, though not entirely pacified. "Chemical fertilizer! Poison!"

The old man vowed to himself he would guard his field that night if it killed him. Now he had not only the mud-fish spirit to fear, but also his sons. They might come and secretly sprinkle the powder while he slept. But the mud-fish spirit was what worried him most. He had no intention of revealing his "occult knowledge" however, and merely announced he would protect the paddy field from any plot that Ah To might persuade Ah Sze to join. The old man was notoriously stubborn!

But the night passed peacefully. Neither the mud-fish spirit nor the unruly, fertilizer-advocating brothers made any appearance. The rice still bent listlessly however, in fact a few stalks were in worse condition than the day before. Though the rice in other fields that had been irrigated was again green and strong, Old Tung Pao began to suspect the effectiveness of the mud-fish spirit's saliva. His daughter-in-law raged, "The old muddle-head is sending us all to the grave!" Worried frantic, he turned the colour of pig's liver. Young neighbour Fu-ching urged him at least to try the chemical fertilizer and see whether it did any good, but he continued to sit silent and wooden. Meanwhile, his sons had gone to work spreading the fertilizer. The old man kept his eyes averted from their direction. He didn't want to see.

Fortunately, the next two days a curtain of clouds protected the fields from the blistering sun. About half an inch of water still remained on the paddy ground. The rice became green once again. While the old man would not give any credit to the chemical fertilizer, he no longer said it was poison. After the cloudy weather, a fine rain fell, followed by bland sunny days. The rice flourished and the peasants sighed with relief. Their

lives were saved. The Old Lord of the Sky had taken pity on them!

The cool fresh breezes of autumn began to blow, ending like a bad dream the more than forty days of scorching weather. The villagers were happy. They could tell from experience that this year's crop would not be bad. Old Tung Pao, now positive that he had not spent all his years in vain like a flea on a dog's back, was predicting a harvest for his family of four loads to the *mo*—a bumper crop! At times, as he carefully fondled the heavy rice heads, he dreamed they might even reap five loads. And every grain was so full and solid!

And he calculated: Even at only four and a half loads to the *mo*, that would still be a total of forty loads. After paying almost seven loads for rent, at ten dollars a load his family would earn more than three hundred dollars. With such a sum, he could pay off half his debts. Besides, they'd probably get more than ten dollars a load. That was the very minimum!

With one good harvest, the peasants could get on their feet again. The Old Lord of the Sky had eyes after all. He saw where His mercy was needed!

But the merchants in town had eyes too, and they saw only where the profits lay. The price of rice in town fell before the harvest even began. When the peasants gathered the fruits of their months of back-breaking toil and packed the full solid grains into bags, the price dropped to six dollars. While the peasants were virtually going blind at the difficult job of milling, rice in town was falling to four dollars for second grade. By the time they painstakingly sorted out the rough grain and brought it to town, it was difficult to find buyers even at three! The rice merchants looked coldly at the stricken peasants and said indifferently:

"That's today's price. Tomorrow it may go lower!"

Creditors descended on the village like a swarm of locusts, fierce and angry. Take rice in payment? All right—two dollars and ninety cents for second grade, three-sixty for white rice!

Old Tung Pao's illusions burst like a soap bubble. The villagers wept and cursed.

Ah Sze's wife raged to everyone she met. "What's the good of tilling the land? We nearly killed ourselves with work and we're still in debt!"

His bitter experience with the silkworms had laid Old Tung Pao low. His bitter experience with the rice harvest sent him to his grave. As he was breathing his last, though he had already lost the power of speech, his eyes were clear. He gazed at Ah To as if to say:

"So you were right all along! Amazing! Who could have believed it!"

January 1933

WINTER RUIN

STRONG winds blowing from the northwest for several successive days stripped the remaining leaves from the branches of the trees. Dying grass beside the little stream faded from bright gold to greyish brown. In a few places, where mischievous children had tried to simulate a prairie fire, the grass was black and scorched.

When the weather was clear, you might find a skinny dog sunning himself on the threshing ground, and maybe a villager or two, still wearing light autumn clothing, squatting in the sunlight picking ice. On the dark days when the northwest wind made the branches creak and clouds scudded across the sky like wild horses, the threshing ground was devoid of any signs of life. Then the entire village seemed dead. Everything was a mortuary ashen colour.

The only sign of green was just north of the village in the Chang family cemetery. This was the ancestral burial ground of Chang the landlord, who lived in town, and it had many tall fir trees.

The cemetery was one of the banes of the villagers' existence. Whenever a fir tree was cut down and stolen, Chang insisted that the village compensate him for its loss—even though the thieves were usually people from outside.

One morning, in spite of the fact that the sunlight was only a dull yellow and bare branches groaned in the northwest wind, people gathered on the open threshing ground.

Lotus, reviled by many as a witch, was addressing the assembled crowd, gesticulating vigorously.

WINTER RUIN

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"I just went by there. Sure enough, another one's gone! Chips lying all around, still smelling fragrant and sweet—the thieves must have stolen it this morning. And a whopping big one it was too! Like this!" she said, showing the width of the tree with her hands.

Her listeners frowned and sighed. "Let's get word to Chang quickly—" one of them started to say.

"What for?" another man cut in. "You don't think if we tell him that old skinflint will let us off, do you? Huh! Not him!"

Lotus's dour husband nodded. "Every day we put it off is a day less trouble. Let's take our chances on what happens when he finds out."

Surprisingly enough, Lotus was the first to disagree. "What do you mean—take our chances? Do you think we'll have money to pay him then? And even if we do—I don't think we ought to give him a penny! We don't eat his food or use his money. What do the trees in his family cemetery have to do with us?"

"You can't reason with him," Ah Sze interrupted. "Last year, Li the Tiger swore at him, and he had Li arrested and put in jail!"

"Those damn tree-snatchers are ruining us!" Ah Sze's wife cried tearfully. In her heart she agreed with Lotus's husband.

The others joined in warmly cursing the thieves. They were sure the culprits were the poor peasants who lived in a settlement of thatched shacks not far from the village. They had suffered at the hands of the avaricious Chang and had probably stolen his tree for revenge. But the result was they were getting others into trouble! Someone proposed going to the settlement and recovering the "purloined object."

Ah To, who until now hadn't spoken, could restrain himself no longer.

"Take the tree back? That's a fine ideal! You're not Skinfint Chang's stinking son! Why sweat over this for him?"

"You don't have to get tough about it!" the man retorted. "You didn't steal the tree. Why are you getting all worked up?"

Lotus's husband pulled Ah To back. "We're only talking," he said soothingly. "Nobody's really going for the tree. Keep your shirt on."

"That's not the point! Those people who took the tree weren't trying to hurt us. If Skinfint Chang tries to make us pay for it, that'll be because he's a dirty son of a bitch! Why should we help him find his damn tree? He's nothing to us. . . ."

Ah Sze, Ah To's elder brother, dragged him off into the house.

Muttering imprecations against the hateful Chang, the gathering broke up. Only Lotus and Ah Sze's wife remained, staring absently in the direction of the green cemetery ground. Suddenly, as if a curtain had been lifted, the view cleared and the dull yellow sunlight brightened into gold. The wind stopped too. The two women raised their faces to the sky and took a deep breath. Of one accord, they squatted on their heels to enjoy the warmth of the sun.

Lotus had been a slavey to a rich family in town and knew all the gossip. To Ah Sze's wife she said in a whisper:

"Skinfint Chang is a crook himself! He's got a hand in plenty of shady deals!"

"Oho!"

"Salt smugglers, opium pedlars—he works with 'em all! Last year wasn't there a gang that specialized in stealing draught oxen from the thatched shack settlement? And they robbed the flour shops in town too. Well, Skinfint Chang was their fence!"

"But surely the authorities must know about it?"

"Hah! Authorities! The chief of police is in on the rackets himself!"

Lotus pursed her mouth scornfully, her eyes screwed almost shut. She had become much thinner lately and her white skin had taken on a bluish tinge. Her mouth looked larger than ever, further accentuating the tiny-ness of her piggy eyes.

Ah Sze's wife wagged her head and sighed. Then she rose to her feet and said angrily:

"No wonder Ah To says that the meek and humble haven't a chance!"

"He's right. The world's going to turn head over heels!"

"My father-in-law used to say the Long Hairs will be coming again. I hear there are women Long Hairs too. You know, we've got a big Long Hair sword in our house. . . . But my father says the True Emperor* hasn't been born yet."

"Bah, how does he know? Do you think Heaven would tell him first? Last month there was a red star in the western sky—big as a wine cup, and with eight points! That was the star of the True Emperor! Eight points means he was born eight years ago. Hasn't been born yet, has he?"

"A rebel! My father says that kind of person is a rebel usurper! What do you know anyhow! Damn witch!"

"What!" Lotus leaped up, her piggy eyes squinting balefully.

* Old popular superstition had it that emperors were ordained by Heaven, and when a dynasty became helplessly corrupt, Heaven sent a new "true" emperor to be born in a mortal body. It was his task to overthrow the old regime and the people were morally bound to support him.

The two women stood glaring at each other; it hadn't taken much to revive the old animosity between them. Ah Sze's wife had always been contemptuous of Lotus, considering her "a slavey, a bit of Huff, a tart!" Lotus, no milksop and full of resentment, had tried to steal the other's silkworm eggs and dump them into the stream. That was six months ago, and since then the two cut each other dead whenever they chanced to meet. Only recently, after Old Tung Pao died, did they begin to act like neighbours. Now, an inconsequential point had set them to wrangling again, each convinced of her own righteousness.

Ah Sze's wife spat on the ground with a lordly air, deciding to make light of this small matter. But as she turned to go, Lotus, who preferred a drubbing any day to silent "cultured" scorn, jumped forward and cried in a strained voice:

"Anyone who curses and runs away is made of pretty poor stuff!"

"Better than cheap stuff like you! Witch!" Ah Sze's wife continued on her way. But she did not go home. Instead she went to the other side of the little stream.

Not having been able to provoke her, Lotus felt very lonely. She loved "excitement"—even if it were the excitement of a quarrel, even if she came out the loser. At times she got severely pounded, but she never regretted it. To her anything was better than being ignored. She hated not being considered "human." When she had been a slavey, the master treated her like a soulless being, an inanimate object, lower than even a cat or a dog. But Lotus knew that she had a soul, and this treatment was one of the reasons she hated her former master.

When she was able to stop being a slavey and became a wife, Lotus was overjoyed. She was sure she could start being a person. Unfortunately, half a month after

her marriage, her husband fell seriously ill; then their poultry and livestock were stricken by disease. Her reputation was ruined—she was a witch! In the village she was not considered "human" either! But since it was only a little country village after all, Lotus found ways to hit back. She quarrelled with the village women whenever she had the chance, and she played around with the unmarried young men. For it was only when engaged in a hot wrangle or while dallying in amorous pursuits that she was able to feel, at least to some extent—"I'm a human being too."

When, after the debacle of the spring silkworms, starving peasants took to raiding the rice bins of the grain merchants and the wealthy, Lotus's stock as a "human being" rose considerably. For a long time no one called her by the epithet she so abhorred—"witch." She behaved better too. But now Ah Sze's wife had prodded her old scar. What's more, she did it with a lofty air—as if Lotus were not even worth a quarrel!

Lotus gritted her teeth. She was suffering a pain much worse than any beating could have caused. The northwest wind suddenly rose again. Its swishing sound seemed to mock her—"Witch, witch, witch!"

At the bank of the stream, Ah Sze's wife stopped abruptly. She turned around to glance at Lotus, then quickly averted her face and spat. That was adding fuel to the flames! With a cry, Lotus rushed after her tormentor. But before she had gone two steps, she slipped and sat down so heavily that she saw stars.

"Ha, ha, ha! Witch!" Ah Sze's wife taunted from the distance. At the same time another woman came running across the threshing ground, clapping her hands and laughing. It was Sixth Treasure, also one of Lotus's foes.

"Just wait for me, if you've got any guts!" Lotus parped angrily, turning her flat face in the direction of

the newcomer. Though Lotus had come down hard and her backside was smarting, her fury made her forget the pain. She had to give vent to her wrath. But there were two of them against her now. A swearing bout? Sixth Treasure was famed in the village for her sharp tongue. A fight? How could she cope with two? Getting to her feet, she hesitated. Just then a man came walking in her direction from the east. When Lotus saw who he was, she changed her plans.

II

THE new arrival was Huang the Priest. With the death of Old Tung Pao, he had lost another of the few persons with whom he could chat. The younger villagers didn't pay much attention to him. Most people had begun to forget the very existence of this queer old fogey. Originally, he had been a peasant too. But one year he was dragged off to carry ammunition for the army. The rice was just sprouting when he left. When he returned, it was already winter. He consoled himself with the thought that anyhow he could enjoy the New Year meal at home. Then his wife died. He was left alone; they had no children. He sold his small paddy field, retaining only a tiny plot on which he raised vegetables to sell in the town. That was how he lived from year to year. Sometimes the villagers wouldn't see him for four or five days at a stretch. People who went to market in the town said Huang spent the money he received for his vegetables on wine; he sat all day with flushed face discussing the "news" with the professional fortune-teller outside the temple; at night he slept beneath the sacrificial altar.

This manner of living turned Huang "queer." He picked up the highflown phrases of some of the towns-

people—a cross between charmed scriptures and involved literary aphorisms. None of the villagers could understand him, nor were they particularly interested in what he had to say.

Recently, because he couldn't even earn enough for food from the sale of his vegetables, Huang gave up drinking. On the rare occasions when he went to town, he returned in half a day at the latest. Then he would squat on his heels beneath a tree beside the little stream and stare vacantly into space. If anyone who crossed his line of vision happened to glance at him, he would jump up and seize the person by the arm and shout:

"The world is going to be plunged into turmoil! In the northeast—in the northeast the True Emperor has appeared!" He would go on ranting until his listener would spit in disgust and flee.

But ever since the northwest wind had begun to blow, the village had seen very little of him, under the trees or anywhere else. He stayed in his small shack, pottering around mysteriously. Someone who had peeked through a split in Huang's door said "the crackpot" seemed to be praying in all directions; he had set up a shrine with three small effigies made of straw.

The younger villagers said Huang the Priest had gone crazy, but the old women and children kept after him to learn what spirits the three straw figures represented. The young women were also determined to get to the bottom of the matter. Huang the Priest answered them all evasively, and pasted paper over the cracks in his door.

But although Huang was not inclined to talk about his three effigies, he was quite willing to babble of other things. The "pointed star" which Lotus had spoken of was something she had acquired from the store of learning of Huang the Priest. And so, when she now saw him approaching, his eyes staring widely, she

hastened to greet him. She wanted to enlist his aid in her feud with Sixth Treasure and Ah Sze's wife.

"Hey, Priest," she called. "Can you imagine? That woman says the red star means a rebel usurper! What a fool!" Lotus faced her two enemies with a wild laugh. Suddenly, she became aware of her aching backside. A look of grief wiped the laugh from her face, and her hands went behind her.

The eyes of Huang the Priest grew larger. He stared at the two women, then he looked at Lotus and shook his head.

"The True Emperor has come into the world," he intoned. "He is as far away as the horizon, yet he may be right before your eyes! At the foot of a mountain outside Nanking is an old man in a little beancurd shop. Every morning he gets up before dawn to mill his beancurd. Rap, rap, rap! Every morning, someone knocks on the shop door and asks, 'Is it light yet? Is it light yet?' Ha-ha, of course it isn't light yet, so the old man answers, 'No!' He doesn't know that the questioner is the True Emperor!"

"And suppose he answers, 'The sky is light?' Then what?" Sixth Treasure drew near to ask, her eyes fixed on the face of Huang the Priest.

"If he said, 'The sky is light?' In that case, in that case. . . ." Huang the Priest squinted up at the sky, then shook his head in a profoundly mysterious manner. "In that case we poor people'll be able to rise!" Lotus burst out impatiently at Sixth Treasure, her painful buttocks again forgotten.

"Right, right!" breathed Huang the Priest. He felt quite grateful to Lotus. "We're sure to get some good from it. Like a three-year rent holiday, for example."

But Sixth Treasure was nothing if not thorough. Ignoring Lotus, she continued to press Huang the Priest for an answer.

"Won't it be wonderful if the old man decides to say 'The sky is light' real soon!" Ah Sze's wife muttered dully.

"Oh, no! That would never do! He couldn't breach the heavenly edict! It isn't time yet! Why, why when he says 'The sky is light,' the heavenly hosts and generals must come down and help the True Emperor win the throne!" Huang the Priest turned to the younger woman. "Sixth Treasure, you know it would never do to call them all down before the time is ripe!"

"Oh," said Sixth Treasure, somewhat dissatisfied. She pressed her lips together and shook her head.

Lotus burst into laughter. Seeing Sixth Treasure's tight-lipped expression, Lotus thought she ought to find her a good nickname.

"And is the old man an immortal too?" Ah Sze's wife asked in a hushed voice. "Tell me, Priest, how do you know that the one who knocks at the door and asks, 'Is it light yet?' is the True Emperor? What does he look like?"

Huang the Priest laughed coldly. "How do I know? Of course I know. That old man in the beancurd shop has his proof. Rap, rap, rap—every morning the same knock on his door. You understand? A knock on his door, not on anyone else's! 'Is it light yet? Is it light yet?' Every morning the same question! The old man only hears the voice, he doesn't see the speaker. Would he dare to steal a look? Certainly not! That would be breaking heaven's edict—he'd be struck by lightning! Anyhow it is the True Emperor, no doubt about it!"

With this concluding sentence, the face of Huang the Priest grew solemn and, his eyes distended in an awesome majesty. The women went goose-pimplly all over. They could almost hear the knocking at the door.

Buffeted by the northwest wind, the four of them shivered with cold. Sixth Treasure wiped her streaming eyes.

"What about your three straw men?" she asked.

"There is reason for them, there is reason!" Huang the Priest replied theatrically, showing the whites of his eyes. He raised his left hand and pointed at the northern sky with his middle finger. His face became even more grave than before.

The three women looked in the direction he was pointing. It seemed to Ah Sze's wife that the skinny black finger of Huang the Priest was stabbing something in the heavens. Her heart beat faster.

"From there comes the True Emperor, there is the Gory Glow! You understand? The Gory Glow!" Huang the Priest said in a piercing voice, his large eyes staring at the three women.

They all started with fright. Though none of them was very clear what was meant exactly by "Gory Glow," because of the solemnity of Huang the Priest's manner, they felt they really did understand. The wife of Ah Sze especially was suddenly blessed with clear vision. She knew that "Gory Glow" meant many people would die, many people definitely had to die. The place that produced the True Emperor had to be paid its price.

Again Huang the Priest raised his hand and stabbed his finger three times into the northern sky. Each time the heart of Ah Sze's wife leaped. Then he brought his hand down and pointed at the ground on which they stood.

"Here too there will be a Gory Glow," he intoned in a muffled voice. "In six months, a year, you all will fall beneath the blade! This village shall be scourged from the face of the earth!" He let his head droop, his hips moving either with trembling or inaudible incantations.

The three women sighed. Lotus looked at Sixth Treasure as if to say, "Let's see who'll be the first to die—you or me!" But Sixth Treasure was eyeing Huang the

Priest a bit sceptically. After a pause, Ah Sze's wife suddenly blurted:

"Then there's no salvation? Does that—"

"Who says so!" Huang the Priest interrupted aggressively, fairly hopping with excitement. "I'm ordering my three straw figures to serve as substitute victims! Seven sevens make forty-nine days—a few days still remain. Bring me your written horoscope, plus fifty coppers, and a straw man will meet the disaster in your place. You understand? There are only a few days left."

"But the True Emperor—when is he coming?" asked Lotus. The base of her spine still ached a little.

Huang the Priest stared straight ahead as if he hadn't heard the question. The cutting northwest wind was making everyone's eyes stream. The fir trees in the Chang family cemetery were groaning in the gale. Huang the Priest wiped his eyes with his middle finger and looked grave.

"When is he coming? When all the fir trees in the Chang family cemetery are dead and gone—then he will come!"

"Ah, the fir trees!" chorused the three women. Their eyes shone with both fear and hope. They would be punished by Skinfint Chang each time a tree disappeared; of this they were afraid. Yet hope lurked behind their fear. And so, in spite of themselves, they couldn't help having a certain amount of confidence in Huang the Priest's rambling blether.

III

AH Sze's wife had been fretting over a problem for several days. Her father had advised her to take a job as a servant in town—she would get her food and could

earn a little money besides. She thought her father's advice was good. But her husband wanted to continue tilling his rented land, as it was much harder for a man to find work in town than a woman. If he still were to tend his fields, he would need her help.

Ah To disagreed with his elder brother. "Till rented land?" he scoffed. "You break your back over it but starve just the same! In a good year we can get fifteen loads of rice from our fields. After paying six and a half for rent we ought to have enough left to eat. But there's the interest on our debt . . . and fertilizer costs money too. By the time you get through paying this and paying that, you find you've been working for nothing. We don't even have enough for thin gruel!"

Ah Sze said nothing, his face bitter. He knew they couldn't live off rented land. His wife could earn some money as a servant and, as for himself, he could get by doing odd jobs. But something seemed to stick in his chest. He felt to take such a step would mean the end. He looked at his wife, waiting for her to speak.

"What's the use of putting it off?" demanded Ah To. "We've had to sell all our land. We're up to our ears in debt. Even this broken-down house doesn't belong to us any more. What are we hanging around here for? The way I see it, you two ought to go into town and get jobs where you can eat. As to the debts the old man piled up, I say the hell with 'em!"

"Little Pao could stay with my father," mused the wife, then caught herself. Her father had no home of his own. He too was living at his place of employment. One grandson was staying with him already and his boss grumbled about it at times. It was hardly likely he could get away with bringing in another grandson. It might even result in his losing his job. No one in town liked to hire people who brought children with them. . . .

When she thought of this, the idea of eating an employer's food didn't seem quite so attractive.

"I've been thinking too," said Ah Sze. He was almost in tears as he watched her face. "The trouble is we have no place to send the kid."

"I've never seen anybody shilly-shally like you!" cried Ah To. "I'll take Little Pao and I guarantee he'll have enough to eat and enough to wear! He's twelve years old already. You can't always coddle him like a sucking babe!"

Ah Sze unhappily shook his head and his wife retorted:

"No, no, I'd worry too much! Ai! What would our family come to—scattering to the four winds! It's no good for a family to split up like that!"

"Hah! With the world all going to hell, people starving by the thousands—what does it matter if we do split up!" Ah To exploded. "In these times a man can die like a dog and no one will care. What's so terrible about spitting up!" He glared at his brother and sister-in-law as if he wanted to swallow down the irresolute pair in one gulp.

Because he was angry, they did not reply. But his blistering wrath did its work. The thing that had been weighing on Ah Sze's chest—making him want to continue tilling the fields in the same old way even though it was rented land, making him reluctant to work for others, making him feel perpetually depressed and unable to come to any decisions—that thing now seemed, with one kick of Ah To's foot, to have been smashed wide open. And what was revealed inside was merely a fear of splitting the family!

They had always been a closely knit family in the past, and once owned their own land. Later, they had been willing to till rented land because they thought in that way they would hold the family together. To drift off

in various directions now—wouldn't that be letting down their ancestors, and wouldn't it be letting down Little Pao, their son? The "family" had long been the only thing in which they had any faith. Ruined though they were, how could they abandon a faith that had been so many years in the building?

Yet Ah To's words had hewn that faith asunder, like a knife hacking through their hearts. "With all the world going to hell . . . what does it matter if we do split up! In these times a man can die like a dog and no one will care!"

The more the wife thought of it, the worse she felt. She began to cry. When is the True Emperor coming? she wondered tearfully. Can the three straw men of Huang the Priest do any good?

In spite of her sorrowful state of mind, she thought she saw a ray of hope.

IV

THE weather became colder every day. It snowed. Many vegetables were spoiled by frost. The villagers had nothing left to exchange in town for rice. Often there was no traffic between town and village for several days. In a neighbouring hamlet the people were starving.

Someone discovered that the roots of the mulberry tree were edible—they tasted rather like yams. Everyone began digging up mulberry roots.

The wife of Ah Size viewed the roots with enmity now, though she had formerly cherished the mulberry trees as her very life. They were a painful reminder of the blow her family had suffered when they last raised silkworms—fed on the leaves of the mulberry—and of

the fact that their own grove of trees had already been pledged with the local money lender.

A few young men disappeared from the village. Sixth Treasure's brother Fu-ching, Li the Tiger whom Skinfint Chang had persecuted, and Ah To, one day suddenly were gone. But none of the villagers cared. What they were most concerned about was the fir trees in the Chang family cemetery. Even though it was snowing, some of them went to see how many trees remained. The prediction of Huang the Priest had quickly become known to every one in the village and many people believed it.

More and more slips of paper were pinned on the three straw men in Huang the Priest's ramshackle hut. These were the horoscopes of various villagers—Little Pao's among them. Ah Sze's wife was trying to raise another fifty coppers so as to be able to add her husband's horoscope to the others.

Of all the women, Sixth Treasure was the only one who placed no credence in Huang the Priest's raving. But she was not in the village either. Some said she had gone to work in a factory in Shanghai; others claimed she had moved to town.

Shortly before the winter solstice a rumour flew through the village that the True Emperor had made his appearance in the neighbouring hamlet of Chichia Creek. Chao, one of the villagers, was holding forth about this miracle to a group on the threshing ground as if he had seen the Emperor with his own eyes:

"He's only twelve. A snot-nose kid, just like Little Pao. . . ."

Several listeners burst into laughter and Chao's face turned red. "If you don't believe me, go and see for yourselves!" he shouted. "Ha, talk about 'The immortals among us do not reveal themselves'—this case really proves it. Don't rush me now, let me think. Ah, that's right—last summer, the kid—the True Emperor—was

very ill, unconscious for three days and three nights. When he came to, he had the Golden Mouth! Nobody knew it at first. Then, on Mid-Autumn Festival Day, he went out with the others, picking yarns. There was a big rock blocking the path and he hollered at it—'Roll away!' And what do you know—that big rock just picked itself up and rolled right out of the path! He's got the Golden Mouth!"

Chao's audience stared at him wide-eyed. A few people turned to look at the painfully thin Little Pao, standing behind his mother.

"The True Emperor should have come into the world long ago," someone said softly, almost sighing.

Ah Sze wasn't satisfied. "What else did the Golden Mouth say? Tell us, Brother Chao!"

But Chao could only gaze at him vacantly, mouth agape. A simple fellow who told exactly what he knew, and no more, Chao was incapable of embroidering a tale. After a pause, he again burst out agitatedly:

"All the villages are talking about it! *He* has come! About twelve years old—the same as Little Pao!"

"Ai! Only twelve! By the time he mounts the throne our bones will be turning soft!" Ah Sze's wife interrupted, her shoulders hunched as if against the cold.

Lotus saw a chance to pick a quarrel and immediately sprang to arms. "Who says so?" she demanded. "Actually it might happen very soon! The stars will be helping him! Emperors whose luck was strong mounted the throne before at eleven or twelve! If we have to wait till your bones turn soft, we'll all be dead and buried!"

"So now you've got the Golden Mouth too!" retorted Ah Sze's wife. "Shameless hussy!" In her heart she thought Lotus was probably right, but she was unwilling to admit it in the presence of so many people.

The two were getting ready to start another row. Huang the Priest intervened.

"We mustn't quarrel among ourselves," he insisted. Then he asked Chao, "How far is Chichia Creek from here? Not even three miles, is it? That puts our village right in the Gory Glow! A few days ago the idol in the little shrine near the bridge shed tears and the waters of the stream shone red. Oh, woe! Soon! Half a year, one year! Remember what I am saying!"

His last few words were like the shriek of an owl. His listeners shivered, fear creeping into their hope. They could visualize his straw men, festooned with slips of paper. Those who had already paid their fifty coppers sighed with relief and gazed respectfully at the face of Huang the Priest.

"In the past few days, three more fir trees have been cut down!" Lotus mumbled, looking north toward the patch of green that was the Chang family cemetery.

Everyone nodded. A few sighed softly.

Chao hadn't expected that his story about the True Emperor would lead to such serious consequences, and he became alarmed. He had not yet pinned his horoscope to a straw man in spite of his wife's prodding. They had quarrelled about it, but now he felt he had better spend the money after all. Although fifty coppers was a large sum, he thought he probably could manage it. He already owed last month's levy for the village "Protection Corps"—a kind of militia maintained by the wealthy. Why not miss another month's payment and be done with it? Wouldn't that give him the money he needed?

Chao was not the only one thinking along these lines. Quite a number of people had already transferred their assessment for the "Protection Corps" to the keeping of Huang the Priest's straw men. They had reasoned it out quite clearly—the Protection Corps levy had to be

paid every month, but Huang the Priest only required one payment; what's more, they didn't believe that the Protection Corps' "Combined Armoured Company," stationed in the Temple of Earth a mile outside the village, could be of much use in an emergency. The combined armour of the company was exactly three rifles, manned by the company's full complement—a captain, sergeant and a private. It seemed to the villagers that as protectors these three warriors would be far inferior to the three straw men of Huang the Priest.

Nor did they believe it was ever the intention of the Combined Armoured Company to protect anything of theirs. The three riflemen had arrived at the end of summer, when the peasants had nothing to eat and were raiding rice bins. What property worthy of protection could starving people have?

Nevertheless, the Combined Armoured Company concerned itself with many things, and in a highly efficient manner. Although because of the cold the members of the Company spent all day in the Temple of Earth, they knew about the True Emperor in Chichia Creek and they knew about the three straw men of Huang the Priest. Even the words which Chao and the others had spoken on the threshing ground that day had reached their ears.

In addition, the fact that many of the villagers were using their Protection Corps assessment money to buy the privilege of pinning horoscopes on the straw men was also known to the Combined Armoured Company!

Four days after Chao made his startling announcement, the Combined Armoured Company made an expedition to Chichia Creek and arrested the child with the Golden Mouth and conducted him to the Temple of Earth "for investigation." This was on a grey afternoon. There was a fine drizzle that threatened to turn to snow.

The interior of the temple was very dark. The entire company—that is to say the captain, the sergeant and the private—was exhausted from its long expedition. The captain issued an order to tie the child to the baked mud leg of the temple's idol, appointed the sergeant Officer of the Day and directed the private to stand sentry at the door. On the morrow, he said, they would report the capture to their superiors and request instructions. The True Emperor squatted at the feet of the clay idol, weeping softly.

Extracting a wrinkled cigarette from the pocket of his tunic, the captain carefully pinched it straight. He lit up, inhaled deeply, then expelled the smoke and said to his Officer of the Day:

"We've broken this case. How much of a reward do you think we'll get?"

"There's no use talking about rewards," the Officer of the Day replied coldly. "I hear our battalion hasn't even issued our winter uniforms yet."

The captain frowned and took another drag on his cigarette.

It was much darker now. The Officer of the Day lit an oil lamp. He was about to relieve the sentry so that the latter could come in and make their supper, when the captain abruptly clapped his hands together and stood up. Taking the oil lamp, the captain shone it on the True Emperor's face, peering at the boy intently.

"So you want to be emperor?" he intoned threateningly. "You can lose your head for a crime like this. Lose your head, understand?"

The child said nothing. He was too frightened even to cry.

"Who else is in your gang? Speak up!" shouted the Officer of the Day. He had come to stand beside the captain.

The only reply was a shake of the head.

Furious, the captain set down the lamp, grabbed the child by the hair and pulled his head back. Glaring cruelly at the upturned dirty thin face, the captain yelled: "Are you deaf? Who's in your gang? Speak up and you won't be beaten!"

"I don't know! All I know is gathering fuel and picking herbs. I can't help what people call me. That's all I know."

"You're lying, you little bastard!"

The captain banged the boy's head against the leg of the idol, repeatedly. The child bleated like a lamb at the slaughter, clay dust raining down on his head from the idol's leg.

Hands behind his back, the Officer of the Day gazed at the decayed remainder of the white beard of the idol. He knew what the captain had in mind, but he could also see that the child was unspeakably stupid. He waited until the captain had spent his anger, then tugged him by the tunic and whispered something in his ear. The two walked off to one side and conferred in low tones. The boy's head was swelling out in lumps. Frightened beyond tears, he stared with large terrified eyes.

"Tomorrow we'll arrest Huang the Priest and bring him here. Then we'll get something done," were the concluding words of the Officer of the Day.

Smiling, the captain nodded. Again he approached the child, not the least fierce now, in fact very amiable. "We've wronged you, little boy. Tomorrow, we'll send you home. But first you must tell me—which families in your village have money? If you don't speak, I'll hit you again!" Here, the captain's face suddenly grew savage, and he stamped his foot.

Trembling all over, the child raised his face. He shivered violently for a moment, but finally only shook his head and wept.

"Dirty dog!" roared the captain. "Unless you're beaten, you won't talk, eh!"

The Officer of the Day took up a stick and stood waiting for the captain's order.

Suddenly there were wild yells outside the temple. The two men wheeled around to see their sentry, shielding his head with his arms, coming flying in the doorway, closely pursued by the dark figures of several men. The Officer of the Day dropped his stick and fled through the little door beside the throne of the idol. No coward, the captain dashed for his rifle hanging at the side of the room. But by the time he got his hands on the gun, he was seized around the waist. A crushing blow from the handle of a hoe felled him dead to the ground.

Fu-ching had grabbed the sentry and relieved him of his cartridge belt.

"One got away!" shouted Ah To mopping his face. He was spattered with the captain's blood.

"But we got the three rifles and all their cartridges. Let's grant a pardon to the one who ran," said Li the Tiger.

The three peasants laughed.

Ah To broke open the cords that bound the True Emperor, then raised the lamp to examine the boy's face. The child was dazed with terror, his eyes large, his teeth chattering. Fu-ching and Li the Tiger raised the child from the floor and kneaded his chest. After a moment, he came to his senses. He burst into tears.

Putting down the lamp, Ah To smiled. "So this is the True Emperor! Go on, run along home!"

Outside the temple door, the wind rose, driving before it a storm of whirling snowflakes.

July 1, 1933