

CHINESE LITERATURE



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CONTENTS

THE FIRST STEP (excerpt from a novel) — <i>Hao Jan</i>	3
POEMS	
Songs of Army Life — <i>Wang Shib-hsiang</i>	63
STORIES	
A New Comrade-in-Arms — <i>Lu Hsuan</i>	73
On Patrol — <i>Lin Po-sung</i>	83
SKETCHES	
The Ferryman — <i>Hsiao Hsing</i>	90
On the Banks of the Peacock River — <i>Ting Hsiu-feng</i>	95
NOTES ON LITERATURE AND ART	
New Developments in Handicraft Arts — <i>Pien Min</i>	100
Two New Ivory Carvings — <i>Pien Chi</i>	105
A Soldier and a Poet — <i>Liu Kuo-liang</i>	108
PLATES	
Spring (painting in the traditional style) — <i>Kuan Shan-yueh</i>	62-63
Holiday at the Commune (painting in the traditional style) — <i>Lin Feng-su</i>	72-73
Hunting Whales (coloured woodcut) — <i>Chia Teh-hsin</i>	82-83
New Handicraft Arts	94-95
Front Cover: Schoolmates — <i>Hsu Kuang</i>	

The First Step

Soon after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, land reform was carried out and peasants all over China received land. However, their ownership of land could not of itself put an end to poverty or guarantee a good life for all. The peasants were faced by two alternatives. They could either get organized, transform their individual economy into a collective economy and work for the welfare of all; or they could go it alone, each trying to enrich his own family and reverting to the old relations of production.

This problem is the central theme of Hao Jan's new novel *The Bright Road* which shows the revolutionary changes in Sweet Meadow Village in the province of Hopei shortly after Liberation, when the first spring ploughing after land reform gave rise to a sharp struggle.

Freed from the fetters of feudal land ownership, the poor and lower-middle peasants of Sweet Meadow were keen to work hard. However, the power was in the hands of the village head Chang Chin-fa who, although a Communist, encouraged each peasant family to get rich by its own individual efforts. The overthrown landlords and rich peasants seized this chance to raise their heads again and the spontaneous tendency towards capitalism developed unchecked, for Chang also made use of his advantageous position to exploit peasants who were short of draught animals and farm implements.

Then a genuine Communist Kao Ta-chuan who was whole-heartedly for going the socialist road put up a fight against the village head. On the basis of what he learned from his own struggle and from the experience of other districts, he organized the first mutual-aid teams in Sweet Meadow and with the help of the masses successfully carried out the spring ploughing.

The first part of this long novel totals 400,000 words and was published by the People's Literature Publishing House, Peking in May 1972. We are publishing excerpts in this issue under the title *The First Step*.

The Editors

1

First came apricot-blossom then peach-blossom, and soon willow-down was floating everywhere.

On the heath wild plants of every kind thrust tender fresh green shoots through the black soil.

It was 1951 and the busy spring-ploughing season had just started on the banks of Bright Cloud River in Sweet Meadow Village. After the revolutionary upheaval following land reform the People's Government had issued loans for production as well as relief grain, and this was an added stimulus for the peasants.

Two Party members Kao Ta-chuan and Chang Chin-fa were fairly bursting with energy, each going all out to show that his line was right.

Chang Chin-fa the village head, having just finished building his new house, now had more time to devote to village affairs. He organized three mass meetings one after another in three different districts, passing on the instructions from his superiors that each peasant should work hard to enrich himself. His hopes centred on the autumn harvest, by which time he trusted a number of peasant families would have become very well off, thus giving him solid achievements to report. It goes without saying that he himself must be among those who had bettered themselves, for this would prove the correctness of his line.

The other Party member Kao Ta-chuan had mobilized the most active of the poor peasants and done a good deal of propaganda work. On the suggestion of the old poor peasant Chou Chung, he paid considerable attention to the weakest links in the chain of production. The activists helped the villagers to carry out their patriotic pledges, made sure that each household had a supply of manure and that this was well mixed and carried to the fields in good time. Kao

had urged the activists to pay special attention to the ploughing preparations of the poor peasants. He and Chu Tieh-han, another Party member, sat in on the family discussions of several households faced with difficulties and helped them arrange their work down to the last detail. He wanted to ensure that all the peasants would make a good job of the ploughing, so as to reap the first bumper crop after the land reform and be able to sell grain to the state for the first time.

Enthusiasm ran high. Before dawn people started work: cleaning out pigsties, mixing manure and carrying or carting it to the fields. Inside and outside the village all was bustle and excitement.

Kao Ta-chuan, two crates of manure swinging like wings from his shoulder-pole, sped like the wind. Sweat dripped from his newly-shaved head on to his thick black eyebrows and ruddy cheeks and then bespattered the ground. He was stripped down to his vest, the muscles standing out on his powerful arms. Under a big willow by the roadside he halted.

"Hey, Lu!" he shouted up at the tree. "Why are you cutting those branches?"

Lu Chun-chiang, the young poor peasant up the tree, stopped swinging his axe to look down. "I'm growing vegetables in my yard," he answered. "I want to plant some branches to make a hedge."

"Have you finished manuring your fields?"

"Yes. First thing this morning."

"When will you start ploughing?"

"Not for a couple of days."

"Got hold of some draught animals?"

"Old Su's going to lend us his. My brother and I will work for him in exchange."

"That's fine."

"How about you? That small donkey of yours can't pull the plough on its own."

"Old Mrs. Hsu of Lotus Pool has sent several times to ask me to do her ploughing for her in return for the loan of her ox. I said it would be better for each of us to team up with someone in our own village; but she can't find anybody suitable there."

"So much the better. Our village never had enough draught animals. What with those the landlords killed off during land reform, we're even shorter now. Besides, this year all that waste land we're opening up means there are hardly enough cattle to go round."

"That's true."

"Don't just lend other people a hand, or you'll get behind yourself."

By now Kao's younger brother Erh-lin had come up with another load of manure. Together the two brothers raced off to the fields.

Their stretch of land was fairly flat, dipping down at the southern tip to a ditch. These fertile fields had been allotted to the Kao family after Liberation. Before that they had been landless. For generations they had longed for a piece of land on which to settle. For this they had travelled all the way from Shantung to Hopei, had sweated blood and worked their fingers to the bone — but not a clod of earth could they call their own. Even their final resting place was a pit six feet by three in the common graveyard, where they buried their dear ones hounded to death by the old society together with their undying hope for land. . . . For two whole weeks after they were given land, Erh-lin used to pace these fields of theirs every day, feasting his eyes on the earth and waiting eagerly for the sowing and harvest. Their happiness was to take root in this precious plot.

The two brothers dumped their manure at the southern end of the field, then walked back with empty crates. The soil which had just thawed out was soft and moist. Treading on it filled their hearts with gladness.

"Back where we come from in Shantung," said Erh-lin, "the earth is hard as a stone before it's tilled, but here it's so soft it's like treading on a cotton quilt. Makes me want to roll on the ground!"

Seeing his brother's ingenuous smile, Kao grinned. "Right. Everyone knows this stretch by the bank is good soil. That year when I started work as a hired hand, this was the first plot I tilled. Now I'm tilling my own field for the first time, I feel really good."

Erh-lin stamped the soil several times, as if to make sure it was solid. "Sometimes I'm afraid this is only a dream," he confessed.

"I never thought to see this day. Why, just by stretching out my hand I've got a piece of land of my own."

"Yes, this was beyond our wildest dreams," replied Kao. "But those old revolutionaries had it in mind all along. Think how many men have shed their blood and died to liberate us poor folk. When you remember them, you'll realize that we didn't come by this land so easily, by just stretching out our hands — it was won with the blood of heroes. It's the Communist Party that gave us this land. We must show ourselves worthy of it."

Erh-lin nodded. "Of course. I'll put all I've got into it. We've time and energy. I'll till it five or six times and overtop the figure we pledged to produce."

Kao's heart leapt within him at thought of the future. With shining eyes he gazed into the distance and said: "After a few years we shall be able to supply more grain to the state, and by then our village will have turned socialist. We shall have tractors for ploughing, trucks for transport. We peasants will be organized then like factory workers, with a sense of discipline, sowing together and harvesting together. Every family will have a happy life. Won't that be great?"

Just then Chou Chung's daughter Li-ping and her sister-in-law came along carrying manure, and called out a greeting in passing.

This set Kao thinking: the Chous can handle their ploughing all right; they've many hands and plenty of relatives to help out. Then there's Mrs. Teng; she'll be taken care of because her son's in the army. . . . As he thought of different families in turn, it struck him that the one with the most serious problem was Liu Hsiang's. Liu was short of labour power and had no cattle. Kao had heard that he had tried in vain to enlist help. Most families owning draught animals had already promised them elsewhere by the time he put in his request.

Kao and his brother made two more trips with manure. When not greeting people on the way his whole mind was occupied with Liu Hsiang's problem. He listed to himself all the cattle-owning households in the village, but could think of no one in a position to help. . . .

Swallows flew low, skimming the ground. Little by little the sunset sky turned dark. The countryside seemed to contract as a light mist rose. It was time to knock off and the Kao brothers went home.

Kao's son Little Dragon was waiting for them at the door. He bounded over to his uncle and father, then carried their shoulder-poles into the house. Kao's wife Jui-fen had already laid the table, and now she brought in a bowl of steaming porridge.

Erh-lin put away their gear, dusted himself off and took his place at the table, while Kao washed his face, then helped his son wash his hands.

As Jui-fen ladled out the porridge she asked: "Aren't you going to stop night school till the ploughing's over?"

"I think we'll go on for another three days," said Kao.

"When are you going to fetch the seeds?"

"When classes have stopped."

"Chin Kai was looking for you just now. He wants to go with you when you fetch the seeds."

This gave Kao an idea. Although Chin Kai was a middle peasant, he had behaved fairly well since land reform. If Liu could come to an agreement with him about draught animals, the two men could help each other. . . . With this in mind, Kao hung up his towel and started out.

"Where are you going?" asked his wife. "Don't you want any supper?"

"I want to find Chin. He has draught animals and probably hasn't loaned them to anyone yet. I'll try to get him to let Liu Hsiang borrow them."

"Can't you do it after supper?"

"The earlier the better. I shan't feel easy in my mind till it's fixed."

As the evening broadcast started and from the club came the sound of gongs and drums, groups of young men and girls headed for the night school.

The school occupied what had been the accountant's office in the western compound of Landlord Crooked Mouth. Some tables had been lined up here, and a paraffin lamp above cast a gay leaping

light on the closely-packed villagers smelling of sweat and earth who were studying a new handbook on world affairs.

Both Kao and Liu were among the students here. The former told the latter: "Chin Kai agreed like a shot to my suggestion that you borrow his ox."

This sounded too good to be true. "I heard he'd promised it to a relative. Won't this upset their plans?" asked Liu dubiously.

"We talked about that," replied Kao. "He says his relative's village is well off for draught animals and he can easily fix himself up. So you needn't worry. Go ahead with your ploughing."

"My wife and I were fairly at our wits' end. You've solved a big problem for us."

"For a middle peasant Chin Kai isn't bad," remarked Kao. "He wants to be progressive. By teaming up with him you can help him. Since that ox of his is strong, if you can't make up the cost to him with your labour, your wife can help his family with some sewing so that he doesn't lose out."

"Right." Liu nodded.

Since this was a busy season they broke up early. As soon as the round golden moon rose in the east, the class was dismissed and the young folk trooped out of the school chatting, singing or calling out cheerfully to each other.

Liu, textbook in hand, had just come down the steps when a little girl ran across the road to meet him.

"Come home quick, dad!" she cried, catching hold of his hand.

"What are you doing here, Spring Joy?" he asked.

"Mum's been taken bad."

Liu hurried off in great dismay with his daughter. During supper his wife had admitted to feeling poorly. She wouldn't have sent the child out so late to fetch him unless she were really ill. . . . Anxiety preyed on his mind.

2

This was no sudden illness that had incapacitated Mrs. Liu. It was a recurrence of an old complaint.

In the depth of winter fifteen years earlier Liu's wife, then working for the landlord, was grinding flour to make cakes for New Year. Although eight months pregnant, she was not allowed to leave the mill-stone for two whole days and nights. The draught animals worked in shifts, but no one relieved her. The northwest wind cut through her like a knife. Finally, dizzy with hunger and quite worn out, she fell down in a dead faint, making the donkey pull up short in fright. That was when her first son was born.

Liu had been working in the evenings in a coal shop to earn some extra money for the child's birth. Coming home late each night and leaving again at dawn, he was unable to look after his wife. Nor did the other hired hands have any time to keep an eye on her. Fear of the landlord kept her from calling for help and not until after nightfall, when the whole household was quiet, did she drag herself home. When Liu groped his way back at midnight, he found the new-born babe a frozen corpse and his wife too at death's door.

To save her, Liu ploughed frantically through the snowstorm to borrow money from the landlord. But Crooked Mouth swindled him, exacting such exorbitant interest that after a whole year of back-breaking work Liu ended up with nothing in his pocket. With the help of poor friends he nursed his wife back to safety, but from then on her health was undermined.

When the first spring ploughing after land reform started, Mrs. Liu made herself ill by worry and overwork. For a few days she said nothing, trying to bear up, and now she was worse.

Running home, Liu felt his wife's forehead and pulse and suppressing his anxiety asked: "How do you feel?"

His wife raised one thin hand and answered weakly: "Don't worry. I'll soon be better. . . ."

"Shall I get a doctor?"

"No need. No. It costs money. . . ."

"Even if it does, your illness must be seen to."

Liu paced round the room, then told Spring Joy to look after her mother and two young brothers while he went to fetch a doctor.

For that whole night and all the next day and night their household

was in a commotion. Still there was no improvement in the patient's condition.

Normally Mrs. Liu's poor health was not a great worry, but this attack had come at a critical moment. In the busy ploughing season even the well-to-do peasants had plenty of problems, to say nothing of a poor man like Liu. He had just received land and had to start farming from scratch. With his small savings he had bought an old plough, some tools and some seed grain. At first he could find no family with draught animals willing to team up with him; now luckily Kao had fixed things up with Chin Kai, solving this problem for him. Still, he had to pay with his labour. Two man-hours in exchange for each hour the animal worked: this was the rule. Liu was the only able-bodied man in the house, but now that his helpmate was ill he would have to spend money on medicine and stay at home to cook and mind the children. What time would this leave him for working in the fields?

Eaten up by worry, Liu sat by his sick wife, his youngest son on his knee. The flickering flame in the lamp made his blood boil with impatience; the gusty spring wind in the trees made him restless as the branches tossed by the wind. A host of memories crowded to his mind.

Recently Liu had worked with Kao on a building and transport job at a suburban railway station in Peking, where he had many novel experiences. That was when he started to think about certain big issues which had never previously occurred to him. He came to know Kao well and was completely on his side when after their return to Sweet Meadow Chang Chin-fa and some others made things difficult for him. Liu had a low opinion of his own ability, but he meant to do all in his power to back Kao up: to work hard on the plot allotted him during land reform, to ensure a larger yield, to be the first to supply grain and cotton to the state. Kao had discussed with him several times the need to give the fields more fertilizer, select good seeds and start ploughing early to guarantee success. But now this misfortune had befallen him before he had taken even the first step forward. At this moment every single second counted. A few more

days delay would make it impossible for him to catch up, and that would be the end of all his fair hopes.

His little son was sleeping now in his arms. His wife was resting quietly, her eyes closed. Struck by an idea, Liu laid the child on the bed, turned the lamp-wick a little higher, then made his way as fast as he could to Kao's house.

Late as it was, Kao's courtyard was a scene of cheerful activity.

From Erh-lin's room came the clatter of tools being sorted. Jui-fen in the doorway was sifting seeds with a sieve. In the north room Kao was talking to an old woman.

Liu went in and found Kao squatting on the *kang* stripping corn cobs as he chatted with his visitor — old Mrs. Hsu from Lotus Pool Village, who had helped Kao's family with sewing and mending in the old days. Her son had been taken away by the Japanese as conscript labour, and for more than ten years she had had no word from him. Before Liberation she had sometimes managed to find odd jobs during the busy seasons, but at other times she went begging, living in the tumble-down temple in Lotus Pool Village and undergoing hardships of every kind. Since Liberation she had been given land and a half share in an ox. Moreover the local government was trying to find news of her son who was believed to have gone to the northeast. So at last good fortune was knocking at her door and this old woman who had been waiting for death felt young again — even her failing eyes had grown much brighter.

Liu greeted old Mrs. Hsu and asked how the preparations for spring ploughing were going in her village.

"Pretty well the same as here," she told him. "We're all bursting with energy, eager to raise much bigger crops, to make our life better and better. In all my sixty years and more I've never seen farming folk so busy and happy. How are you getting on? Got everything ready?"

Liu forced a smile but made no answer.

"Uncle Liu has his difficulties," said Kao. "But he'll manage."

"True," said old Mrs. Hsu. "Life is never easy for farmers. Though we're our own masters now, the first step is hard, it isn't all plain sailing. Just look at me. I never had an inch of land to stand

on: nothing but worry, worry all the time. Now I've got land but I still have my worries. . . ."

"Your new worries aren't the same as your old ones," Kao put in. "Before you worried about how to keep body and soul together. Now you worry about how to go further, to reach higher. The two things are as different as chalk and cheese."

Mrs. Hsu turned with a smile to Liu and remarked: "In these few months since last I saw him, how Ta-chuan has changed! He sees further now, he has big ideas, and it's a treat to hear him talk. I came hurrying over here worried sick, but before my sweat's dried he's already cheered me up."

"This new society is good for young folk. It makes men of them," Liu rejoined. "Kao's a Party member. He's a tower of strength for us poor peasants in Sweet Meadow."

Kao brushed this compliment aside, protesting: "No, Uncle Liu, you've put it the wrong way round. It's the poor peasants who are a tower of strength. We wouldn't dare think big, let alone forge ahead, if not for the masses." With that he moved further in to make a place for Liu on the *kang*.

Liu shook his head. "No, I won't sit down, I must be getting back. I came to see you about fetching the seeds. You must take Chin Kai and the others. I can't go. My wife's no better, so I can't leave home. . . . Well, that's all, I must be off."

Kao leapt down from the *kang* and ran out after him into the courtyard calling: "Wait a bit, uncle!"

Liu halted, touched by the younger man's concern.

Kao studied his face by the light coming through the window. "You're not looking too happy," he said.

"I've been sleeping late these days. . . ."

"No, you look down-hearted. Why?"

Liu shifted uneasily, not knowing how to answer, reluctant to add to the worries of his warm-hearted friend.

"Are you short of cash? Short of labour?" demanded Kao. "Just tell me what your trouble is, so that we can help."

"There's nothing. . . ."

"I'll get seeds for you," promised Kao. "If you have any dif-

difficulties, mind you let me know, then we'll tackle them together. We're all one family. Don't stand on ceremony."

"You've worked damn hard for us already," said Liu. "You've got more than you can handle as it is. Don't worry about me. . . ."

"You and I and the others are all melons on the same vine, all one big family," insisted Kao. "Like the ten fingers of a man's hands, we're joined for better or worse. We went through hard times together, then won through together. If anyone has difficulties now, it's up to all the rest of us to help. We must follow where the Party leads and all together march on towards socialism."

Face to face with such a fine Communist, hearing these stirring words, what could Liu say? Bracing himself he answered: "With a friend like you to back me up, I'm not afraid of any difficulties. If I need any help, I'll certainly come to you."

"In that case," said Kao, "I shall set my mind at rest."

As Liu walked back alone his heart felt lighter. The spring breeze caressed his flushed cheeks, starlight shone on his path. He heard a whinny near by — that must be the black mule newly bought by Feng Shao-huai a rich peasant who had escaped being classed as one. The shadowy shapes of houses beside the road reminded him of the new house with a tiled roof which the village head had just finished building, using the new bricks he'd bought dirt cheap from Crooked Mouth. The crafty landlord had stacked these bricks into a thick wall before land reform to prevent their confiscation by the peasants. By selling them to Chang as old bricks he hoped to ingratiate himself with the new village head. Walking down the quiet road, Liu was conscious that a storm was gathering. Compared with all the pressure put on Kao, his own difficulties appeared to him as nothing. He should learn from the young fellow's courage and confidence. The more concern Kao showed for him the less help he should ask for, so as to leave Kao more time and energy to lead the people of Sweet Meadow towards socialism. . . .

Kao's example had restored Liu's confidence. His earlier anxiety had given way to impatience. He burned to get out into the fields to put up a fierce fight against misfortune.

Time and tide wait for no man. There were a few days only left for sowing. All those families with enough labour and draught animals, as well as those who could find others to help them, were going full speed ahead with their ploughing and sowing. From dawn to midnight the countryside and the village were in a ferment of activity. Cuckoos were calling, mill-stones turning, carters' whips cracking. All these sounds spurred the peasants on to greater efforts.

In his impatience to get out to work, Liu paced restlessly round and round his room and courtyard. Five days had passed, yet his wife's illness was worse. He was late with his ploughing and the family's store of grain was being used up little by little to buy medicine. Calling Spring Joy out to the courtyard he squatted down, holding the child's hand, and whispered: "How about asking for leave from school today?"

Holding her satchel, the little girl shook her head. "No. You told me I mustn't play truant."

"Your mother's ill. If you'll keep an eye on her and mind your brothers, I can go out to mix manure, take it to the fields and do our ploughing and sowing. Then when we get in our harvest we shan't need relief from the state, and our grain will help the workers and our volunteers in Korea to defeat the Yanks."

Spring Joy blinked at that and agreed.

Liu patted his daughter's head and straightened up in relief. Taking his pick he started out, reminding Spring Joy: "If mum wakes, come out and fetch me."

It was very quiet outside. There were not even children about. So many people had gone to sow the fields that the doors of most houses were locked.

Liu dug up the manure collected during the winter. Because he kept no pigs or cattle, his only animal manure was some dung he had picked up on the road. Apart from this there was the earth from a little outhouse he had pulled down last winter. The tamped earth was hard to break up. Not knowing when he would be wanted at home again, he worked fast, not sparing himself, swinging his pick so hard that in no time his tattered jacket was soaked with sweat.

In the warm sunshine and the soft spring breeze sparrows were

chirping on the top of walls, chicks were scuttling eagerly along the road, while the heady fragrance of peach and apricot blossom was wafted through the fresh air.

For ten days Liu had been confined to the house. Endless chores and gnawing anxiety had turned him into a shadow of his old self as if he too were ill. Though he clenched his teeth and went all out, his strength soon ebbed away. His pick began to falter, his blows grew lighter, there was a continuous buzzing in his head. When he turned the pick round and started with an effort to smash the chunks of tamped earth one by one, he suddenly blacked out, dropped his pick on his left foot and toppled to the ground. When he came to again, his left foot felt numb; then a piercing pain shot through it.... He heard footsteps approaching and looked up to see Kao.

The young Party member brimming over with confidence and enthusiasm had taken off his padded winter jacket and unbuttoned his white cotton tunic, revealing his broad chest gleaming with sweat. His black cotton trousers were rolled up, his ankles spattered with mud. Striding along with a package in his hand, he was glad to see that Liu had started to mix manure.

"Is your wife better?" he asked with a smile.

Still slumped on the ground, Liu shook his head. "Just the same."

"Seeing you out at work, I thought she must be better. Here's some herb medicine for you to brew and give your wife twice a day, morning and evening. Several women with the same trouble are said to have recovered after two doses of this. Whether that's true or not, you may as well give it a try."



"Yes, anything's worth trying once," agreed Liu. "You never know, it may work." With that, gritting his teeth, he struggled to his feet and took the package.

"We've just finished taking manure to the fields," continued Kao. "Old Mrs. Hsu of Lotus Pool wants me to go over there and help her now. I've teamed up with her, you know. Get your manure mixed while I'm away, and when I come back we can work at night taking it to your fields. Then if Chin Kai's not using his ox, we can finish the ploughing in a couple of days. We'll need to look snappy, but don't you worry. With all of us to lend a hand, your land won't go to waste."

As cheerfully as he could, Liu responded: "Go and get on with your job. Don't worry about me. . . ."

After a few more remarks Kao hurried away.

As soon as Kao had gone, Liu inspected his foot. Blood was seeping through his sock and the pain had grown worse. He steadied himself by leaning against the wall.

3

Kao put in four days of hard work at Lotus Pool Village, but all that time his mind was on Sweet Meadow. How fast was the spring ploughing there going forward? Could the short-handed families finish sowing in time? Was Liu's wife better? . . . On the fifth day, by going all out, he finished sowing the fields belonging to old Mrs. Hsu and the family she had teamed up with; and they agreed to lend him their ox for two and a half days in return.

Kao got up in the middle of the night to feed the ox, then drove it home, reaching Sweet Meadow while the stars were still in the sky.

Jui-fen was just lighting the fire in the kitchen when she heard a sound outside and, hurrying out, saw her husband tethering the ox to the big willow in the courtyard.

"Did you get any sleep?" she asked. "How come you're back so early?"

"This is spring, woman!" retorted Kao as he walked towards the house. "If we don't get those seeds into the ground pretty soon,

it'll be too late. We must hurry. Are all the folk here all right?"

"Things are going like lightning," replied Jui-fen. "Last night Chu Tieh-han and old Uncle Chou came to find you. They're worried because a few families still haven't finished sowing." Following him in she continued: "We hadn't much manure compared with other folk, so after you left Erh-lin and I pulled down and rebuilt the chicken-house and the kitchen range; and he took that rich earth out to the fields one morning. Now we're all ready, just waiting for you to come back to start ploughing and sowing."

Kao had squatted down to wash his face. Dipping his hands in the basin, he asked: "Is Liu's wife better?"

"Not completely." Jui-fen sighed. "And Uncle Liu's hurt his foot. It's swollen up like a pumpkin. He can't even get into his padded trousers."

"How did that happen?" asked Kao in dismay.

"It all started the day before you left. He dropped his pick on his foot when mixing manure."

Hearing this, Kao didn't even stop to wipe his face but immediately hurried out.

The manure heap outside Liu's gate had been scattered right and left by chickens and dogs. His gate was closed; the sorghum stalks of his thatch were coming loose, and the yard was a dismal sight with no lamplight showing through the window, no smoke from the kitchen.

Kao halted, realizing he had come too early. Mrs. Liu would not be up yet, and he didn't like to disturb her. He paced anxiously up and down by the gate wringing his powerful hands. "Poor Uncle Liu. It's just too bad," he thought. "He was so keen to get cracking, but he crippled himself before even starting. Liu was ground down in the old society. He's the worrying sort, afraid to take more hard knocks. This must have struck him like a bolt out of the blue. . . ."

Just then a child near by wailed: "I'm hungry, hungry. . . ."

He heard Spring Joy's voice: "Hush. We'll eat when dad comes back. . . ."

The broken gate was not locked, simply closed. Kao pushed it open quietly and tiptoed into the courtyard.

The cottage door stood open. Spring Joy, seated on the doorsill, was rocking her little brother to sleep in her arms. When she saw someone coming she started calling out, thinking it must be her father. Then realizing her mistake she lowered her head and went on rocking and patting the little boy.

Kao stepped over and bent down to ask softly: "Where's your dad?"

"He's out," was the faint answer.

"Is his foot better?"

"No."

"Where's your mother?"

"She's asleep."

"Haven't you cooked any breakfast?"

"All our grain's gone to buy medicine."

The little boy whimpered in his sleep, and his elder sister patted him again.

Kao stood there at a loss, chilled to the heart. Though spring had come the mornings were still like winter, and his coat wet with sweat was cold. It was brighter now, the stars had disappeared and cocks were beginning to crow. All this only increased his distress and anxiety. Not knowing what to say he turned and left, walking off with heavy steps and a heavier heart.

As the sky grew light morning mist and kitchen smoke hung low above the village.

Erh-lin was fixing a ploughshare to the old wooden plough in their yard when Kao returned.

"If you hadn't come back, I'd have taken time off to fetch you this morning," he cried cheerfully. "You're just in the nick of time. In three days at most we'll have finished sowing. There wasn't much snow last year, so the soil looks dry; but yesterday evening I dug up a patch and found our fields are still moist underneath. So the seeds should sprout all right. Have breakfast now, then take a nap. After that you can come to the fields to take my place."

With a nod and a muttered assent, Kao hurried inside.

Jui-fen ladling porridge out of the pan told her husband: "Erh-lin wants to get on with the ploughing straightaway, now that we've

got the ox. Since he's not waiting for breakfast, you may as well eat later with him. I'll make you some more flapjacks."

As Kao brushed past her, he felt the steam from the porridge hot on his face. He raised the door-curtain and entered the inner room.

Little Dragon was just putting on his clothes. At sight of his father he scrambled up, holding his trousers, and jumped to the edge of the *kang*. "Why did you go out the moment you got home?" he cried. "Did you bring those peanuts you promised me from Aunt Hsu?"

Instead of answering, Kao lifted the lid of the flour-bin: it was empty. He groped in the millet-bin: There wasn't much millet left either. Then he saw a bag on a stool and, feeling it, found it was full of maize. He picked it up and slung it over his shoulder.

Little Dragon hopped down from the *kang* to follow his father, imagining he was going to grind some maize-meal.

Jui-fen gave a start when she saw what her husband was up to and the determined look on his grim face. Without a word she pulled Little Dragon back. But a minute later she ran after Kao. "Take them some cabbage too," she called. "I'll come with you."

Kao nodded and turned back into the house.

But Little Dragon proved quicker than his father. He already had his arms around a big cabbage stored since the previous winter. He staggered out with this calling: "Let me go too! No, let me carry it. I can manage."

Like sunshine piercing the clouds, a smile dawned on Kao's grim face. Chucking his son under the chin with his strong fingers, he said approvingly: "That's a good boy."

Now golden sunlight was streaming from the east; clouds tinged with red were glowing brighter and brighter; birds chirped as they hopped merrily on the boughs or alighted on the walls. Another busy day had begun for the villagers. Old and young, bearing ploughs and driving draught animals, the peasants hurried out of the village to the fields.

4

In this sea of clamorous activity there was an island of quiet. That was the five *mu* of land called the Tip owned by Chin Fu, a well-to-do

middle peasant known for his scheming ways. Chin Fu's third son Wen-ching, alone at one edge of these fields, was swinging a hoe which long years of use had worn down until it was now no larger than a child's palm; but his father begrudged spending money on a new blade.

First Wen-ching loosened the hard soil, then he broke up the clods. This was not heavy work for an able-bodied young man and he took his time over it, pausing frequently to look round at all the villagers working so hard and to listen to them shouting at draught animals, scolding lazy children or complaining about women who lagged behind. He spotted the new black mule belonging to Feng Shao-huai, who had narrowly escaped being classed as a rich peasant. This sturdy mule was drawing an iron plough held by Feng's nephew, while Feng himself was sowing seeds behind and his daughter-in-law, hardly able to keep up, was scattering manure from her crate. On the other side Chang Chin-fa was ploughing his fields. Yoked to the village head's plough were his big donkey and a new white horse which he must have borrowed or bought. Close by, Chou Chung and his family were working as a well-coordinated team. Far away to the southwest, a new highway was being built, but he could see only red flags and men moving like ants, could hear only the faint sound of distant motors. To the north by the old brick kiln some workers were fixing up cables, filling the air with a metallic clanging. From time to time trucks rumbled past, sounding their horns.

The clouds floating through the sky, the insects crawling on the ground, the birds flitting past, the nodding dandelions, all stirred the young man's heart.

Another young peasant Chu Tieh-han approached now, pushing a cart. From the student's jacket hanging on a bough and the magazine weighted down with a clod of earth he guessed that Wen-ching was in the vicinity. A further look confirmed this. He halted and bellowed: "Hey there! Don't overdo it. It's time to knock off for a rest." Then leaving his cart he strode down the ditch separating their fields.

Wen-ching stopped. Mopping his perspiring face he greeted Chu with a smile.

These two young men, unlike in appearance, status and to some extent in outlook, sat down on a ridge overgrown with wild flowers to chat.

"Trimming the edges, eh?" asked Chu.

"We're through with ploughing, so we have to find something else to do."

"Why are you working all on your own?"

"I feel freer this way to think things over."

"What's worrying you?"

"I've a right to think, haven't I? We all need something to occupy our minds."

"Do you suffer from insomnia?"

"Insomnia? You're the one with insomnia..." Wen-ching burst out laughing.

"What's so funny?"

"Well, Old Chu, lots of people say you've changed. And so you have. You're always frowning or moody. You don't race around and shout the way you used to. Even your voice is less booming than before. . . . Tell me honestly, have you got someone?"

"What do you mean?"

"A girl."

"Come off it. What time do I have to think of such nonsense?"

"Don't try to fool me. If you aren't thinking about someone, why can't you sleep?"

"I'm worried."

"What's there to worry about? Your family's doing nicely. You're sitting pretty now, completely free. As for the work in the village, why, since Brother Kao came back even the air here has changed. If he hadn't taken the lead in all that propaganda and mobilization before the busy season and in making such detailed plans, things wouldn't be going as well as they are now. If we'd gone on the way we were before New Year, each man for himself, each thinking up some crooked scheme to make money, we'd be sunk today."

"Even so there are difficulties. Some land is lying idle, waiting for weeds to grow."

"What land?"

"First let me ask you: what's your father doing? Have you left your ox at home?"

"Yes. Dad's over there, trimming the edges of our land."

Turning towards the southwest where a number of people had gathered, they saw Wen-ching's father Chin Fu leaning on his pick by a solitary grave, deep in conversation with Feng who was carrying a crate.

Chu moved closer to his friend and said earnestly, as befitted the secretary of the Youth League: "Wen-ching, our job as Youth Leaguers is to help the Party. The ultimate aim of the Party is to build communism in China, and our immediate goal is socialism. This aim is fixed; it can't change. In order to achieve it, we Youth Leaguers must go all out for the revolution, not like your father who thinks only of his petty self-interest. We must unite and help each other too, instead of thinking only of ourselves. Listen! It's mutual aid I want to talk to you about today. This is something that won't wait, something as urgent as putting out a fire. . . ."

Wen-ching smiled and nodded agreement, so as not to dampen the other's enthusiasm. But when Chu went on and on with no sign of stopping, he cut in: "Now, comrade secretary, come to the point. Whose land is lying idle?"

Forced to cut short his harangue, Chu cast a glance at Wen-ching and boomed: "Surely you know? I mean Uncle Liu Hsiang's land." Then he told Wen-ching the whole story of how Liu had arranged to borrow Chin Kai's ox; how his wife's illness had tied him to the house; how Chin Kai, unable to wait, had made other arrangements; and how Liu, half frantic with worry, had injured his foot.

Shocked by this news, Wen-ching said thoughtfully: "On my way home from sowing yesterday with my dad, I met Chou Chung's daughter Li-ping, who told me that Uncle Liu had some trouble at home. I thought it was just one of those minor troubles and that in a few days Mrs. Liu would be about again. I didn't know it was so serious, or that it had held up his ploughing and sowing."

"The whole village knows," retorted Chu. "You must be deaf not to have heard the news days ago."

"Hell!" countered Wen-ching. "The last few days my old man has been fairly scething with impatience. He keeps yelling at us to outstrip everyone else, to be the first to finish sowing, not to drop behind. He's been driving us day and night, making us come out by starlight and go home by starlight. We haven't even had time to wash our faces, not to speak of calling on people. So how could I have heard the news? I must find time to go and see Uncle Liu."

"Can you comfort him by rolling your big black eyes?" Chu bellowed. "The important thing is to give him a helping hand. Deeds speak louder than words."

"Sure, we must help him."

"All right then. Since you've finished your ploughing, lend him your ox for a couple of days. In just two days he can finish his ploughing and sowing; then his land won't go to waste."

"When can he start?"

"Right away. The sooner the better."

"Very well, I'll go back and tell them. I'll give you their answer this evening."

Chu was delighted. "Cool it, comrade, cool it," he warned. "Don't just let off steam or play the fool like me. When you get home, try to educate that short-sighted father of yours properly by encouraging him to be patriotic and work for socialism. Tell him we poor folk have this land because Chairman Mao led us to carry out land reform. This is our first spring ploughing since Liberation; the poor peasants have no reserves and some have run into bad luck. It's up to us to help them. Tell him that if land lies idle we'll harvest less grain and cotton and won't be able to supply these to the state; then the factory workers will have nothing to eat, machines will have to stop for lack of raw materials, there'll be no cloth to make clothes, and we shan't be able to support the war against U.S. aggression and to aid Korea. . . ."

Wen-ching cut him short. "There's no need for all that. He has too much on his mind to take all that in. But don't worry. Since you've asked me, I guarantee to bring our ox on time to Uncle Liu's fields. How about that?"

Chu gave a sheepish grin. "The truth is, Wen-ching, though you're a warm-hearted fellow and you've given your word, I don't altogether trust that niggardly father of yours."

"What's got into you today?" asked Wen-ching in surprise. "However backward my old man may be, he has some human feeling. How can he refuse to help someone in real trouble?"

Wen-ching's obvious sincerity impressed Chu. Well satisfied with what he had achieved he stood up. "All right. That's settled then," he said. "I'll wait for you in old Chou's house this evening." With that he hurried back to his cart.

In the fields to the southwest, Chin Fu's long conversation with Feng Shao-huai was also drawing to a conclusion.

Feng's face which had been dark with suppressed anger had now lit up in a smile. He was wagging his head and looking confident. Even when he lowered his voice, his head was cocked at such a derisive angle that Chin Fu, who was the shorter of the two, could not see the gleam in his eyes but only his flaring nostrils.

"Very well then," said Feng. "In future, don't play for peanuts but for higher stakes. That's the only way to go far."

Chin Fu nodded vigorously. "Right you are."

Feng stepped closer then to say confidentially, "Honestly, though I flatter myself I'm fairly clear-sighted and not lacking in courage either, I'm convinced that going it alone isn't good enough. That won't get you anywhere. As the proverb says: A single tree doesn't make a wood. This is the time to get rich — if we stick together."

"I feel the same way." Chin Fu gave a knowing smile. "Now times have changed, everything has to be done the 'mass' way. In all we say or do we must float with the tide. If others don't move I won't budge either. That's my belief."

"Actually you're better placed than I am," answered Feng. "You're one of the masses whom the Communists want to woo. People in my position can only move after you. You've nothing to fear. No one will find fault with you or label you a rich peasant. Hell! If I were in your shoes, I'd do as I damn well pleased."

Chin Fu felt that there was truth in Feng's reasoning. But he said, "You see only the surface, you don't know the inside story. We're all in the same boat. Each family has its problems." He had in mind his unruly third son Wen-ching. However, not wanting to wash dirty linen in public, he swallowed his dissatisfaction and kept quiet.

Seeing his nephew approaching them now with the plough, Feng said, "Since we see eye to eye on this, why not strike while the iron's hot? We'll never have a better opportunity."

"That's true." Chin Fu smiled. "Don't take me for a coward. It's just that I've been confused the last few days with Kao and that lot putting on shows, making broadcasts and doing house-to-house propaganda. I thought we were done for."

Feng threw back his head at that and laughed scornfully. "The moon may wane but only to wax again. I tell you, the world is made up of rich and poor. The day such differences disappear, the world will come to an end. This is the truth, dammit, and nobody can change it. You can see it now for yourself. This trouble Liu's in is a token of what's to come. Just wait and see. Wait till the storm dies down and the tide runs out. There's plenty more who'll be in trouble."

"That's very true."

"Now there are some able men in the government who see much more clearly than we do. When Kao and fellows like Chou Chung ganged up to put pressure on the village head, they seemed very powerful; but Chang kept his head. He's in with those able people on top, you see, and they've told him not to worry. He knows you can't get away from rich and poor. He doesn't have such crazy ideas as Kao's gang, who dream about socialism and all getting rich together. What sort of world would that be, if everybody was equally well off? Just to take one example, they say that in future we'll all have motor-cars, all enjoy ourselves; but then who'll drive the cars I'd like to know?"

Feng laughed derisively and Chin Fu joined in.

After disclosing his real feelings, Feng started back cheerfully with his crate of seeds. After a few steps, however, he turned and

called to Chin Fu who was standing there lost in thought, "Mind you don't forget what I've said. You must make Liu an offer."

"Sure. . . ."

5

Some time before noon Wen-ching finished his job and went home.

This young man had attended primary school and since childhood had always loved reading and going to operas. During the land reform movement, he was an active member of the club and helped with the writing of stage scripts. Traditional operas and new dramas had filled his head with quixotic notions of justice and sympathy for his fellow-men, but membership in the propaganda troupe took him out of the fenced-in house which his father had laboured all his life to build, throwing him together with some honest peasants whose whole aim in life was to help others. Thus new ideas kept flooding into his mind, while the noble deeds of the Party members and village activists set him a fine example and gave him a new aim in life.

This was why he had acceded so readily to Chu's request in the fields. He felt it his duty to help a man like Liu and was confident that he could win over his father.

Reaching home, as usual he found the gate locked and had to call for someone to open it. His elder brother Wen-chi was in the courtyard searching for a thong to mend some broken gear. Raising his head he smiled at Wen-ching. "So you're back."

"Where's dad?"

"In the back yard."

Wen-ching went through the house to find his father.

The vegetable garden at the back was a model of neatness, each bed as level and symmetrical as if cut with a knife or stencilled. The back gate, now open, commanded a view of Liu's house. The peach tree was loaded with blossom like bright clouds.

Chin Fu was squatting by a vegetable plot, hard at work repairing an old wooden plough. When he saw his son he said, "Here, give me a hand. After only a few days use it's coming apart."

Wen-ching went over to grip the plough by its handle.

Chin Fu, still hammering, asked, "Why are you back so early? Have you broken up all the clods? If you don't, the seeds won't sprout."

"It's so finely broken up, you'd think it had been sieved."

"Did you look at the seeds we sowed? Are they sprouting yet?"

It had not occurred to Wen-ching to do this. However he lied to please his pernickety father: "I had a look and some of them have sprouted. The ground is moist enough, and we've sown in good time." Then watching his father's expression he continued, "But Uncle Liu's fields aren't sown yet. They haven't even started ploughing."

Chin Fu grunted.

"Aunt Liu is ill," Wen-ching went on. "They've been busy for days fetching doctors and brewing medicine. Then unluckily Uncle Liu hurt his foot, and with all these troubles he couldn't get out to work. It will soon be too late for sowing, but if they fail to sow they'll get no harvest; then how will their family manage?"

Chin Fu, his whole mind on the plough, answered casually, "Yes, for us, land is the chief thing."

"People are worried for him. . . ."

"Yes, we all want other people to do well. Then we needn't be afraid that they'll be short of food and pilfer our beans and corn-cobs."

"Other people have their own troubles: they're short of hands or draught animals and haven't yet sown their own fields. So though they feel for the Liu family, they can't help them."

"Well, these days no man is his neighbour's keeper."

"But we've done our sowing. I want to help them plough."

Chin Fu stopped work. Scrutinizing his son he asked, "Did Liu ask you for help?"

To Wen-ching this seemed hopeful. He answered, "No. It was someone else's suggestion."

"That's what I thought." Chin Fu smiled. "It's about time Liu came to ask for our help."

Wen-ching had never imagined his father would react so reason-

ably. He followed up quickly, "When do you think we can start? They're waiting for an answer."

"Well, it depends on how he means to feed us and . . ."

"They've spent all their grain on the doctor," cut in Wen-ching. "We'd better not ask for meals there, don't you think?"

"All right."

"You're really good to lend them a helping hand."

"Never mind about helping hands. We have the labour power and it's better to work for people in our own village. There's less trekking to and fro for men and beasts. That saves time and energy."

"The earlier we start the better. Let's say tomorrow. I'll go and tell them now."

"Wait a bit." Chin Fu stopped his son. "What are the terms?"

"The terms?" Wen-ching was puzzled.

Chin Fu spread his hands. "What payment per *mu*?"

Wen-ching lost patience. "How can they afford to pay. . ."

Chin Fu blinked. "They have no money now but they can pay us in grain after the harvest. I won't ask too high an interest."

"We're helping them out, dad. We can't ask for payment."

Chin Fu glared at his son. "What! Work for them for nothing?"

"Later on, when his foot heals, they can help us with labour."

Chin Fu shook his head. "We have more than enough labour ourselves. We don't need his. If he won't pay, there's no more to be said."

Wen-ching was shocked. His father had shrunk in his eyes. Hiding his indignation he tried to win him round with talk of mutual aid; but whatever he said his father just shook his head. At last, his patience exhausted, Wen-ching flared up. He declared that if his father refused to go, he would take their ox himself the next day to plough for Liu.

6

When it was time for the noonday meal, Kao found Young Chu under the old locust tree, having just returned from the fields with an empty cart.

"Brother Kao, let me tell you some good news!" cried Chu.

"I saw your grin a mile off. Well, what is it?"

"I've found a draught animal for Uncle Liu. A fine one."

"Whose is it?"

"Chin Fu's. They've finished sowing and their ox is idle."

"Oh? Has he agreed?"

"Not yet. But I've persuaded Wen-ching and he's all for it. He's given his word."

"If Chin Fu hasn't agreed yet, Wen-ching's word doesn't count for much."

"I don't believe it. How could Chin Fu be so heartless?"

With bounding steps and a light heart, Chu trundled his cart away, while Kao gazed thoughtfully at his receding figure. Then he too headed for home.

That morning after he and his wife had taken food to the Liu family, Kao had gone to the fields to relieve Erh-lin by doing a spell of ploughing. After Erh-lin had breakfasted he went back, carrying fodder, to take over. On his way home Kao had originally planned to call on Chou Chung, but after meeting Chu it seemed to him that there was no longer any need to trouble Old Chou. However, he reflected, "Chin Fu is thoroughly selfish. He wouldn't part with a single blade of grass even to help his own brother and nowadays he's very thick with Feng Shao-huai. It's not likely he'll help Liu. The season will wait for no man. We've had a dry winter with a good deal of wind. If he delays any longer, even if he gets his ploughing and sowing done, the seeds may not sprout well. With such a bad start, he wouldn't get much of a harvest."

Kao decided not to rely too much on Chin Fu, but to make other preparations as well. He recalled that when the government last issued loans and relief grain, because Liu's position was not too bad he had not received any aid. Now that he was in such trouble the local government would surely help him. Kao made up his mind to see the village head, as he was in charge of such matters.

He turned to go to Chang's house. Since their quarrel at the time when Chang was pulling down the landlord's brick wall which he'd bought in secret, they had been on bad terms and stopped dis-

cussing things together. And because no Party meeting had been held since the spring ploughing started they had seen practically nothing of each other. Now Kao intended to report to Chang calmly on the situation in the village, so that together they could solve various problems and ensure the successful completion of Sweet Meadow's spring ploughing.

The last touch had been put to Chang's new house. Grey brick from top to bottom, with over-hanging eaves, bright rooms and big windows with newly-fitted glass panes, it stood like a camel among a flock of sheep, its dignity dwarfing Sweet Meadow's old squat, tamped-earth cottages.

Approaching Chang's courtyard, Kao smelt fried garlic. From the gate he saw a bush of oleander in white blossom before the window. Steam was floating out of the open door as he walked in, calling Chang's name.

Chang's wife Hsiu-hua, her hands sticky with dough, came forward to greet him. "Well, this is an unexpected pleasure," she cried with a laugh. "To what do we owe the honour of this visit?"

"I've been busy." Kao smiled.

"Aren't you busy today? Come in and take a seat."

"Is your husband at home?"

"No, he isn't."

With that, Hsiu-hua came closer and asked: "Why haven't you been to see us all this time? When we got the beam set up, I sent over to invite you for a drink. Why didn't you come?"

Kao was anxious to find Chang and not to waste time. "I was working that day with Wen-ching and the rest on a new show," he said. "I couldn't get away. Besides, I don't drink...."

Hsiu-hua brushed the pretext aside. "Don't try to fool me. I heard you Party members had some sort of row. Is that true?"

Kao did not know how to reply to this blunt question.

"I've asked Chin-fa several times about this," Hsiu-hua continued. "He just says there's nothing wrong, and you didn't have any row. But I can't make it out. If there's nothing wrong, why don't I see you discussing things together as you did before? Lots

of other people are puzzled by this too. Can you honestly say you haven't quarrelled?"

Kao felt he must tell the truth, but he had no time to go into details and could not tell Hsiu-hua everything anyway. He just nodded. "We don't agree on some main issues."

"So it's true!" Hsiu-hua was shocked. "But why? We're old friends living in the same village, and you two have been mates from way back. Now we're our own masters things will get better and better. Why should you quarrel? Live and let live I say. Why should you disagree? Even if you don't see eye to eye there should be some give and take. If each of you gave way a little, wouldn't everything be all right?"

"I can't explain this in a few words," replied Kao frankly. "When I said we didn't agree, it wasn't on minor issues on which we could give way. Don't you worry, though. In the end we shall bring him round to our way of thinking. We're not only old friends and old mates; what's more important is that we're both Party members. A Communist must abide by the truth. Whoever's wrong must follow whoever's right. That's what the masses expect, what the Party demands."

"That's the spirit!" exclaimed Hsiu-hua, smiling. "Chin-fa has his hands full dealing with the higher-ups as well as the villagers. Having so much to see to makes him short-tempered. If he flares up sometimes, you must overlook it."

Not wanting to pursue this subject, Kao asked again where Chang was and learned from Hsiu-hua that the village head had gone to see Chu Chan-kuei, to whom he had lent his donkey.

Without stopping for further talk Kao left, rather pleased by what Chang was doing. For Chan-kuei was a poor peasant living in the north part of the village who had labour power but no cattle. The fact that Chang was helping him made it seem more likely that he would help Liu too. Bent on solving this urgent problem, Kao decided to shelve his differences with the village head for the time being. After the sowing was done, he could report them to the district and the leadership there would certainly clear them up.

The land allotted to Chan-kuei was not far from the village. As Kao crossed the reedy swamp, he saw Chin Kai breaking up the clods in his fields. He called out a greeting in passing. "Hard at work, eh?"

Chin Kai, who had pretended not to see Kao approaching, stopped work to ask, "Are you looking for the village head?"

Kao replied that he was and moved on past the boundary stone.

Chin Kai put down his pick then and ran after him. "I've something to tell you," he said.

Noticing with surprise that Chin Kai's wrinkled face was burning, Kao stopped and asked, "What is it?"

Chin, facing him, heaved a sigh. "I really feel I've let you down," he answered.

Kao was nonplussed by this.

"A few days ago I was frantic to get started, but he couldn't come so I didn't wait," explained Chin Kai sheepishly. "A relative of mine asked me time and again to help him. I had to team up with him. . . . It was really too bad."

Kao realized that he was referring to the ox he had promised to Liu. "You didn't mean any harm," he said reassuringly. "If you hadn't got somebody else, you'd have been too late. That would have been a loss too."

With an astonished glance at Kao, Chin Kai said, "Well, your saying that takes a great weight off my mind."

"You mustn't take this too much to heart." Kao smiled. "We're all new peasants under Party leadership, all one big family, all together building New China. We shouldn't have any secrets from each other."

Still somewhat ashamed Chin Kai said, "Well, my ploughing hasn't been held up, but his has. That relative of mine has taken my ox now to plough his fields and hasn't returned it yet. . . . To tell you the truth, I haven't felt able to face you these last few days. What made me more ashamed was hearing how you neglect your own family, you're so busy helping others. My wife told me just now you were milling flour for the Lius."

Kao brushed the compliment aside with a slight frown. "It's little enough I've done — no more than my duty," he said. "The fact is I've handled a whole lot of things badly." With that he went on.

Chan-kuei's fields were separated from Chin Kai's by a small stream which flowed into the swamp. The drought this spring had made the stream dry up and cowslips, thistles, shepherd's purse and other wild flowers were growing on the bottom. Half this plot of land, having been newly ploughed that morning, lay soft and spongy as raised flour, giving off a pleasant tang of damp earth and leaf-mould. The furrows lay as straight and even as if measured by a ruler. The ploughman, cracking his whip in a leisurely fashion and striding forward with a contented air, seemed hardly to be exerting any strength. . . .

Standing on the ridge by the ditch Kao watched, fascinated. He could see that the ploughman was the village head Chang, but since they were on the far side of the field he couldn't identify the man leading the team.

Along came Chan-kuei then, carrying a big teapot. This happy-go-lucky poor peasant still in his thirties was usually very cheerful. Since the land reform a smile seldom left his face. In the old days his family had lived for more than ten years in a hovel, but now they had been allotted one of the best houses in the whole of Sweet Meadow. Just now, however, perhaps because he was tired after work, he looked rather off-colour and his brows were knitted.

"You've made a good job of your ploughing, Chan-kuei," remarked Kao.

"Not so bad." Chan-kuei forced a smile.

"Chang's a first-rate farmer. He hasn't lost his old skill."

"He's pretty good at making money too," Chan-kuei snorted. "Even more so than before."

Passing over this thrust at the village head, Kao said apologetically, "Your place is so far to the north that I seldom see you. I'd clean forgotten you had no animal either."

"I know, you've had your work cut out helping Liu."

"You're lucky to have got the village head to team up with you," Kao rejoined.

"Lucky?" Chan-kuei shook his head. "Do you expect me to get a good deal from him? I'm paying through the nose."

"What? You're paying him?"

Chan-kuei explained, "Chang teamed his big donkey with this white horse which he says he borrowed from Heavenly Gate. Once he finished his sowing he wanted to hire it out. My dad was against my hiring a team, especially from him; but Chang kept putting pressure on me. Since I'd have to spend money anyway, I gritted my teeth and agreed to his terms. I told him we could drive the team ourselves, but Chang insisted that I take on this fellow Greedy Guts, who's eating us out of house and home. Apart from three square meals a day, he wants pork and liquor too. He keeps grumbling and grouching, using dirty language. So that's my luck..."

Kao had been thinking better of the village head, but this exposure angered him again. He hid his feelings, however, and said nothing.

Chang was approaching them now, driving the plough. His bronzed skin and easy gait exuded well-being and self-confidence. But at sight of Kao his face clouded over. He deliberately lowered his eyes to the ploughshare and vigorously cracked his whip.

Greedy Guts, looking as if he had been travelling for hundreds of miles, was dragging his feet now as he led the team. Seeing the teapot in Chan-kuei's hand, he beamed. "Be a good sort, Chan-kuei!" he yelled. "Come and take over. I'm dying of thirst, dammit. My heart's on fire, my throat's smoking." With that he tossed the reins on to the horse's back, lurched over to grab the teapot from Chan-kuei and started drinking.

Kao accosted Chang: "I want a word with you, village head."

Chang, his eyes on the furrows, drawled: "Well, what is it? I'm busy right now. Won't it keep till later?"

"It's very urgent," said Kao emphatically. "It won't wait."

Chang cast him a sidelong glance. "Is it all that urgent?"

"Yes."

Although very annoyed by this persistence, Chang could hardly make a scene. He set down the plough, pulled a towel out from his belt and mopped his face as he waited for Kao to speak.

Kao stepped closer and told him briefly: "Liu Hsiang hasn't started ploughing yet and can't find anybody to help with draught animals. Since we're living in a new society, the People's Government can't ignore his problem; so I've come to ask you to solve it..."

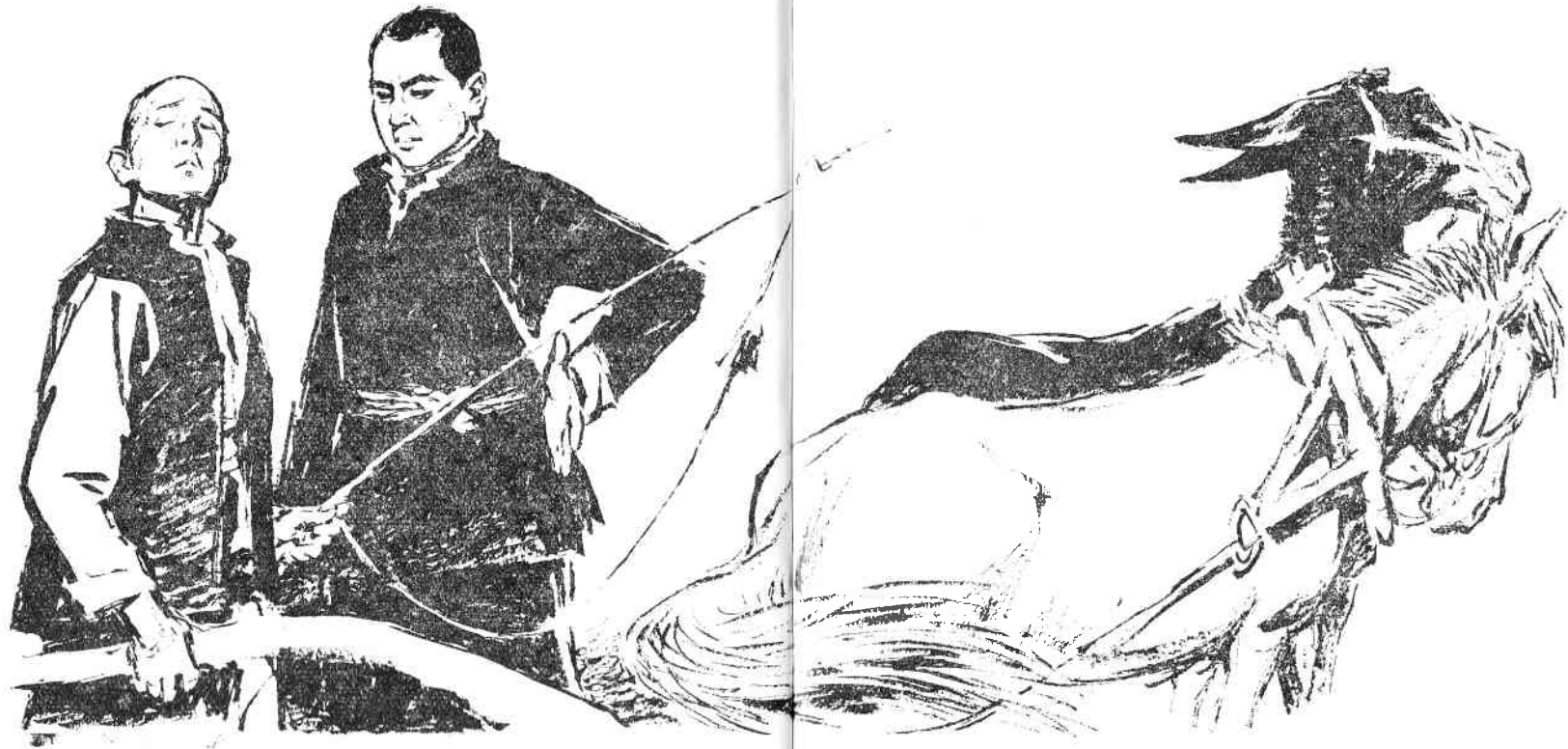
After hearing him out, Chang picked up his whip again. "Is that all? All right," he said off-handedly. "You've reported it and I've taken note of it." Taking hold of the plough, with a shout to the team he continued on his way.

Kao stepped forward and stopped him. "Just taking note of it isn't good enough; you must solve the problem. I think our village administration should shoulder the responsibility, or ask the higher-ups at once for instructions. We must see that he gets his sowing done in time."

Chang shook his head decidedly. Still driving the team he drawled, "What can we do? We've just finished issuing loans and relief grain. He's not a dependant of some revolutionary martyr, soldier on active service or government cadre, that we should assign a man to plough for him. If an ordinary peasant can ask for state aid with his sowing, what sort of government is this? I don't think this is government business..."

With a sweep of his hand Kao cut in, "It *is* government business. This isn't an unreasonable request. True, he's not an army or government cadre dependant, but he's a poor peasant on whom the Party counts for support. To serve the people, the government must first serve the former poor peasants and hired hands."

At this, Chang pulled up abruptly. Staring superciliously at Kao's flushed face, after a pause he replied incisively, "I haven't forgotten the way you picked fault with me over New Year. You wanted to cover all the walls with slogans on supporting the state, on worker-peasant unity and so forth; and when I didn't agree you were furious. Since then your lot's been working hard broadcasting and producing blackboard newspapers. Quite a show you put on, and many people clapped and cheered or started cursing me behind my back. But I didn't take it to heart, I was ready to wait. If good came of your work, I was willing to admit my mistake and



eat humble pie. So now, after all that rumpus, this is what you're doing to support the state. The Party didn't ask us for a single cent but gave us good land free and gratis; yet when a peasant can't even sow his fields you think you've a right to ask the state for help. Tell me, Comrade Ta-chuan, is this supporting the state or being a burden to it?"

Stung to the quick, Kao glared with smouldering eyes at the village head's crafty face. He clenched his fists and stepped closer. But before he could speak there came an outburst behind him from Chan-kuei.

Chan-kuei too had been staggered by Chang's sneering tone. Though not an activist he had gone through the stormy struggles

of land reform and had his pride as a liberated peasant. Unable to contain himself, he grabbed the teapot from Greedy Guts and shouted, "All right. It's our own fault! We should never have stooped so low as to ask his help..."

"You needn't fly off the handle, Chan-kuei, over a few black-hearted words," said Kao.

Chang laughed scornfully. "So my heart is black. If your heart is red, let's see it!"

Kao turned to Chang. "I show my red heart in my words and actions. You're right to say that we've been given land, our land was won by the blood of martyrs. We got land because the Party led us to struggle for it—that's something we shall never forget.

And you're right to say we can't even sow our fields. But what's the reason for that? It's because we've been exploited for generations and today aren't yet completely on our feet. Because we're poor we have to rely on our government and care for our state; that's why we want to grow more grain and cotton to help industrial construction, to consolidate our state power and make our country strong. Only then can we paupers shake off poverty for good and all. Only then can we keep the land given us by the Party and never let it fall into enemy hands. This shows our hearts are red and loyal." Darting a look of contempt at Chang he continued, "Yes, we're still poor but we have guts. We don't stoop to secret dealings with our class enemy, and we certainly don't try to take advantage of our poor brothers."

"That's right," agreed Chan-kuei. "Well said!"

Chang was livid. Trying to brazen it out he bellowed, "Speak straight out, Kao Ta-chuan. Don't make insinuations."

"All the words from my mouth are straight as rails," Kao answered. "I put my cards on the table. You're the only one doing anything crooked or underhand. You keep preening yourself on representing the government, but what sort of government do you represent? What do you say, Chan-kuei and Chin Kai? Can this be our people's government? It can't be. I warn you, Chang, the masses won't allow you to go on like this. What are you aiming at? Landing the poor in trouble? You'll never do that. If you don't get your thinking straight, you'll be the one who comes a cropper."

As Kao lashed Chang with his tongue, the village head glared in amazement. He turned away, racking his brains for some way to refute him. Then with a forced smile he said, "All right, all right. Empty talk is no use. I'll wait till autumn to see whether your lot have grain and to spare in your barns and money to spend in your pockets...."

"Very well," said Kao. "He laughs best who laughs last." Although anxious to leave he felt it only right to give Chang another chance to admit his mistake. "See here, Chang, you were a poor man too," he said. "You shouldn't make fun of the poor men's difficulties. Don't you feel ashamed, talking like that?"

Chang tried to pass the matter off. "Is that all...."

Kao brushed this aside. "Don't put on that act. Think over those words you just said. Is that the way poor peasants talk? The way a Communist talks?" With that he turned on his heel and strode away across the untilled fields and ditches.

7

Some villagers seated on Chou Chung's *kang* were discussing how to help the Liu family.

"Come out a minute, Chu!" a young man called through the window. "I've something to tell you."

Chu leapt off the chest on which he had been sitting and ran out. It was Wen-ching. Chu immediately asked: "How about it? Can we start to plough tomorrow?"

Wen-ching simply hung his head.

Chu's heart sank. "What's the hitch?" he asked.

Still Wen-ching said nothing.

"Well? Did you fall down on your job?" Chu reached out impatiently to shake his friend, and as he did so felt some hot drops fall on his hand. "Why, you're crying!" he exclaimed.

Wen-ching, unable to hold back any longer, squatted down with his head in his hands and started sobbing.

Meanwhile the people inside the room had come out. Kao realized at once what had happened. "Never mind," he told Wen-ching, patting him on the shoulder. "We know you've done your best, but you haven't much say in your house. We never expected your dad to put himself out to help Liu."

This only made Wen-ching feel worse. The tears streamed down his cheeks.

"Stop blubbering!" Chu stamped his foot. "Call yourself a man?"

"As long as our hearts are in the right place, failures don't matter — we can learn from them," said Kao. "A few set-backs like this will help make a man of you."

Chu took these words to heart. "It's all my fault," he said, clapping his forehead. "I took too simple a view of the business." He gripped Wen-ching by the arm and led him inside.

After hearing the story old Mrs. Teng, an army dependant, told Wen-ching, "Your dad's not out to help the poor—he's on the make, out to feather his own nest."

"That's right," declared Chou Chung's son Yung-cheng indignantly. "This morning when I was working in the fields, Wen-ching's old man came strutting past with his pick on his back. He told me: If any family wants to hire a team for sowing, I should let him know. If they have no ready cash, they can pay him in grain after the autumn harvest—at three per cent interest!... He knows how to look out for himself all right."

"Build up the family fortunes'—all that talk just suits his book," chimed in Yung-cheng's sister Li-ping. "Others can starve to death for all he cares. Skinflints like that are only out for themselves. They'll do anyone in so long as it helps them get rich."

Young Chu pounded the chest. "I've seen through them at last!" he boomed. "If we go on this way, the only ones to grow rich will be those skinflints. Then, good heavens, what sort of society will it be? What way out will there be for us poor peasants?"

Clapping Chu on the back Kao cried: "Well said! You've hit the nail on the head. If we think only of feathering our own nests, when one family grows richer another is bound to grow poorer. This is nothing but a rat race. And nine times out of ten it'll be poor peasants like us who are ruined. We mustn't take this path at any price. We must figure out ways to help the poor stand up."

Chu took this up, continuing vehemently, "Since land reform, the leadership has been calling on each household to work hard to better itself. This has been the bone of contention between Brother Kao here and the village head. At first I thought it was a pointless squabble. We're all farming folk who have been longing for land of our own, and now that we've got it why can't we make a go of it without troubling the government? The world belongs to the people now. We don't have to worry about the Kuomintang conscripting us and grabbing our grain. We can sow and reap and enjoy

our harvest in peace. We're sitting pretty, aren't we? Why should we Party members worry for the other poor peasants? I never dreamed that tilling our own land would be trickier than the struggle against the landlords and despots in land reform...."

Gripping Chu's shoulder Kao listened carefully, impressed by the young fellow's reasoning. This hothead who had always seemed so ingenuous was certainly making progress. He was beginning to think things out for himself, beginning to mature like iron tempered in the furnace of political struggle.... Warmth flooded Kao's heart, banishing the anxiety and sense of confusion which had filled it for a while.

The others present were also moved by Chu's words which recalled so many recent happenings and expressed their own conviction. In silence they mulled the matter over in their minds.

Wen-ching looked from Kao to Chu, then said in a low voice, "It's all my fault. I bungled the business. But something has got to be done. Suppose you two go and talk it over with my father? You never know...."

Kao brushed this aside. "No, we have our pride," he said firmly. "We don't need people of that sort to help us. My fields can wait. Tomorrow I'll work on Liu's land."

"So will I," chimed in Chu. "We can take both our donkeys there."

Old Mrs. Teng shook her head at these two young men, both of them boiling over with indignation. "You mean well," she said. "But let me ask you this: Weren't your fields, too, given you in the land reform? Will crops grow there if you neglect them? Without grain how can you support the factory workers and our volunteers at the Korean front?"

"Where there's a will there's a way," piped up Yung-cheng. "We can all lend Uncle Liu a hand. Even if we use nothing but picks, we'll see that his seeds get sown."

"I'll go and get the militia to join in," put in Chu eagerly. "Let's get cracking."

"And our Youth League will rope in the young people," said Lu Chun-ho.

"Count me in too," cried Wen-ching, brightening up. "I don't mind going without sleep for a few days and nights. Though I can't dispose of our ox my body's my own, and I'll go all out to help Uncle Liu."

Li-ping was about to promise help from the women when, turning her head, she caught sight of her father. "Ah, dad's back!" she exclaimed.

In came old Chou Chung, beaming all over his face. He had evidently been walking fast, for his brow was beaded with sweat and he was panting. After looking round at all the eager young faces, he turned and said excitedly to Kao: "Hah, I've learned a thing or two on this trip of mine."

Infected by his enthusiasm, the others hung on his lips.

Chou Chung told them: "Today at lunch in Li-ping's grandmother's house, a man from East Willow Village to the north told me they were getting through this year's spring ploughing very fast because they'd hit on a new method. So I put my bowl down and hurried over there. I found some people ploughing and, believe it or not, they had three donkeys yoked to the plough. I asked: Is a team of donkeys strong enough? They said: Not if we use only two, but three together are as good as an ox. The ploughing was well done, mind you, and going ahead quickly. When I asked how many families had teamed up together, they told me five. They said this wasn't the old method of two families working together, so they called it a mutual-aid team. After the East Willow peasants got land, many families didn't have enough labour or cattle. Party Secretary Liang from the county, who was staying there, talked things over with the villagers and told them they must help each other. Liang pointed out that one strand is easily broken but many strands combined make a strong rope. He got them to organize themselves in groups of their own choosing, putting families with draught animals together with those having none, putting families with surplus labour together with those who were short-handed. There are more than two hundred families in the village, but this way no one had to hire a team and every household was able to plough its land.

This afternoon they finished all their sowing. And they say other villages in that district are trying out this new method too."

Kao listened with rapt attention, blinking thoughtfully. Then he clapped his hands and exclaimed: "This idea is fine. Now we poor peasants are in difficulties, but if we all get organized our combined strength will enable us not only to cope with the ploughing but to stand up against natural calamities too. I vote we try it out."

"I knew you'd be for it," said Chou Chung. "That's why, as soon as I learned this, I came back as fast as my legs would carry me."

"If three donkeys can pull a plough," put in Yung-cheng, "Chu has a donkey, so has Kao, and if we borrow another the three will make a team to plough Uncle Liu's land."

"That's settled then," said Chu. "Our donkey will be free the day after tomorrow. We'll form a mutual-aid team with Uncle Liu and make time in the next couple of days to mix his manure and take it to the fields first."

"I'm all for it," said Kao. "That's settled then."

"You must count me in too," said Wen-ching. "At least I can help mix and carry the manure."

"My brother and I will pitch in too," volunteered Lu.

"You didn't make this trip for nothing, Old Chou," remarked Mrs. Teng. "You've brought us back the answer to our problem."

The whole room rang with laughter.

Bright Cloud River meanders across a boundless plain. On both banks stretched fertile fields in which the young wheat, thick and green, had covered even the ridges and ditches around. The pulley above an old well was being worked by a small donkey in blinkers which was plodding round and round as if on a journey which would never end. The rhythmic creak of the pulley seemed to be spurring on the girls who were carrying food and water to the fields. Mustard in flower made patches of gold in the cottage yards. Pear-blossom was being scattered by the spring breeze...

Pear-blossom Ford was a traffic junction for both sides of the

river. Since it lay quite a distance from any village, there was a small tea-house here. And the ferry was a large one. Just before and after crossings the place hummed with life, but betweentime all was quiet. Small barefoot boys often gathered here to watch the fun.

Now Liu was limping up to the ford leaning on a stick newly cut from a willow tree. His face was pale, his back more bent than before. Each step up the sandy slope cost him an effort.

Liu had spent the previous night with his wife's brother. The latter was doing well, but his son had got married just before New Year and although they had not splashed money on the wedding they had spent more than they could well afford. So Liu had not mentioned all his difficulties or asked for a loan. However, he had another brother-in-law Blacksmith Tung, his younger sister's husband. Tung had received a loan from the government which had enabled him to start up again in his old trade. His father and grandfather before him had been blacksmiths, and although he had not used his forge for ten years his skill was well-known in these parts. The picks and hoes he made were much sought after. So all thought it a pity when, owing to poverty, he had to give up this trade; and many old peasants still clung to the old tools he had made. The re-opening of Tung's smithy was one of the many new developments which had caused quite a stir in these villages since Liberation. He was doing good business now. And although he didn't have much capital in reserve, Liu thought he might be able to help him out.

At the top of the dyke Liu paused for breath. He was just about to continue to the ford when he saw Feng Shao-huai riding towards him on his big mule. Reining up beside Liu, Feng alighted and greeted the poor peasant like a long-lost friend. "I went twice to your place last night, but you were out," he said. "Been making some trip?"

"Yes, I've been to visit someone."

"Your wife's ill at home and you've a game leg. Why don't you rest? Why gad about?" asked Feng with a show of concern.

"Just to take my mind off my troubles," answered Liu.

Feng produced a packet of cigarettes, took out two and offered one to Liu. "Have a smoke."

"I've stopped smoking since my accident," was the reply. "Go ahead."

Feng lit a cigarette and took a few puffs, watching Liu's face as he did so. "I heard you had some trouble, but I was so busy with sowing I couldn't manage to come and see you," he said. "How are things going now? If you need any help, just tell me."

"I don't need anything...."

"Don't treat me like a stranger," urged Feng earnestly. "What are neighbours for if not to help each other? We drink from the same well, mill flour on the same mill-stone. You mustn't stand on ceremony with me. Working on the land we're bound to run short sometimes, and that's when we must help each other. My life's a bit easier than yours, but I'm of poor peasant stock too and know what it's like to run into difficulties and need a helping hand. In our new society poor peasants, hired hands and middle peasants are all one family. You all treat me well, and I have a heart too. How can I stand idly by while poor friends are in trouble?"

Liu glanced at Feng's face. His expression was very grave and there seemed no reason to doubt his words. However, Liu had been through the mill. He knew that the rich are equally capable of assuming a kindly smile or a venomous glare.

"Since we're neighbours let's not beat about the bush," Feng continued. "The truth is I want nothing more than to get on good terms with you all. Why shouldn't we live peacefully together all in the same village? You're an honest man, intelligent too, so you must know what's in my mind. Empty words are useless; here's something tangible." He took a wad of crisp new banknotes from his pocket and flourished it before Liu. "Take this. Count out as much as you need, and return me the rest. If you need more, I'll try to raise it...."

Feng was well aware of Liu's desperate position and he had chosen his time carefully. If Liu's eyes so much as gleamed, if he stretched out his hand, Feng's scheme was assured of success.

However, Liu simply glanced with contempt at Feng and kept both his large hands on his stick. With a vigorous shake of his head he answered firmly: "Put your money away. I don't need it."

"Ah, have you got money?" asked Feng in genuine surprise.

Again Liu shook his head. "No."

Feng's eyes narrowed. "Have you got grain then?"

Once again Liu shook his head. "No."

Feng grinned. "Well then, if you've neither money nor grain, why not take it?"

Drawing himself up, Liu answered bluntly: "We have the People's Government and the masses. They'll never let me get into debt, never let me go broke."

"I don't want any interest," interposed Feng. "You need only pay back what you borrow."

"No interest, eh?" Liu smiled scornfully. "I'm thinking it's more than interest you want out of me."

"What... you think I'm trying to trap you, is that it? Frankly, the little you have doesn't tempt me in the least. All I want is to help a neighbour. That's the truth."

Liu smiled faintly. "Maybe I've nothing to tempt you. As I told you just now, I've neither money nor grain. But I have backbone. Whether you like it or not, we're living in a new society. And I'd starve to death sooner than sell my poor peasant backbone."

Hate filled Feng's heart. But putting on a look of honest indignation mingled with sadness, he said: "Well, well. I'd no idea you had such a low opinion of me. Of course we didn't know each other well in the past and some people have smeared me, making me out a monster. So I don't blame you if you have cold feet. All right. Wait and see how high this Monkey King* of Sweet Meadow can jump and whether he can really fetch us a holy canon from paradise to solve everybody's problems." After baring his teeth he carefully pocketed his banknotes and mounted his mule again. "Don't close the door too tight. If you need help any time, just say the word. I'll certainly give you a hand." Then flicking the mule on the rump with the end of his reins he cantered down the dyke.

*The chief character in the 16th-century novel *Pilgrimage to the West* is a monkey king who has supernatural powers. He accompanies the monk Tripitaka on a perilous journey in search of Buddhist canons.

Liu deliberately looked the other way.

Sunlight on the rippling surface of the stream made it scintillate like cut glass. A small boat was sailing smoothly over the water, with one man holding the rudder at the stern and another standing in the prow to catch fish. The fisherman was wearing a straw hat and had a strip of oil cloth round his middle. Poised with the fishing-net in his hand, he waited until the boat approached an eddy then deftly cast the fine net which spread out like a dark cloud in the air before falling into the water. Then he slowly hauled the net aboard and shook it. Countless small fish thrashed about, caught in the meshes....

Liu took the ferry and called on his brother-in-law Tung the blacksmith, who gave him a loan to tide him over and promised to send him grain after a couple of days. Liu went back to the ford then in high spirits. Once his foot was better, he told himself, he would work hard to make good his losses. Then, his troubles over, he could catch up with the rest. He was very pleased not to have fallen into Feng's trap.

That afternoon a wind started to blow from the south. The ripples on the water seemed like loose silver tossed about in a basket as the passengers leaving the ferry started up the dyke.

Suddenly Liu heard someone call: "Wait, Brother Liu!"

He turned and saw it was Feng again on his mule. Liu halted and greeted him casually: "Going back?"

Feng came up to him leading his big black mule, the picture of dignity. His face was ruddy as if he had been drinking, and his shrewd eyes were gleaming. "Come on, let's go together," he cried. "You ride my mule. I'll walk."

Unwilling to accept any favours from Feng, Liu replied: "You go ahead. I'm waiting for my nephew."

"Is your brother-in-law sending you grain right away?" asked Feng.

"What grain?" Liu was taken aback.

With a knowing smile Feng picked up his reins. "Think over my offer carefully, Brother Liu," he urged. "Don't get me wrong. Even a rabbit won't nibble the grass by its warren. However grasping I might be, I'd never try to take advantage of you. So let me

know if ever you're hard pressed. We're from the same village. You mustn't be too suspicious."

"Don't worry," answered Liu off-handedly. "You have your own work to see to."

At that, with a parting smile, Feng led his mule up the dyke.

The fishing-boat was on the move again. Once more the finely-meshed net billowed out through the air like a dark cloud, then fell into the water with a splash. . . .

8

The first mutual-aid team in the village was taking shape. A new Sweet Meadow was being born!

This was mutual aid in its most elementary form, just a crude beginning, a hint of things to come. But although those taking part in this historic task had not yet awoken to its profound significance, it was something very precious and full of vitality because it crystallized the liberated peasants' deep love for the new society and their unshakable confidence in the future. It had taken root in many loyal and fervent hearts.

The meeting to discuss the setting up of mutual-aid teams did not end till late at night, when two young Communists left Chou Chung's warm house. One was carrying a pencil and a notebook, the other an old lantern. They chatted as they walked, while the spring breeze cooled their flushed faces and ruffled the lapels of their coats. Their firm footsteps thudded on the sleeping road.

Coming to South Lane, they stopped before a house and held up the lantern to see whether the manure dumped there had been carried to the fields or not. Then they went on to North Lane and stopped outside a house whose owner had arranged to borrow an ox from a relative, to see if they could hear an animal chewing the cud.

Finally they came to Liu's wicker gate. They flashed the lantern round and each rolled a cigarette.

Soon the moon came out. As it climbed from the lowest boughs of the trees to the top, it cast checkered shadows over the lanes and mud walls.

Kao was smiling at Chu, who smiled back in return.

"Why are you grinning?" asked Chu.

"First tell me what you're so happy about," replied Kao.

"I'm laughing at the lot of us. We had no idea what to do; then all of a sudden we got the ball rolling like this."

"Necessity is the mother of invention," quipped Kao. "When we've finished sowing we'll go to East Willow to see how they handle things, then we can improve on our own method."

"Anyway, we've solved Liu's problem," remarked Chu.

"We'll start earlier next spring."

"Tell me: Isn't this mutual-aid team of ours rather like the old idea of becoming sworn brothers?"

"No, the two are quite different. That was bogus, but this is from the heart."

"Well, sworn brothers used to burn incense and take an oath to go through thick and thin together. . . ."

"That was just empty talk. It was 'out of sight is out of mind' with them. Our brotherhood's genuine because our hearts are closely linked together."

The red glow of the cigarette illuminated Kao's face now deep in thought. After a pause he went on: "It's a true saying: The only way to get rich is over the dead bodies of the poor. Before we found the Party, we weren't class-conscious. We knew they were murdering us, but we had no way to fight back. Now though the world has changed, the enemy still wants to do us poor folk in; so we have to stand up and oppose them. This is an even fiercer fight, although we don't use weapons. It's them or us. We can't live together in peace." Kao smiled. And in the moonlight his smile looked golden. "That's why I saw red," he continued, "when Chang called on each household to fend for itself, to compete with all the rest."

Chu took a few puffs at his cigarette. "The facts show that you were right," he asserted emphatically. "Chang's line is all wrong. We don't want any part of it. He's telling us to stick our necks out to have our heads chopped off."

"It's too early yet to see the results," said Kao. "But with this mutual-aid team I feel more secure. Provided we stick together, I'm sure we can hold on to the fruits of land reform."

This heart-to-heart talk gave a great lift to their morale. There was not a shadow of doubt in the minds of either of these two young Party members that they must fight all their lives for socialism; but they weren't too clear as to the path they must take to reach this glorious goal. Still, unshakable devotion to socialism and strong class feeling for the working people had made them take the first step forward — a firm, courageous step in the right direction.

Looking at Liu's pile of manure, Kao remarked: "They're short of manure."

"They'll have to make do this year," was Chu's reply.

"No. We're a mutual-aid team," Kao reminded him. "If we don't do well, people will talk. We must make a good showing."

"Quite right. Suppose we each scour our sheds and pigsties to collect more manure for them."

"I tell you what. Tomorrow we'll get two men to pull down that *kang* in Liu's west room to use as manure. They're not sleeping in that room now."

"That's a good idea. Baked earth's first-rate fertilizer. But why wait till tomorrow? We'll be busy ploughing all day and won't have time. Besides, after the *kang*'s dismantled it has to be broken up fine. That takes quite a while. We don't want to hold things up."

"What do you propose then?"

"Let's start on it right now — the two of us."

"No, you haven't been well. You mustn't overdo it. . . ."

"Nonsense. I can cope. Didn't you say we've got to go all out for the revolution?"

"Well . . . all right. I'll go and fetch tools."

That was how they set about this significant task. Apart from Liu's wife, still ill in bed, who woke up and called out to ask what they were up to, not a soul in the village knew what was happening or that these two young men were working through the night.

The next day dawned clear and fine. The daily round in the village started again. Men fetched water from the well; women went for

firewood; cocks crowed lustily; smoke wreathed up from kitchen chimneys. Then people emerged from wooden and wicker gates, from brick houses and mud cottages, driving cattle or carrying farm implements. The lanes thronged with villagers, seethed with activity.

Some peasants passing Liu's house stopped in surprise at sight of a pile of blackened earth.

"This wasn't here last night," they said. "Where did it come from?"

"If it had been carted here last night, we'd have heard."

"Have Liu's relatives come to help?"

"Liu isn't back yet, so how could they have come?"

Old Chou Chung strode up then, a spade and pick over his shoulder, and solved the riddle for them. "This is the work of our mutual-aid team," he announced.

"Mutual-aid team? What does that mean?"

"It means several families joining together to till the land. If anyone's in difficulties, all the rest help out, so he doesn't get sunk."

This novel idea aroused tremendous interest. The peasants surrounded Chou and bombarded him with questions until he ran out of answers. Then they went on to their fields to work, still discussing mutual aid among themselves.

Putting down his tools and stripping off his padded jacket, Chou started to mix the manure. He worked with a will. Since land reform he had been doing less heavy work. It had seemed to him that after toiling hard all his life, now that he need not worry about food and clothing he could sit back to enjoy his declining years. After all, he was over sixty. But today he had decided to change his way of life and break fresh ground. The new fighting task spurred him to action. He wanted to soldier on in the same ranks as Kao and the other younger men.

First he raked together the scattered manure, then broke it up with his pick, then shovelled it into another pile with his spade, by which time it was as finely crumbled as if it had been through a sieve.

Chun-ho arrived now with two buckets of water. The lad's shoulder-pole quivered as he ran, and spilt water made two long tracks on the path behind him. Putting down his load he picked up the buckets and emptied them over the baked earth. Then wiping his

sweaty face he told old Chou how sorry he was not to have helped the previous night.

"After the meeting yesterday, I suggested we should give up a night's sleep so as to prepare manure for Uncle Liu," he explained. "But my brother said that would keep Mrs. Liu awake. So you see, Brother Kao and Chu stole a march on us."

"You want to outdo Kao?"

"After all, this is our mutual-aid team's first job."

"Don't be so impatient. You'll have to wait a few years yet to outdo Kao."

"Is this water enough?"

"For the baked earth, yes; but we need more on the manure. It should be wetter."

"Won't that make it heavier to cart to the fields?"

"Liu's fields are dry, and we're starting late. The damper the manure the better the seeds will sprout. That's what we have to think of."

Then Chun-ho went to fetch more water.

Chin Fu now showed up. After glancing this way, he hurriedly scuttled over.

Yesterday he hadn't eaten his fill at meal-times. He hadn't given his ox enough fodder either. Instead he made ready his plough and yoke, waiting for Liu to come and hire his ox. He also did a sum in his head. If three of them did the ploughing and sowing for Liu, that would take them four or five days, during which they would have good meals in Liu's house in addition to earning two hundred pounds of maize. If Liu were unable to pay now he would have to pay at least two hundred and fifty pounds, including interest, after the autumn harvest. The more Chin Fu dwelt on this scheme, the better he liked it. It even haunted his dreams. His two sons had disturbed him several times by moving about during the night; and each time he thought someone had come to negotiate with him. He had waited till sunrise — still no sign of Liu. Then he walked slowly out with lowered head, still thinking about this business. An unusual commotion aroused him. When he looked up and saw the dung-heap

at Liu's gate and the villagers mixing manure and carrying water, he felt as if he had been robbed. He hurried to the spot.

"Are you taking over Liu's job, Brother Chou?" he asked with ill-concealed anxiety.

Chou straightened up and smiled. "Right. That's just what we're doing."

"You've even taken over the job of mixing manure?"

"Yes, everything."

"Well, you've raked it all up, not left a single scrap."

"That's right. Not a scrap left for you."

"You're doing very well for yourselves. . . ."

"And we shall do better yet." Chou burst out laughing.

Chin Fu gnashed his teeth and stumped home in high dudgeon.

The women did not lag behind either when it came to helping the mutual-aid team.

Chu's mother and Chou's daughter Li-ping went to see Liu's wife. Softly opening the door they tiptoed up to the *kang*.

Mrs. Chu was cut to the quick to see how frail the patient looked. Sitting on the edge of the *kang*, she stroked Mrs. Liu's feverish hand. "Are you feeling a little better these days?" she asked.

Liu's wife moved her pillow further in to give Mrs. Chu more room as she replied: "That medicine Kao brought did me a power of good. But I still have dizzy spells."

"That's natural after illness. Don't worry, just lie back and rest."

"I feel so anxious." Liu's wife sighed.

"Everything's going to be all right now," Mrs. Chu assured her. "We've formed a mutual-aid team."

"To think of all the trouble I'm giving you!"

"That's no way to talk. We all have to take our luck as it comes. We can never be sure our crops won't be spoiled by wind, hail, rain or pests. But provided we help each other, we can weather any storm. It was old Mrs. Teng who told me about the advantages of this mutual-aid team. I cottoned on at once and I'm all for it."

"We can never thank you enough for all you've done."

"Forget it. What we need is mutual aid — that just means helping each other."

Li-ping, her heart aching, was looking at the chaos in the room: thick dust on the chest, ragged bedding, dirt on the ground, and three children huddling together on the *kang*. While Mrs. Chu chatted with the invalid, the competent girl helped the three children put on their clothes and braided Spring Joy's hair into two neat plaits. Then she dusted the chest, swept the floor and straightened the bedding.

"What would you like to eat, auntie?" she asked.

"You have your hands full, Li-ping. Don't let me hold up your work."

"This is my work."

"Spring Joy can cook. Let her do it."

"She ought to go to school. She's behind with her lessons."

"She can stay home a few more days to look after her brothers."

"After breakfast I'll take the little boys to our place. My mum's at home. They can play with my young nephew. No trouble at all."

"Li-ping, what can I say to thank you?" exclaimed Mrs. Liu.

"You don't have to say anything. Once you and uncle are well again, we'll grow more crops together to support our state, help build up the country and support our volunteers in Korea. We shall all work together then for socialism."

Mrs. Chu clapped her hands and cried: "Well said! You're a fine Youth Leaguer, a true daughter of our old activist Chou Chung. Every word you say is new and progressive."

Liu's wife joined in: "There's not a single one of the Chou family lagging behind."

"Yes, you and I are growing old. We have to admit that," rejoined Mrs. Chu. "When I got up this morning and lit the stove, my son told me I must explain more of the new happenings to you to cheer you up. On the way here I thought out a few things to tell you, but as soon as I crossed the threshold all the new ideas slipped my mind and I started talking in the old way again. I don't seem able to help it."

Li-ping and the three children burst out laughing.

It was a long time since Mrs. Liu had laughed, but now she joined in too. Her heart felt so much lighter that with an effort she sat up on the *kang*.

Chu's mother helped her, commenting: "That's right. You must make up your mind to get better. The proverb says: Rest is a better cure than medicine. If you keep fretting, the best medicine in the world will do you no good."

"Your coming has cheered me up," said Mrs. Liu. "You've taken a great load off my mind. That's done me more good than any medicine."

"Just take it easy and you'll soon be well," replied Mrs. Chu. "Look at these kiddies of yours, what sweet children you have!"

After the meal Chu's mother washed some dirty clothes for Mrs. Liu while Li-ping spruced up Spring Joy and taking her by the hand saw her all the way to school.

9

The Kao family had supper in relays that evening. First Little Dragon, not waiting for the menfolk, had his meal and then curled up to sleep on the *kang*. Erh-lin came back after dusk, tired out and hungry, ate several bowls of millet without a word, then went to his small room to rest. Kao had business to attend to on the way home, so that by the time he got back the lamp was lit.

When Jui-fen saw her husband put down his bowl and chopsticks after just one bowl of porridge, she protested: "Don't do any more work this evening."

"Why not?" demanded Kao.

"You rest at home. I'll go instead of you to help out Uncle Liu."

"I wouldn't know what to do with Little Dragon if he wakes up and wants you," Kao countered with a smile.

"Why should he want me if you're home? You mustn't go out. I'll lock you in."

"What an idea! We've just started the mutual-aid team, and I'm a Party member. How can I sleep at home when others are hard at work?"

Jui-fen looked at her husband's drawn face with concern. His eyes were sunken, his cheeks hollow, his chin covered with stubble. Even his neck seemed thinner. Both his movements and speech

showed clear signs of over-fatigue. He insisted, however, on taking the lead because he was a Party member. And, knowing her husband, she knew he would do as he said.

"If you must go, lie down for a nap first," she urged, "while I get you some more to eat."

"I'm not hungry. Don't worry." Kao smiled. "You can cook me a big meal when we've finished ploughing."

"If you spoil your health that will be no joke," she protested.

Kao stretched, then braced himself. "Don't worry," he repeated. "I'm not going to collapse. I'm still strong as an ox."

With this he picked up the dipper, ladled some water from the vat and gulped it down. Then wiping his mouth with the back of his hand he went out.

Jui-fen watched till her husband had vanished into the night before going back to clear the table and coop up the hens. This done, she shut the door and lay down by her son. But she didn't feel like sleeping. The night was dark and still. She could see not a thing outside, could hear not a sound. Her thoughts strayed to the past.

Jui-fen had lost her parents while still a child. At the age of nine she had been found by Kao's mother who had begged her way from Sweet Meadow in Hopei back to her old home in Shantung. Clasp- ing the child to her, Mrs. Kao said with tears: "You can call me mother, lassie. You'll be my daughter. This is your brother Erh-lin. We're bitter gourds from the same vine." The three of them shared one tattered quilt between them, but cold as it was their hearts were filled with warmth.

Unluckily Kao's mother, worn down by hardship and grief, did not live to see the happy days that had come now. After struggling to bring up Jui-fen and Erh-lin, she died.... Jui-fen was twenty-two at the time of Liberation, when Kao returned from Hopei. In accordance with his mother's wish, they decided to marry. The wedding night should have been a happy occasion, but Jui-fen was overcome by tears. Taking her hand Kao urged her not to cry. "Don't be afraid, I won't bully you," he said. "We're brother and sister from the same stock, both poor..." His words brought

warmth and sweetness back to her heart. Three days after their marriage, Kao had to go back to the front. Before setting off he told her: "The old society broke up our homes and made us go through hell. Unless we wipe out Chiang Kai-shek's forces, we poor folk won't have the power in our hands, won't be able to live. Even if we managed somehow, it would be hell on earth..." Later, during land reform when they struggled against Crooked Mouth, Kao had mounted the platform during a mass meeting to denounce the landlord. "You've hounded so many people to death, today those blood debts must be paid!" he thundered. "If we don't overthrow you dogs, we poor folk have no way out." His words had deepened Jui-fen's class hatred and given her a better understanding of the revolutionary struggle.

During those stormy days in which they fought for a new life after Liberation, something else had happened which she could never forget. Late one night just after her husband had joined the Communist Party, Kao had given her an insight into his heart. "It's only now that I've found the right path," he told her. "From now on I belong body and soul to the Party..." That was the first time, after living for three years together, that she saw this resolute young husband of hers shed tears.

Since then, it seemed to her, her husband had been changing with each passing day. He became even more warm-hearted, absolutely tireless and better at using his brain. His goodness and generosity often passed her understanding. Why he should busy himself from morning to night, working so hard all the time, she could not explain; but she firmly believed that what he was doing was important and fine. He had the welfare of the poor at heart and was working so that future generations would never know bitterness and suffering. So she had determined to work together with him, not to let the family be a burden to him, but leave him free to devote himself to more important tasks.

Outside the window now she seemed to hear the sound of shoveling and the rumble of a cart. She got up, deciding that it was her duty too to help cart manure for the Liu family. Jui-fen always had the courage of her convictions: in this respect she was just like her



husband. Having shifted Little Dragon next to the wall and put pillows by him to prevent him from rolling off the *kang*, she took a spade, blew out the lamp and went out.

It was still pitch dark. The village was quiet. Most peasants were fast asleep after a day's hard work. As Jui-fen groped her way to Liu's house she heard him talking to her husband.

"It's after midnight. Go back and get some sleep."

"There are only two or three cartloads left. We'll soon finish the job."

"How can I let you both wear yourselves out for us?"

"Don't say that. We're only doing what we should."

"Well . . ."

"Go in and rest. When your foot's better, we can work together."

Jui-fen heard footsteps then, followed by the sound of a door being closed and latched.

"Don't leave the door on the latch."

"Have a good night's rest."

Slipping through the courtyard gate, Jui-fen groped about until she found an empty cart. A shadowy figure approached her — it was her husband.

"Who's there?" Kao asked.

"It's me," Jui-fen replied.

With no further ado they started to load the manure. The sound of rhythmic shovelling broke the stillness of the night. And soon the moon rose from the east.

After they had finished loading the cart, Kao stuck his spade into the pile of manure, wiped the sweat from his brow and stamped his feet to shake the dirt off his shoes. Then he went to the cart, fixed the harness round his shoulders and took firm hold of the shafts. The cart started to move.

Once out of the village, as he pulled the cart Kao asked: "Is Little Dragon still sleeping?"

Jui-fen, pushing the cart from behind, replied that he was.

"No danger of his rolling off the *kang*, eh?"

"No."

As the cart crossed over the ground moist in the spring, the moonlight cast their long shadows across the grass. Young reeds were growing in a pool by the roadside. The clear water glistened as the fish sleeping at the bottom breathed out bubbles of air. From a distant thicket, beginning to turn green, they heard the cries of wild geese. . . .

Now that the difficulties which had so taxed their brains had been overcome, the crack of a whip rang out over Liu's fields where the team of donkeys was turning up the soil which had slumbered all through the winter — good fertile soil wrested from the hands of the landlord.

This stirring scene had attracted many on-lookers.

Chou Chung's son Yung-cheng, steadying the plough with one hand and flourishing the whip in his other, was ploughing the fields with his team of three donkeys. He had already turned up four furrows.

Kao ran forward, his face shining, to see how the animals were making out. Sure enough, they had the strength to pull the plough. Then dropping back he bent down to examine the deep furrows. The sight of the withered stalks of crops and weeds turned under the moist dark soil flooded his heart with inexpressible joy. He walked off down the road towards the morning sun. Birds darted before him merrily. The good smell of newly tilled fields filled the air.

Leaning on his stick, a kettle in his hand, Liu was waiting on the path by the fields to greet him. Beaming all over his face he called: "Come and have a drink of water!"

Kao went up to him, took the proffered bowl and drained it in one gulp. Then wiping his mouth he said: "Go and see for yourself. The ploughing's well under way. It's going fine. Three donkeys are every bit as good as an ox."

Illustrated by Tung Chen-sheng

Spring (painting in the traditional style) by Kuan Shan-yueh ▶



Songs of Army Life

The Communications Corps

Somewhere
A telephone rings. . . .

Not a bird on the wing
In the freezing sky,
Not a passer-by
On the frozen earth;
In the deep mid-winter
At dead of night, in a storm,
Where is the telephone ringing?

Somewhere
A telephone rings. . . .

About the poet see the article on p.108.

A network of lines
Interlacing
Links distant hills
In a web of golden dreams.

Somewhere
A telephone rings. . . .

The mountains are crying aloud,
Peak answers peak:
"This is Kwangchow calling Peking. . . ."
"Peking calling Kwangchow. . . ."

Somewhere
A telephone rings. . . .

What birds are these —
Sparrows, nightingales or larks?
Out from a snowdrift scramble
Two men of our communications corps
Whose telegraph lines have called up
The bright red sun.

Cavalry Drill

Men leap to the saddle;
Their mounts with a swish of the tail
And a thunder of hoofs are off
Swift as the wind,
Amid a volley of shots.

Eight-foot ditches,
Ten-foot chasms —
With a shake of the reins
And one bound they fly across
Like tigers leaping ravines,
Like wild swans alighting on sand.

A thousand cordons of fire,
Ten thousand torches —
Not a horse falters,
Not a man dismounts,
But with staccato cracks
Their guns spit fire.

As if welded to the saddle
The riders veer left and right,
Race upwards and down;
Now bending to their stirrups
They fire a burst
And knock out flying targets;
Now fanning out
Like cranes in flight,

With a raking fire
They raze thickets.

Then, in a flash,
The cavalry is gone. . . .
But no! A cloud
Scuds swiftly past the sky-line,
A flashing streak of light.

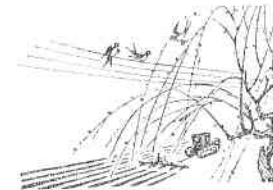


Our Answer to the Swallows

Willows before the window trail long tendrils,
Swallows spread their wings and sing,
Twittering as if to ask us:
Are you ready for the spring?

Ah, swallows, you come too late.
Spring has long been here for the army;
In mid-winter we started the spring sowing,
And our crops were blossoming in the snow.

Are we ready for the spring?
We are!
We have rifles, picks,
Flowers, verdant crops,
And this song to show our welcome. . . .



Narcissus

Before the gate of company headquarters
Stretches a sea of flowers:
Peonies, orchids, camellia,
Lilac and pomegranate. . . .
But what catches the eye is a cluster of narcissus,
One mass of blossom and luxuriant leaves.

The narcissus is growing in a battered basin
With a history longer than that of our company,
Dating back to our present commander's old commander
Who brought it with him from home,
A basin used by his father
And his father's father before him.
Heart ablaze, he joined the Red Army,
Went on the Long March, campaigned across north China,
Struck south against Chiang Kai-shek, then fought in Korea. . . .
In this basin he washed his face and cooked his meals;
On marches, in battles and singsongs it followed him.

In this basin, how many soldiers
Washed off the dust of battle?
How many heroes' faces did it mirror?
Soldered with brass and with iron,
Every patch on it gleams like a star.

No wonder, then, the narcissus grows so well,
Rooted as it is in the soil of our company,

Watered by the Red Army,
Fed by the Eighth Route Army,
And tended today
By our own PLA.



By the Camp-Fires

Blue sky above, snow underfoot, green pines:
A scene lovely as a picture.
Moonlight, starlight and camp-fires
Shine bright as many lamps.

The whistle sounds for muster,
Strings strike up,
There is dancing, singing and laughter
Among men and commanders out on field manoeuvres.
The sound of merriment reaches to the sky.

Wind whirls the drifted snow,
Camp-fires redden the sky;
Laughing and light at heart
They sing to welcome in another dawn.



Granny Sees the Troops Off

Don't go yet, lad!
In spring you helped us fight the drought,
In summer helped reap our wheat;
Now the autumn harvest and sowing are just done
But without even stopping to smoke or drink some water
You are setting off again --
How this saddens my old heart!

We can't stay any longer, granny,
Our job here's done,
A new task's waiting for us.
Goodbye for now!
Next year when the wheat is ripe
We'll come back to drink with you to your good harvest.

When the bugle calls muster and stars stud the sky,
The old woman is still clasping the soldier's hand;
After the troops have climbed the nearest hill
She still stands outside the village waving goodbye.



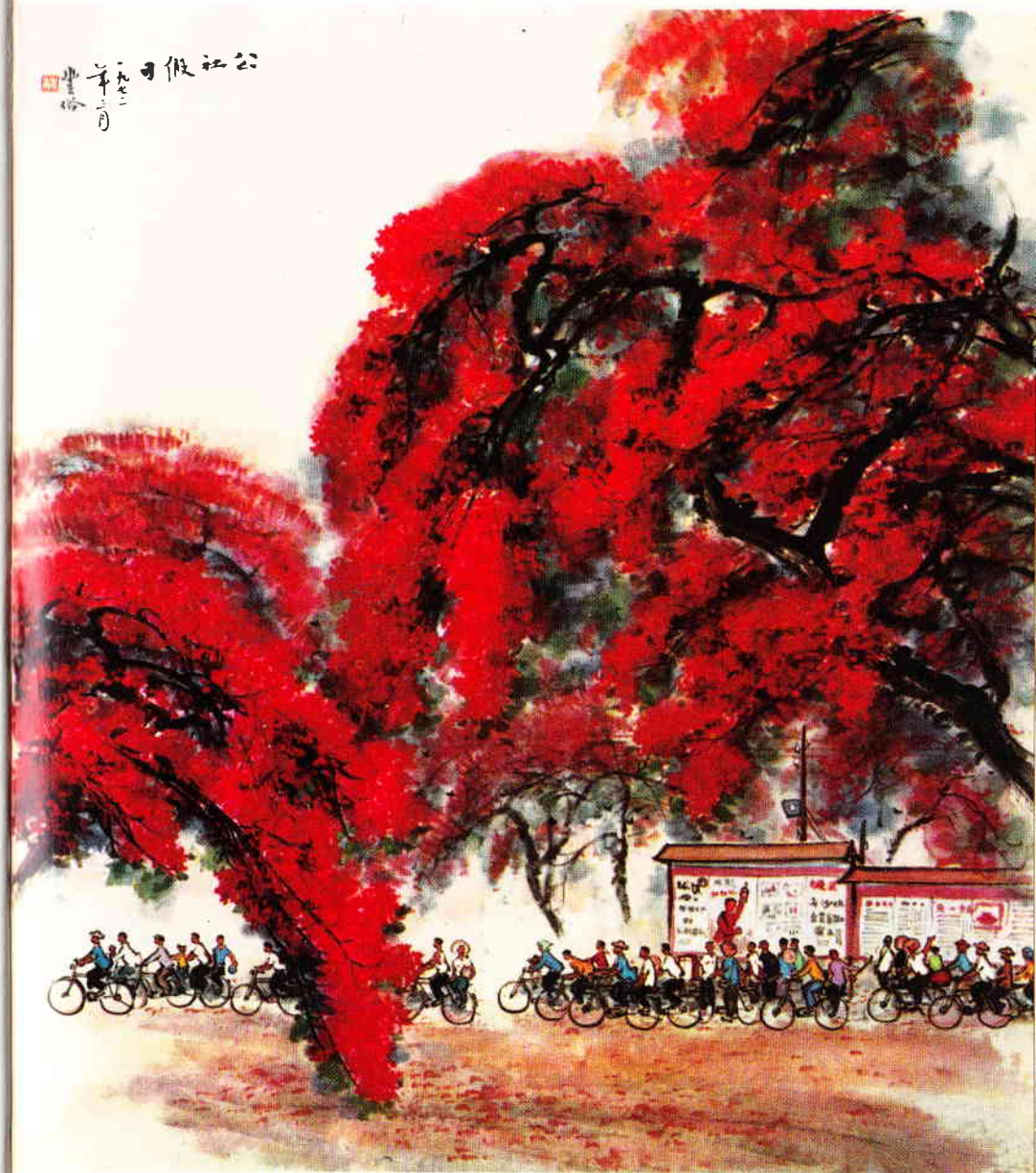
Moving On

In the silence of night
The men pack their kit and move on,
Striding swiftly but softly,
Not wanting to disturb
The peasants who put them up.

The next morning, rising at the crack of dawn,
The villagers find the armymen have gone,
Every water vat is filled,
Every courtyard swept,
On a slip of paper on the white-washed wall
Is written: "Thank you. Goodbye!"

Illustrated by Hao Chan

Holiday at the Commune (painting in the
traditional style) by Lin Feng-su ►



Lu Hsuan

A New Comrade-in-Arms

On his very first day in the service company Niu Ling made a poor impression on his deputy squad leader.

After taps that night, the light stayed on in the quarters of the first squad. Standing motionless in the middle of the room, arms akimbo, head on one side, deputy squad leader Yueh Hu sighed with exasperation at the crooked row of knapsacks hanging on the wall.

Yueh Hu had "reason" to be annoyed. Since their squad leader had been promoted to head a platoon, he had waited day in and day out for a good replacement. After two long weeks the political instructor told him that First Squad would continue under his command but would be reinforced by a soldier from Third Company who studied hard, used his head and understood the need to prepare for active combat. The men of Third Company were a fine bunch of fighters. And judging by what the political instructor said, this new comrade-in-arms must be first-rate; so even without a squad leader they could manage. The eleven men of First Squad were tough and resourceful. Their squad had always been at the fore,

both in preparedness against war and in military training. Just because they were a crack unit and the service company's work was so crucial, Yueh Hu was sure the higher command would send them someone really able.

Niu Ling the new comrade was to arrive at noon. Together with the political instructor, the deputy squad leader and his men waited at the depot gate. Soon they saw a short stocky soldier, a knapsack on his back, a satchel over one shoulder and a cartridge-belt round his waist, heading their way.

Could this be the man assigned to their squad, Yueh Hu wondered.

"Report! Niu Ling is reporting for duty," announced the short soldier in a high boyish voice as he saluted the political instructor.

"Good! You're very welcome," rejoined the political instructor cordially as he took Niu Ling's kit from his back. "Waiting for you has driven your deputy squad leader frantic." Then he introduced Yueh Hu. "This is Yueh Hu, deputy leader of First Squad. He and the comrades have been waiting here for a long time."

Yueh Hu grabbed hold of Niu Ling's knapsack, chuckling. On the way to their quarters he said expansively, "My name's Yueh Hu: *yueh* for mountain and *hu* for tiger. Is the *ling* in your name the *ling* for a mountain range?"

"No, it's the *ling* for flexibility."

Yueh Hu, who already had some reservations about Niu Ling's build and voice, felt a chill run down his spine. What a peculiar name! And the boyish way Niu Ling spoke sounded cissy. He just didn't measure up to Yueh Hu's squad of tiger-cubs. These reflections found expression in his next words.

"You ought to change your name and use the *ling* for mountain range," he said. "That would have more zip to it."

The political instructor laughed while Niu Ling simply stared, batting the long lashes of his dark eyes. Feeling rather a fool, Yueh Hu cleared his throat in embarrassment, then continued:

"What was I talking about? Oh yes, we're very glad to have you with us. Our service company's tasks are extremely important, as the leadership may have told you. That means that every one of us needs to have high political consciousness, be ready at all times

for action and fight like a tiger. I believe these are exactly your qualities. . . ."

Chatting and laughing, they escorted Niu Ling to the barracks.

That night when Yueh Hu returned from a meeting in the company, he found the light still on in First Squad's room and wondered what was up.

Striding in he discovered Niu Ling, his jacket draped over his shoulders, fiddling with the squad's twelve knapsacks, lengthening the straps of one and shortening those of another. The new knapsack hanging at the end of the row stood out like a sore thumb, its straps three or four inches shorter than the rest. It was this which had occasioned Yueh Hu's sigh of exasperation. He was inwardly sizzling like a lighted firecracker, ready to explode any minute. But since all the others were asleep, he kept his voice down as he asked, "What are you up to? It's long after taps, Young Niu. This is no time to be sorting things out. Besides, what a mess those knapsacks look, all hanging at different heights. Hurry up and turn in now." With that he started to change the straps back again.

"Don't do that, deputy squad leader. It just struck me that this is a more scientific way. . . ."

"What do you mean? More scientific? In the army everything has to be spruce and trim, just as everybody has to march in step. It's not a small thing, the way we keep our equipment, but an indication of our combat strength. Our squad has never been sloppy. You must watch your step. . . ."

"But this is how the comrades wear their knapsacks when they march. You can see the marks made by the buckles. . . ."

"I know. But why don't you look at the other marks made by the buckles? If you fasten them according to those marks, the knapsacks will hang in a straight row. You've just gone and messed things up."

"I think. . . ."

"You'd better do your thinking in bed, Young Niu. Is it right to mess up our barracks? Don't say any more now or you'll wake up the comrades. Go ahead and sleep while I put things right. D'you hear me?"

Given no chance to explain, Niu Ling clamped his lips together and walked out.

This astonished Yueh Hu even more. "Well, Niu Ling, though your name means flexibility, you're not so much flexible as pigheaded," he thought. "As soon as you arrive you start meddling with things without a word to anyone. When I try to put you wise you refuse



to be convinced. You'll be making plenty of trouble for me in future. . . . But what can one expect of a new recruit?" Yueh Hu heaved another deep sigh. Presently, however, he regretted having spoken so sharply to the young soldier who had come only that afternoon. He had let his temper get the better of him again. He thumped his head hard and chased after Young Niu. "I was wrong to blow up like that," he said contritely. "I must learn to keep a better check on my temper. You must give me more help from now on. I apologize. Come in now and go to bed."

Niu Ling laughed, taking it for granted that Yueh saw his point at last. "Didn't I say that's a more scientific way?" he said. The two of them put out the light, then went to sleep.

The following day the service company was due to have bayonet practice. The soldiers had improved their skill after some arduous training and were now to demonstrate it in the presence of all the officers and men of the depot.

After breakfast the sun shone brightly over the drill field, which was flanked by two squads of soldiers with wooden rifles. Hundreds of men had gathered on the slope to watch. The fourth platoon leader, in charge of the exercise, stood on a rock holding a banner. First Squad was pitted against its old rival Ninth Squad that morning in a tricky bayonet contest on hilly terrain. Since Ninth Squad was second only to First Squad in bayonet fighting and had made further progress in the recent training, it was hard to tell which would be the winner.

The fourth platoon leader led the contestants in reciting a quotation from Chairman Mao: "**Heighten our vigilance, defend the motherland.**" Then he waved his banner and the contest started. Chia Ching-hua, the tall leader of Ninth Squad and an ace in hand-to-hand combat, advanced to the middle of the field and planted himself there like an iron tower. Then the eyes of the audience swivelled to First Squad, focusing on Yueh Hu. But instead of bounding out with a roar like a tiger as everyone had expected, Yueh Hu said a word to Niu Ling, who promptly shot forward. The audience started buzzing in surprise.

"Who's this youngster?" people asked.

"He's Niu Ling. It's ridiculous to put him up against Chia Ching-hua."

"What's got into Yueh Hu today?" others demanded.

"Niu Ling, glaring at his opponent, seemed to hear none of these comments. After a few seconds he yelled "Attack!" and levelled his rifle at the ninth squad leader's chest. At once silence fell, broken only by the thud and clatter of thrust and parry as the onlookers watched the fierce duel with bated breath.

Both men attacked fiercely, shouting, "Charge . . . charge!" They struck now to the left, now to the right, sometimes lunging seven or eight times in swift succession. First one forced the other to give ground, then the position was reversed; but all this time neither of them had scored a hit. After fifteen minutes Niu Ling, unequal to Chia in strength, was reduced to fending. Having manoeuvred himself into an advantageous position higher up the slope, Chia's spirits rose and he attacked harder and harder, kicking up gravel and stones. It looked touch-and-go with Niu Ling. As he retreated, he caught one of his trouser-legs on a stub. When he warded off Chia's next blow and jerked his leg away, he tore his trousers and fell over backwards. For a second the ninth squad leader was stunned. Before he could recover himself he heard a shout and — Dong! — a bayonet thudded against his cuirass. Niu Ling had scored a hit.

A shout of applause went up. The drill field, which had been silent for fifteen minutes, was thrown into a tumult again.

"What a stubborn fighter this young fellow is! That blow packed a punch."

"Didn't you see how he charged on to the drill field just now? It was obvious that he had the real enemy in mind. His only concern was to hit the enemy."

The fight continued amid a buzz of comments.

But the ninth squad leader had not made a name for nothing. Though Niu Ling mustered every ounce of his strength, he was hit twice and came out the loser. Nevertheless the young soldier had left a deep impression on everyone. Even after the two contestants left the field they were still the general topic of conversation.

"I wonder why Yueh Hu pitted Niu Ling against the ninth squad leader. He should know that a new soldier is no match for a crack fighter."

"I'm sure he did know. Yueh Hu may show off at times and be pretty casual, but all the same he has plenty of tricks up his sleeve."

"Certainly. I think I know his tactics. He pits his weakest against their strongest, his strongest against their second-best and his second-best against their weakest, so as to make sure of the overall victory. Just you wait and see."

"Look, here's Yueh Hu taking the field now."

The soldiers' comments reached the ears of the political instructor. With a deep frown he watched Yueh Hu.

The second contest was quite unlike the first. Face to face with his opponent, a soldier of Ninth Squad, instead of charging in his usual pugnacious way, Yueh Hu watched the movements of the other man carefully while casually warding off attacks. And soon he was hit. Again the audience buzzed. But from his own failure in the first encounter Yueh Hu had detected his opponent's weakness. He went on to attack in his usual tiger-cub style and quickly won the next two rounds. Before each of the following contests Yueh Hu gave some whispered instructions to the man he was fielding. The soldiers of First Squad all followed his example, sizing up their opponents before launching an attack.

The political instructor had of course guessed what Yueh Hu was up to. He walked over and patted his shoulder.

"What kind of tactics are you using today, deputy squad leader?" he asked.

Yueh Hu chuckled. "Flexible strategy and tactics: losing first and winning later so as to ensure the final victory."

So his guess was right! The political instructor did some serious thinking. Niu Ling who had been watching the drill field intently, raised his eyebrows when he heard the deputy squad leader's answer. There seemed to be two big question marks in his eyes as they fastened upon Yueh Hu.

The last contest was over. First Squad had won hands down. This gave rise to more discussion.

"First Squad's living up to its name as a tiger squad."

"After the recent training they've come on no end."

As the onlookers started dispersing, a short soldier leapt up the boulder where the fourth platoon leader had stood. "Don't leave yet, comrades!" he called shrilly.

It was Niu Ling, the wooden rifle in his right hand, his long eyelashes batting and his round face flushed, looking as if something was pent-up in him.

"What does he want?" people wondered, staring.

"Our squad is the loser today. Not Ninth Squad," he blurted out, jumping down again from the boulder.

"What do you mean?" demanded Yueh Hu, astounded.

"Your squad won nine to three. A very high score," countered a soldier of Ninth Squad.

Smiling encouragingly the political instructor prompted, "Go on, Young Niu. Tell us what you have in mind."

"We may be the winner according to the score," said Niu Ling. "But supposing it had been a real battle? Eleven of us were hit first. That means they were killed as soon as the battle started. How could they knock out the enemy afterwards? Our drill field is a battlefield and military manoeuvres are real battles. We've lost this time. Our deputy squad leader's tactics are unscientific."

"Well, he's got a point there," some men said approvingly.

The political instructor was pleased too. Stepping forward he announced, "Fine. Very good indeed. Comrades, you've drilled hard and made great progress. We need to check up on our skill and tactics as Niu Ling has done, that is, from the point of view of real battle, always considering actual battle conditions. Then the skills we master during training will stand us in good stead in time of war." Turning to Yueh Hu he asked, "What do you say, deputy squad leader? Do you keep real warfare in mind?"

Niu Ling's criticism and the political instructor's comment had set Yueh Hu thinking furiously. How did his actions measure up to their requirements? "Niu Ling's right," he decided. "I've fallen behind in my thinking recently. All I have in mind is military manoeuvres, not real battles." He quickly walked up to the ninth

squad leader and said, "We're the losers, Old Chia, because my thinking was wrong. . . . We must learn from you."

"Oh no, Yueh Hu, your squad's by far the stronger," the ninth squad leader protested.

Yueh Hu went over to Niu Ling and grasped his hands. "You've the right way of thinking, Young Niu," he declared. "We revolutionary soldiers must always bear in mind the fact that we may be fighting real battles in the future. You're much more scientific than I am. You must give me more tips from now on so that we will be better prepared against war. I promise to learn from your scientific methods."

The others admired the spirit of both Niu and Yueh. Somebody started clapping. Then all the rest joined in with enthusiasm.

Niu Ling flushed again, protesting vehemently, "No, no. I'm the one who ought to learn from you. When I messed up our barracks last night, you criticized me. But you accepted my way of doing things right away when I said it was more scientific. You even apologized to me. This readiness to admit mistakes is what I should learn from you."

Yueh Hu was staggered for a second time. "Was that another of your scientific methods?" he asked.

The political instructor intervened to inquire what had happened the previous night.

"It was like this, political instructor," Niu Ling explained. "Last night, when I was lying in bed trying to visualize my new comrades, it struck me that they were all taller than me by a few inches. But the straps of the knapsacks hanging on the wall were all the same length. If an emergency task were to come up, I'd have to lengthen the straps of my knapsack while some other comrades shortened theirs a bit. That would waste precious time. So I tried to adjust them all to the right length. But that didn't work out either. It looked too sloppy."

Yueh Hu's heart was rapidly warming to this young soldier. "So that's how he looked at the matter," he reflected. "But I failed to see his point and went on with my old way of doing things this morning." He could have kicked himself. Thumping his rifle

on the ground he said, "Say, Young Niu, how about this: we'll put the nails higher for the tall men and lower for the short ones. Then our knapsacks will still hang in a straight row."

"That's a fine idea, really scientific!" Niu Ling's face lit up.

Yuch Hu never let grass grow under his feet. Once he saw what was needed he would go into action like lightning. Taking Niu Ling by the hand he cried, "Come on, Young Niu. Let's see to it right away."

Illustrated by Huang Chia-yu

Hunting Whales (coloured woodcut)
by Chia Teh-hsin ▶



On Patrol

I was transferred from a scout squad to a sentry post on the border to take the place of Squad Leader Liu. Before I started off the head of my scout section told me more than once to learn from Liu's rich experience, for he was said to know the situation on the border as well as he did the palm of his own hand. In recent years, Liu's squad had fulfilled its tasks very well.

Right after I arrived at my new sentry post, Liu received notice to leave within a day or two. I was quite worried about this, since the time was too short for me to learn from his experience. Then I thought that when we went on patrol duty that day, I'd ask former Squad Leader Liu to come with us so that he could talk about his experiences on the way. However, I realized that leaving soon he would need time to prepare for his journey. Could I invite him to come with me in spite of this?

While I was still hesitating I heard someone calling me: "Squad Leader Yang, let's go now!" Turning, I saw former Squad Leader Liu standing there all ready to leave. I asked where he was going. "On patrol of course!" said he with a smile.

"But you'll be leaving soon," I protested. "Don't you need to get ready?"

"I'm to report for duty at regiment headquarters tomorrow morning. That won't stop me from going on my last patrol today," he explained.

"Fine!" I was so pleased I jumped to my feet.

As we prepared to leave, Liu took out from the locker by his bed a bottle of wine, the arm for a pair of glasses, a paper parcel and a few books. He gave the cork in the bottle an extra twist, then wrapped it in paper. The plastic arm of the glasses he put in a small cardboard box padded with cotton-wool and tied it securely with a piece of string. Then he put all these things into his knapsack.

It was a hot July morning. Mist rising from the valleys into cooler air fell again in a light drizzle. The narrow path zigzagged into the distance. Thick creepers and weeds along the edges of the path were wet. They caught at our clothes as we climbed on our way. I followed close behind Liu. He pointed now to a mountain top and now to an observation tower, indicating various landmarks. He was as familiar with the geography of the border as if he had a large-scale map in his hand. He even knew how many telephone poles there were between two observation posts. Although I admired his ability, I felt he hadn't grasped what I needed at all. I was anxious to learn from his experience of dealing with unexpected problems along the border.

"Squad Leader Liu," I interrupted him, "what do you do in case of an emergency here?"

Taking out my notebook, I prepared to jot down some notes. But he didn't answer. Turning, I saw Liu and a new recruit named Chen squatting together on the edge of a sorghum field beside the path. They were straightening a trampled sorghum plant.

"Squad leader, I've been careless," admitted Chen remorsefully.

"It's all right as long as you do something to make up for it," said Liu. "We must be very careful on our way." Then they both laughed. Chen rolled up his sleeves, gathered up a handful of wet soil, crumbled it and built up a mound around the young plant. Liu unslung his water bottle from his shoulder and watered it.

We descended into a valley between magnificent cliffs. Chen, who had gone on ahead, returned to report, "Squad leader, the wooden foot-bridge in the gully has been washed away by a flood."

On hearing this, Liu frowned. We hurried towards the stream to find that the bridge was no longer there.

"Squad Leader Yang," Liu said to me. "We can't spare time now. We must make a detour. When we return we'll put up another."

We travelled about five miles along the stream, crossed a ravine, climbed over a peak and approached a gully where a few small huts huddled together. There were a number of beehives scattered on the hillsides around the huts. Bees were busy in a vegetable garden and on the mountain slopes. It was the place where the patrol detachment stopped to rest.

Squad Leader Liu assigned one of our comrades to stand guard while the others were told to rest. I thought that now was the best chance for me to beg Liu to tell me something about his experiences.

But before I could speak, he had pushed open the door of one hut and stepped in. I followed him. An old man still wearing a net on his hat to protect him from the bees was stirring honey in a bucket by the stove. "How are you keeping, Granddad Chang?" Liu greeted him.

"Ah, Squad Leader Liu, so you're here again," the old man answered cheerfully, raising his head. "We were just speaking of you! That prescription you recommended did the trick. I've had no trouble for a long time."

The old man eyed me. "Who's he?"

Liu introduced me. "He's the new squad leader—Comrade Yang."

"Very good. We welcome you. Come here often." He continued working while he talked.

All of a sudden, the door opened with a bang. A boy ran into the room carrying a bucket of honey. When he saw us, he put it down with a plonk and rushed into Liu's arms. "Have you brought me any books, Uncle Liu?" he asked, stretching out his hand towards Liu's knapsack to see what was in it.

"Here they are." Liu pulled out a few Little Red Soldier story-books from his knapsack and gave them to the boy. With the small parcel in his hand, Liu said to Granddad Chang: "I've brought you some more brown sugar which you'll need for that prescription."

The old man, still working, nodded his approval. "Fine! Fine! Please put it on the table, Little Ching-shan," he called out to the boy. "Why are you still standing here? Go and fill Uncle Liu's water bottle for him."

When the boy returned from fetching water, Liu gave him the bottle of wine saying, "Keep this for your granddad, Little Ching-shan. Be careful now."



Taking the bottle, the boy hopped off with a smile.

"I can't stop now to show you but read it yourself, I wrote down a few things for you," said the old man, pointing to a notebook lying on the table. On the cover someone had written, "Border Situation Record".

Liu read it page by page. There were small drawings on the pages that resembled people, cars and birds.

Before we left, the old man said: "The enemy's planes have been very active beyond the bridge. You hear them buzzing a lot these days. Be on the alert!"

After we left the apiary, Liu gave me a detailed account of the people living along the border. He told me the names of many villagers, the members of each family, who was sick of a certain disease, which family was going to build a new house and so on. But I listened impatiently, thinking that such information was of no use to me. What I wanted was to learn from his experience.

We arrived at another hamlet of only a few households about half a mile from the border. Liu told me that members of a shock team from a nearby brigade were opening up virgin land there. Among them was an old woman. Her brigade leader had tried to persuade her to stay at home. But she had insisted on going with the team to cook their food and wash their clothes for them.

Squad Leader Liu led us to a hut. There we found the old woman who was over sixty sitting before a spinning-wheel, busily spinning hemp. She stopped working when we came in. "Squad Leader Liu, I was sure you'd come. I just prepared some honey-water for you. Have a drink." Granny invited us all to enjoy some cold honey-water.

Liu seemed quite at home. He put down his knapsack on the *keang*, and took another notebook with "Border Situation Record" written on the cover from the peg where it hung. He read it and jotted down points in his own book.

Liu hung the notebook up again after reading. "You've done very well, granny!" said he approvingly.

"Hai, my eyes are too weak to write well. Don't forget to bring me an arm for my glasses next time you come, Liu!" I noticed



immediately that the old woman's spectacles had only one arm. The other side was tied with string.

"I've brought it, granny. I wonder whether it's the right size though," Liu said.

"How did you know that I needed it?" she asked in surprise.

"I noticed it last time," he told her. Then he took out his pen-knife, lifted the glasses from her face, screwed the new arm on and handed the glasses back to her.

It began to dawn on me how Squad Leader Liu gathered information from the villagers, at the same time giving what help he could to them. Chen told me that this was Liu's way of work. Sometimes he would walk miles to deliver something to a family after his patrol duty was over for the day.

We finished our patrol early in the afternoon.

Liu would soon be leaving us. He stood on a large rock wiping the sweat from his face with a handkerchief and gazing at us and the mountains. After a while he said to me: "Squad Leader Yang, the time is too short for a real talk. I have many shortcomings in

my work and hope to hear your comments and suggestions. The foot-bridge I'll have to leave to you and your comrades."

After we had seen Liu off, our patrol detachment returned to the bridge. It was around 6 p.m. Obviously we must carry logs from two miles away for there were none available near by. Getting them would take us several hours, for there were only five of us. Just then, we noticed a group of people coming down the mountain slope with Granddad Chang and the militia platoon leader in the lead. Some carried logs on their shoulders, others had spades and rope in their hands. We all hurried over to them to ask where they were going. Granddad Chang seemed a bit angry.

"It's everyone's duty to take care of things along the border," he said looking at me critically. "Why did you say nothing about the bridge when you came? A while ago, Ching-shan's brother was looking for an ox. Then he noticed the wooden foot-bridge had been washed away and told us. So we came here immediately to fix it. If only you five were to do the job, it wouldn't be finished till midnight." So saying, he put down the poles. Before I could speak he beckoned: "Come on over here!" He joined two ends of rope, throwing one end to me. We pulled from each end till the knot was strong enough. Then we tied the logs firmly together. Granddad waved again. Soldiers and militiamen together quickly laid the poles across the stream and fixed them to make a new foot-bridge.

Watching this stirring scene of civilians and army men working together I received the best answer to the questions in my mind. There had been no need to ask former Squad Leader Liu to tell me about his experience. His experience was being demonstrated before my eyes in action. He had set me a good example of closely linking army men with the people. As long as we depended on the people, our frontier would be an iron wall.

A rosy sunset dyed the mountain range red. The slanting rays of the sun dipped into the valleys. We crossed the new foot-bridge, climbed up a cliff and looked down the track along which we had travelled. In my mind I saw a great wall being built along our thousand miles of frontier.

Illustrated by Tsui Shen-lin

Hsiao Hsing

The Ferryman

It was mid-winter and late at night. Snow swirled wildly all around us as we rushed a patient to the county hospital.

By the time we reached the Taching River, the wind was whipping the drifting snow with even more fury. The whole world seemed frozen. Only the flowing river quietly lapped up the fluffy snowflakes as they fell. A white mist met our eyes wherever we turned; there was no sign of a boat.

"Will the ferry be out in this blizzard?" Aunt Li voiced the worry in her mind as she brushed snow off the tarpaulin from under which came a moan now and then.

"I'll shout for one," said Young Chang, cupping his hands over his mouth. Just then he and I cried out together, "Look, a boat!" A light, flickering dimly in the distance, came nearer and nearer.

"This way! This way!" I yelled, waving my arms.

"Coming!..." a deep bass voice answered from the river.

As soon as the boat neared the shore we hurried on to it with the stretcher. "Is someone ill? Easy there," said the ferryman as he

lent us a hand. Then picking up his pole again he pushed hard with a grunt and the boat left the bank.

"Have I kept you waiting?" he asked, dropping the pole in exchange for two oars at the stern.

"Not at all. We're so sorry to give you all this trouble," said Aunt Li with relief and gratitude, bending down to adjust the quilt over the patient.

"How come you rowed across to us before we even called you?" I asked in wonder.

"I hadn't turned in yet. Came out to see if the snow had stopped and saw you the moment I opened the door."

"Saw us?" I was puzzled.

"I saw that thing in your hand," he said, using his oars vigorously.

"That's amazing!" I muttered, instinctively tightening my clutch on the storm-lantern in my hand. A bright lantern at the feet of this brawny man showed up the strong grip of his hands on the oars and the power and rhythm of his movements. Snow had settled thickly on his padded coat and hat. Gratitude welled up in my heart. As the water gurgled softly under the keel, the moving oars left a trail of churning water. Thoughts too churned in my mind.

In less time than it took to finish a cigarette, we reached the other bank. In the hut by the ferry a light was still on.

"Take it easy. Don't move until the boat's alongside," said the ferryman jumping ashore to steady the boat with his hands. Quickly, we carried the stretcher to the bow, but my foot slipped as soon as it touched land. The ferryman flew to my side when I stumbled, and lifted the stretcher with both hands.

"Careful now," he cried to Uncle Hsu and Young Chang as they carried the stretcher ashore.

I found my feet and saw that the glass in my lantern was broken. "Are you hurt?" asked the ferryman, concern in his voice.

"No. But I've broken the lantern," I answered despondently.

"It was my fault for not warning you about that slippery bank." He went back to the boat for his lantern and pushed it into my hand. "Here, take this with you."



Only then did I discover that his padded shoes were soaking; he must have stepped into the water when he came to my help. "Oh dear," I cried apologetically. "Your shoes are all wet."

"That's all right. It's all in the day's work."

"Hurry and change into dry shoes," urged Uncle Hsu, brushing the snow off the man's shoulders. "You're not such a young man. Careful you don't catch a chill."

"Ha! I'm still hale and hearty. Not quite fifty yet. Listen, young man, that lantern needs oil."

I followed him to the hut. His sodden shoes made a plop, plop

sound on the thick snow. Once inside, he busied himself refilling the lantern while I looked around me. On a table by the bed, a kerosene lamp burned beside an open diary and a pen with its cap off. A volume of the *Selected Works of Mao Tsetung* lay close by. I could see the man sitting there a moment ago, reading, writing, and pondering perhaps.... Suddenly a match flared. I turned round to see his swarthy face etched in the orange light of the flame as he bent to light his cigarette by Uncle Hsu's match. There were icicles on his beard. His wrinkled face glowed like carved bronze. Was this the face of a ferryman who braved the elements day in and day out or was he a veteran fighter who'd been through countless battles? I walked up to grasp his hand. To my surprise, three of his fingers were missing from his right hand.

"May I know your name, comrade?"

"I'm just the ferryman here." His laughter, reverberating in the little room, was warm and cheerful.

While I was still urging him to change his shoes, he picked up the padded overcoat on the bed. "Here take this along with you..."

At last the night of tension was over. Our patient lay comfortably asleep in the county hospital. Outside, sunshine bathed the snow-covered earth. A light breeze touched the green pines, shaking their heavy burden of snow from them as they stood erect and majestic as ever. My eyes on the borrowed overcoat and lantern, I fell into a reverie. Just then Uncle Hsu entered. "Aren't you going yet?"

"Ah yes, I must be going now." When I came out, Uncle Hsu said, "Thank that comrade properly for all of us."

Lugging the coat and lantern I returned to the ferry. A young man was sweeping the snow to clear a path.

"Where's the comrade who ferried us across last night?" I asked without preliminaries. The young man eyed me from head to toe. "I want to return these," I hastened to add, showing him the coat and lantern.

"Oh him. He left at dawn."

"Left? But he said he's the ferryman here."

"He's the Party secretary of our ferry-boat administration."

“Then where can I find him?”

“Find him?” He pointed up and down the river. “There, the dozens of ferries across the Taching River can all be called his office. You’ll really have to run around.”

I was alarmed. As I explained to him what had happened last night, he smiled and dropped his broom. “He’s always like that. Here, leave the things with me.”

I followed the young man into the hut. He was very talkative. From him I learned that their Party secretary’s name was Kao. He was a veteran revolutionary who’d lost the fingers of his right hand in battle. Last night, he had come to see how things were. It happened that the young man was needed at home so the secretary took his place at the ferry.

“Ferry, please...” Someone was waiting to go across. We left the hut. The young man was at the boat in one bound. He gently helped an old woman aboard. With a heave and a grunt, he guided the ferry-boat away from the shore. The river flows ceaselessly eastward. Mantled in sunshine the boat glided towards the other bank, leaving in its wake a golden ribbon of scintillating water.

Illustrated by Shen Yao-yi



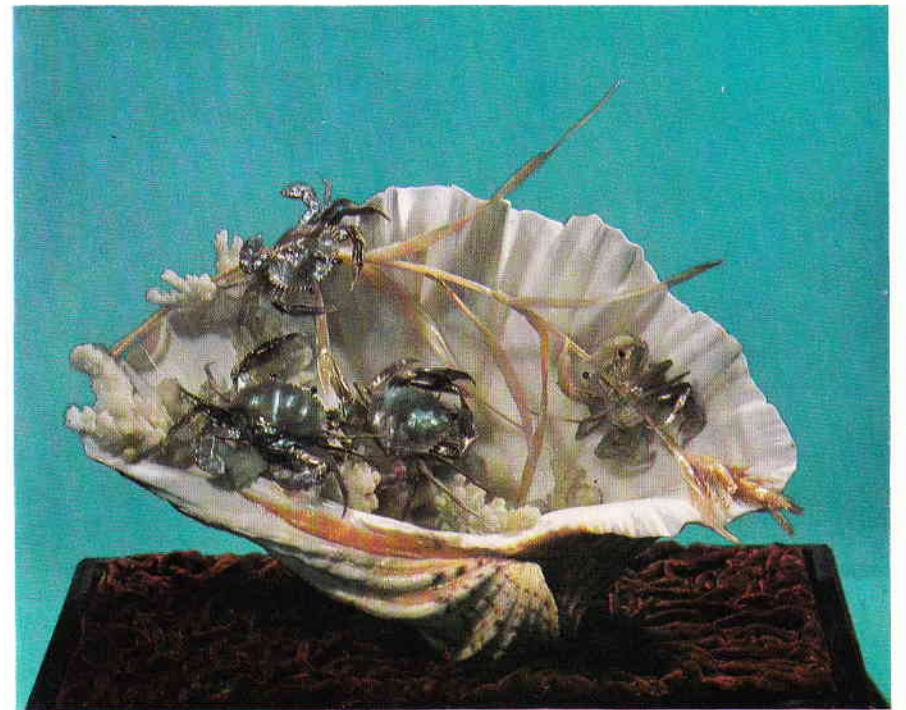
Two Little Mongolian Shepherdesses (ivory) from Peking

New Handicraft Arts



Abundant Fruit (stone) from Foochow

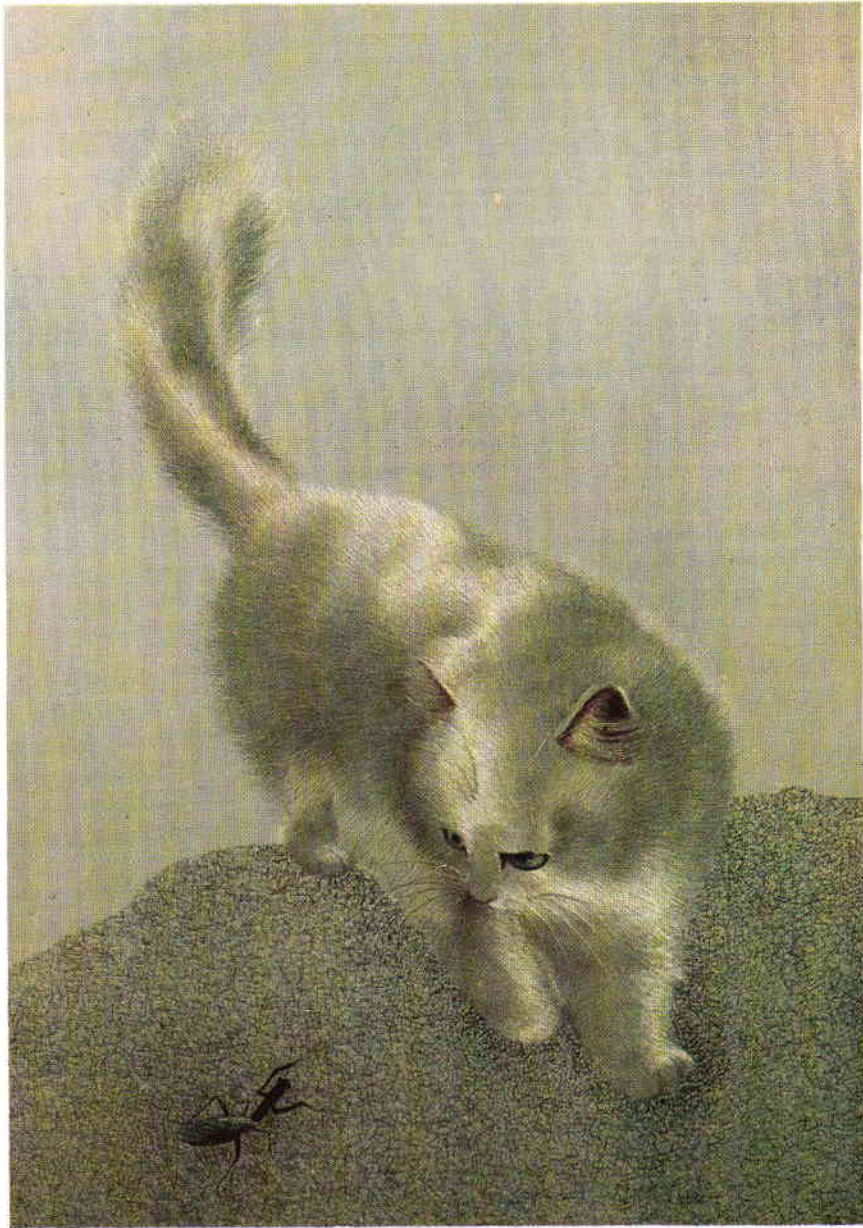
Crabs (shell) from Kwangtung



A Tibetan Milkmaid (wood) from Wenchow



She Practises Acupuncture on Herself (pottery) from Shihwan, Kwangtung



White Cat and Mantis (reversible embroidery) from Soochow



Peacock Vase (copper) from Kunming

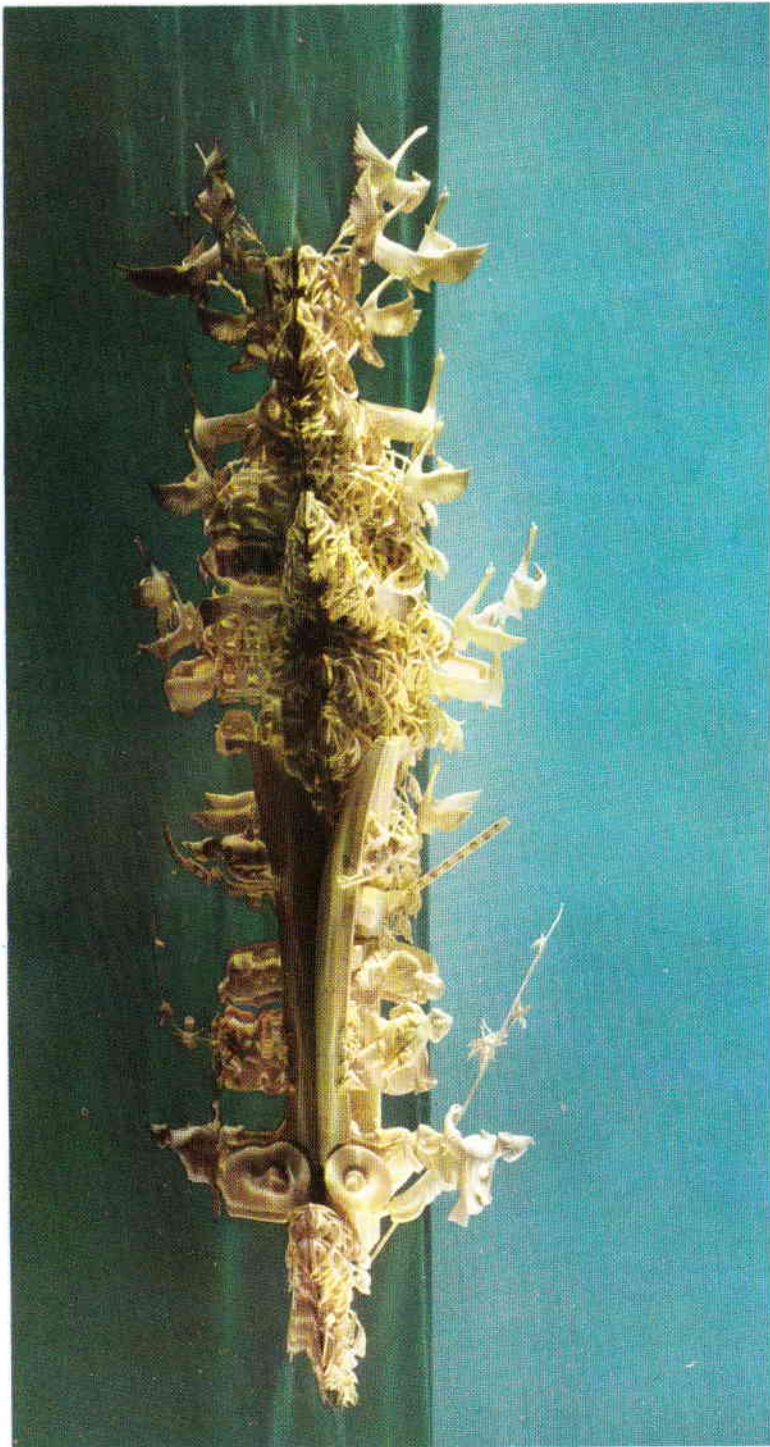
On the Banks of the Peacock River

The day dawned fine and crisp.

The previous night a heavy snow had fallen. Fields, slopes and roof-tops were completely carpeted in white. Along the banks of the Peacock River the bare branches of the date trees covered with velvety flakes looked like pear trees bursting into blossom.

Soon after breakfast the commune's supply and marketing centre began a new day. Some shop assistants busily swept the snow from the front yard, cleaning it for the early shoppers. Others were checking the contents of some crates and loading them on a donkey-cart ready to be sent to the PLA men billeted in one of the commune's brigades. The crates contained candies, cigarettes, soap, towels and other things which the soldiers might need to buy before leaving on manoeuvres.

Aimuhan lit the stove to warm up the store. Afterwards, as she was cleaning off the counters a PLA man walked in, bringing with him a cold draught. He glanced over the shelves, searching for something, and then asked Aimuhan briskly, "Do you sell anything to relieve a sprain?"



"No, we don't," Aimuhan answered. She looked closely at the young soldier. In spite of the icy weather there were beads of sweat on his forehead as if he were in pain, so she asked sympathetically, "What's wrong, comrade?"

"Oh, just a sprained ankle," he replied casually and, looking disappointed, left the store.

But his expression did not escape Aimuhan's sharp eyes or fail to set her thinking: He must be one of the soldiers who arrived at the East-Is-Red Brigade on a military exercise the day before yesterday. Tomorrow they were leaving but this one had a sprained ankle! How could he go? She was worried about him.

"Say, dad is experienced in treating sprains and such troubles," she suddenly thought. "If I could take him to see this soldier—he'd certainly be able to help." So she went to the store manager and told him what was on her mind. He agreed, saying, "Good. Our cart is starting for the soldiers' billets soon. You go with the driver and pick up your father on the way to the brigade where they are."

The cart started. As it neared the village where her father Amuti lived Aimuhan saw him coming from the opposite direction also driving a donkey-cart. Pleased at this, she called out: "Hi, dad!" It did not take her long to discover that the old man was going to see Uncle Kurban who had just returned from Peking for a short visit. She knew that, having missed his old friend for years, her father was anxious to see him again.

"I'd better ask him in a roundabout way," she thought.

"Dad, I've a question to ask," began Aimuhan. "These PLA men were strangers to us, but as soon as they came here they took us into their hearts. Why did they do this?"

"Does it need explaining?" answered Amuti. "The roots of the green pines on the Tienshan Mountains are twined together and so are the hearts of the PLA men and ours."

"Then tell me: If they're in trouble, should we look the other way?"

"What're you talking about? Their troubles are ours too. There's not one of us but is ready to help them."

Her father's reply made Aimuhan very happy, and so she told him the whole story and also suggested that he turn his cart in the other direction and go to see if he could help the young soldier.

"Hey, why didn't you say so at the start?" the old man retorted in a half-chiding tone. "Come on, quick. Let's go."

The daughter climbed into her father's cart, and the two of them drove speedily along the snow-covered road to the PLA billets, leaving the other cart far behind.

The young PLA man who had sprained his ankle was Li Wei-min, a messenger. After returning from the store he had been trying to hide his pain. But before lunch was over his company commander Lei Ta-hai had discovered that something was wrong with Young Li's leg. It looked a bit stiff. He refrained from asking Li directly, knowing full well that the young soldier would never admit that he was in pain. "But we're setting off tomorrow. Will he be able to go with us?" Lei wondered. Pulling a long face, he said to Young Li: "There's obviously something wrong with your leg. I think you'd better stay here when we set out on the march tomorrow."

This put Young Li on the spot. Sweat beaded his forehead once more. "I only sprained my ankle a little, do let me go," he pleaded.

"You must let the medical orderly treat it at once," insisted the company commander.

"All right. I'll go right away." Young Li obediently turned to leave.

"Stay here and sit down," ordered the company commander, who then telephoned for the medical orderly to come over right away.

When she arrived to examine Li's ankle, the company commander saw it was red and swollen. He was really worried. Just then they heard tinkling bells outside, clear and crisp in the frosty air. He opened the door and looked out, surprised to find a donkey-cart coming to a halt in the courtyard and two Uighurs, a middle-aged woman and a man with a long grey beard, climbing down from it. This was Aimuhan and her father. The company commander stepped out in haste to meet them.

"Comrade," began Aimuhan, "one of your men has a sprained ankle. My father is quite expert in giving treatment so he's come here to help." The old man nodded his approval for the way she put it.

The company commander wondered how they knew Young Li had a sprained ankle. He felt very grateful. The poor and lower-middle peasants always have the interests and needs of the people's soldiers at heart. He was at a loss how to thank them. Li Wei-min who had overheard all this could no longer control his feelings. He limped to the doorstep and gazed at the father and daughter with admiration.

Sunlight flooded the room, making everything bright. The old man, while gently massaging Young Li's foot, began chatting with the PLA men. Presently the door creaked open again. In came a man and woman in white overalls with medical kits slung across their shoulders. These were doctors sent from the commune clinic by the commune's Party committee to see if the soldiers needed any medical care before leaving on their march. Surprised to find Aimuhan there, they exclaimed: "Why are you still here? Didn't you receive our telephone call? You're wanted at the clinic to see about your child. She's had an accident."

Aimuhan was amazed. What could have happened?

That morning the clinic had telephoned the store but it was just after Aimuhan had left there. The manager took the message and, knowing that Aimuhan would not be back for some time, went to the clinic right away to see what was wrong with her daughter.

The woman doctor looked closely at Li Wei-min. "Why, this is the young soldier who just saved her child from drowning!" she exclaimed.

Everyone in the room stared at the rosy-cheeked young soldier in astonishment. Immediately guessing what had happened, the company commander went up to Li and said quietly, "So you were trying to keep it a secret from me, eh?"

Li, looking embarrassed, smiled sheepishly.

Early that morning Li Wei-min was returning to company headquarters after completing a mission. Beside the Peacock River he

saw a few children playing about and hurling snowballs at each other. Suddenly a Uighur girl slipped and tumbled down the river bank. The water near shore was frozen solid but the current was still rapid in the middle of the river. In a flash, Li jumped down the bank and grabbed the girl, who was bleeding from a cut on the forehead. Li had sprained his ankle when he plunged down but oblivious of his own pain he picked the child up in his arms, climbed up the bank and rushed her to the commune clinic.

There, Li handed her over to the doctors. While they were treating the cut to staunch the bleeding, Li disappeared. The doctors had been looking for him, wondering who he was. They had not expected to find him here being massaged by old Amuti. After a while the pain was alleviated and Li, able to walk easily again, received permission from Commander Lei to leave with the other soldiers the next day. Extremely happy, Li said:

"Why was it that a remarkable healer like Uncle Amuti and the clinic doctors all came here to help, so that now I can walk?"

"Why was it? It's because we're all one family, the hearts of the people and the soldiers are tightly twined together," said old Amuti. And with these parting words he went off to visit his friend.

Pien Min

New Developments in Handicraft Arts

Handicrafts in China have a long history and the general level of craftsmanship is high. As early as five thousand years ago painted pottery was produced; during the Shang and Chou Dynasties from the 16th to the 8th century B.C., jade carving was already widespread; lacquerware dates back to the time of the Warring States (475-221 B.C.) and the silk fabrics of the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-220 A.D.) were extremely fine; while the embroidery and tapestry work of the Sung Dynasty (960-1297) and the porcelain and cloisonne of the Ming (1368-1644) and Ching (1644-1911) Dynasties were known throughout the world. All this testifies to the wisdom and creative talents of China's working people since ancient times. However, many splendid works of arts and crafts were monopolized by the exploiting classes. During China's feudal period recurrent motifs in jade and ivory carving, embroidery, lacquerware, porcelain and other works of art were "wealth and nobility", "good fortune in the family" or similar concepts reflecting the thoughts and feelings of the feudal landlord class. Only now in the age of socialism are Chinese arts and crafts returning to the working people and directly serving their

needs. And those works of art which serve a practical purpose as well are particularly popular.

There is much the handicraft artists today can learn from their past masters regarding motifs, forms, methods of expression and technique. But this does not mean that they should accept everything indiscriminately. By taking over and remoulding the old traditions, they have indeed tried to adopt what is of value in a creative way while discarding reactionary feudal elements. As Chairman Mao has pointed out: **"We should take over the rich legacy and the good traditions in literature and art that have been handed down from past ages in China and foreign countries, but the aim must still be to serve the masses of the people. Nor do we refuse to utilize the literary and artistic forms of the past, but in our hands these old forms, remoulded and infused with new content, also become something revolutionary in the service of the people."** The Chinese handicrafts have followed this teaching closely.

In recent years some new handicraft works have appeared as a result of the cultural revolution and under the guidance of Chairman Mao's instructions. A welcome transformation is taking place in handicraft art. Many works reflecting life today praise the mighty achievements of China's socialist revolution and socialist construction, create heroic images of workers, peasants and soldiers, depict the new spirit of the motherland, the revolutionary unity of the various nationalities in China and our friendship with the peoples of the world. Other works, with traditional motifs, show the fighting spirit of China's common people in the past in productive labour and scientific discovery, their struggles against oppression and exploitation and their aspirations for a better life. Even works depicting flowers, birds, fish, insects or landscapes have a freshness and originality which indirectly reflect the vigorous and youthful spirit of our socialist age. There is also a wide range of functional handicraft objects and folk toys having a simple charm and elegance.

A few examples only need be mentioned. Yangchow lacquerware inlaid with jade, marble and mother-of-pearl was formerly noted for its depictions of scenery, flowers and birds, and human figures.

But the Yangchow craftsmen today are using their traditional expertise to portray the achievements of socialist construction. Their new work *The Yangtse Bridge in Nanking* is a lacquer screen with fine inlaid work and a splendid composition. The black screen throws into relief the vast bridge inlaid with lustrous mother-of-pearl, and by skilfully handling the special qualities of lacquer and mother-of-pearl, it graphically presents this great bridge as seen at night and shows the creative ability of our working people.

The clay figures of Huishan near Wusih have long been popular toys. Now the Huishan artists have produced a work called *I Love Peking's Tien An Men* presenting children of our new society. In shape, colour and style they have made use of traditional conventions, but they have also introduced innovations based on their study of children's life today. The motif is fresh and the three children shown have appeal. These clay figures, like the lacquer screen mentioned above, have retained traditional artistic features and at the same time display a strong feeling for our socialist age.

Since our handicraftsmen approach traditional themes from a proletarian standpoint, many of their works show a new ideological depth. The Foochow stone-carving *Abundant Fruit* and the Chekiang stone-carving *Sorghum* are two good examples of using traditional flower-and-fruit motifs to create something new. In both cases, full use is made of the natural shapes and colours of the stone to produce works which are thoroughly lifelike. The Foochow stone-carving, effectively exploiting the natural tints of the stone, contrasts clusters of red lichee and purple grapes with peanuts, loquats and pomegranates in a beautiful basket of fruit glowing with colour. Similarly, the Chekiang stone-carving uses some purple veins in the stone to depict ripe ears of sorghum, conveying the sense of joy evoked by a bumper harvest.

Or consider the case of the plum-blossom motif. In the past Chinese artists took this as a symbol of the "lofty detachment" of the feudal literati. Thus their paintings or carvings gave prominence to a few sparse twigs or a few lonely blossoms to conjure up an impression of individualistic aloofness. The new Chekiang stone-carving *Plum Blossom* shows, however, blossoms braving the snow

on a high cliff, vigorous and militant, illustrating the feeling expressed in a poem by Chairman Mao "**Plum blossoms welcome the whirling snow**", and exemplifying the revolutionary spirit of the proletariat.

Traditional Chinese handicrafts are well-known for their great variety and richness of motifs; they possess a distinctive national style as well as many local features. These special features, which have evolved through long centuries of practice in the handling of different materials and techniques, reflect different tastes and local customs. Thus the porcelain of Chingtehchen in Kiangsi, of Liling in Hunan and of Tangshan in Hopei all have their own distinctive styles. Similarly the embroidery of Soochow, Hunan, Szechuan and Kwangchow, four regions famed for this art, shows different features: some emphasize meticulous needle-craft, others lay more stress on vigour and freedom. Because they possess their own striking characteristics, they are loved by the people.

The life depicted in these handicraft works, the motifs chosen and the techniques adopted are all different too, displaying special qualities and limitations. For example, the fine texture of materials such as ivory and wood lends itself to the depiction of human figures and other objects; whereas glassware with its bright colours and transparent quality is better suited to the depiction of decorative designs. Other handicrafts, such as tableaux made of shells, feathers, horn, wheat-stalks and clay moulding, have distinctive attributes in the way of texture, colour and modes of expression, and their representation of scenes is conditioned by the materials employed.

However, handicrafts as one form of art do not develop in isolation but must enrich themselves by absorbing nourishment from other arts. Thus embroidery has very close links with traditional Chinese painting, while jade and ivory carving have adopted certain techniques from modern sculpture the better to express new motifs.

Handicraft works are closely connected with the life of the masses. Following the development of the socialist revolution and construction and the general rise in living standards in China, there is a growing demand for more and better works of art. Having studied the aesthetic tastes of the masses, our handicraftsmen are trying to

produce things which are practical, economical and pleasing to the eye. They have improved on the form, colour and design of many daily necessities such as fabrics, bed-linen, headsquares, basins, umbrellas, fans and china. These new products, simple, tasteful and practical, reflect our socialist culture and our people's spirit.

Different Chinese nationalities have used local materials to produce many beautiful works of folk art including pottery, bamboo and wicker utensils, clay figures, scissor-cuts, lanterns, embroidery and shadow-play figures. Other striking examples of minority folk art are the brocade of the Chuang, Tai, Li and Miao nationalities and their indigo-and-white homespun cloth. All these products show the vision and artistic talent of the Chinese labouring people. With their strong national styles, they are both beautiful and practical.

These handicraft works embodying traditional skills and a distinctive Chinese style enrich the life of our people and help to promote foreign trade and cultural exchange as well as our friendship with the peoples of other countries. The further development of the arts and crafts is therefore an important task on our art front. And the handicraft artists have themselves realized that to produce works which are socialist in content and proletarian in spirit, works of a better quality to reflect our political and cultural life, they must give a fresh lease of life to these time-honoured arts through innovations and that the key to this lies in raising their ideological and artistic level. That is why many of them are now making a serious study of Marxist classics and the writings of Chairman Mao, engaging in revolutionary movements, learning from the workers, peasants and soldiers, and doing their utmost to remould their world outlook and improve their artistic taste. They are working hard to master traditional skills to improve their technical level; at the same time they are linking theory with practice and training promising youngsters and apprentices in order to build up a new contingent of craftsmen who are both revolutionary and proficient. In this process of remoulding and innovating, China's traditional handicrafts are entering upon a new stage of development, and they will undoubtedly score yet more splendid successes in the creation of our new socialist art.

Two New Ivory Carvings

A small boat gliding through the reeds startles a flock of wild geese which take flight, honking in alarm. A little boy of the Yi nationality sitting on the prow splashes the wild geese with water, while the young Yi punting the boat looks up at the sound of their cries. Two girls dressed like Hans — the largest nationality in China — are showing great interest, one turning her head and the other standing up for a better look. Another young Han seems less impressed — he has probably seen sights of this kind before. The costumes and the equipment of these three show them to be a small surveying team come to this wild, sparsely populated region in search of mineral resources.

This carving *New Life Comes to the Marshes* is the work of Peking craftsmen. It conjures up a vivid picture of the help extended by local minorities to surveyors who trek to remote parts of our country to find minerals for socialist construction. Form and content are well integrated in this work, its fresh significant theme finding expression in exquisite craftsmanship in the best tradition of Peking ivory carving.

The composition as a whole is reminiscent of traditional Chinese painting and the depiction of characters is realistic. The techniques of sculpture in the round as well as in relief have been employed to create lifelike images. Effective harmony is achieved between the young people on the boat with their different expressions and personalities and between the wild geese which have taken wing crying out in fright—all are portrayed to the life in white ivory. The leaves and stems of the reeds and the plumage of the wild geese are meticulously carved. Many other details also repay careful study. Thus the bamboo pole for punting, with a few leaves still on it showing that it has been newly cut from the forest, is highly decorative and exhibits the delicacy of touch typical of ivory carving. The sharply-etched folds of the clothes and their flowing lines, in the tradition of old Chinese painting, heighten the realistic atmosphere. In brief, this work is an evocative scene presented in such a way as to convey the spirit of the characters in it.

Another ivory carving by Peking craftsmen, *A Train Has Come from Peking*, depicts a new railway in a mountainous border region. Like a superb scroll-painting it presents a panoramic view of the sky flecked with white clouds, ranges of peaks, luxuriant forests and flowers in full bloom. The newly-built railway spans this magnificent landscape, and a train is slowly puffing into a small mountain station to be greeted with cheers by villagers of different nationalities in festive dress. Two Tai boys are beating long drums, young Miaos are blowing reed pipes, an Yi lad is dancing, while girls wave gay silk ribbons, children send up balloons and even a white-haired old woman who seldom stirs from home has joined in the celebrations.

The combination of revolutionary realism with revolutionary romanticism has resulted in a work in the traditional style but possessing vivid features which belong unmistakably to socialist China. The attention to detail shown in creating lifelike figures and conveying their spirit is one of the special features of ivory carving. The composition too is successfully handled as regards the relationship between the chief figures and secondary figures, between subjects near at hand and in the distance, and between solid objects

and empty space. For example there are two trains, one slowly entering the station and another speeding on its way. The first, in the foreground, is relatively large; the other, in the distance, is small. They appear too at different levels, that in the foreground emerging from a tunnel, the other higher up crossing mountain ranges. Thus although both trains are carved on the same block of ivory, these contrasts conjure up a sense of great distance. And while the main emphasis is laid on the jubilant scene of welcome at the station, at the same time we see another express making the long journey over distant mountains.

The railway bridge spanning two high peaks like a rainbow stands out in bold relief, turning our thoughts to the heroism of the working people who built this railway under such arduous conditions. The towering piers and steel pillars of the bridge add splendour to the natural scenery, and at the very top of the composition a balloon trailing a beribboned basket of flowers introduces a fresh note of festivity. Here, incidentally, the traditional technique of flower carving in ivory is brilliantly employed.

A large part of this carving is devoted to mountains. On the basis of years of practice and by adapting the "wrinkle" technique of traditional landscape painting, the craftsmen have evolved new methods of expression depicting the special features of mountains in different regions. Thus the thickly-wooded mountains in the foreground are typical of the south, green the whole year round; while the rugged boulders in the distance, stark and strong, suggest the mountain scenery of the north.

Ivory carving in China has a very long history and possesses a distinctive national style. Today our artists are experimenting in the use of this art form to depict life today in the socialist period. These two works prove that the successful application of the special techniques of ivory carving to new themes can produce works of art which have a mass appeal.

A Soldier and a Poet

Somewhere
A telephone rings...

Not a bird on the wing
In the freezing sky,
Not a passer-by
On the frozen earth;
In the deep mid-winter
At dead of night, in a storm,
Where is the telephone ringing?...

What birds are these?
Sparrows, nightingales or larks?
Out from a snowdrift scramble
Two men of our communications corps
Whose telegraph lines have called up
The bright red sun.

In these few lines we seem to hear first the ringing of the telephone, then a raging blizzard; in our mind's eye we see the scene at night in the snowstorm; then from the snowdrift appears the bright red sun. These apparently contradictory images in this poem strike

us as harmonious and natural. The poem does not refer explicitly to the Chinese People's Liberation Army, but we get a vivid impression of the PLA. For all the other images serve as a foil to set off these two men of the communications corps.

This is one poem in the collection *Songs of Army Life* by the young soldier Wang Shih-hsiang. The distinctive language and fresh images of this book have won it the wide acclaim of China's poetry lovers.

This collection of poems describes not only army life, as its title says, but also the spirit of the PLA. For instance in the poem quoted above, men of the communications corps face fearful odds working at night in a snowstorm; yet what impresses us is not their hardship but their heroism and the pride our army takes in serving the people. This pride and heroism result in fine poetry filled with the spirit of the socialist age.

Indeed, it is impossible to write such poems without a rich experience of army life. Wang Shih-hsiang joined the PLA in 1959 and has served as soldier, squad leader and platoon leader, sometimes working as a clerk, typist, librarian or reporter. In other words he is very familiar with life in the army and shares the common feelings and thoughts of other armymen. Deeply moved by his experience in the army, he tried to put his impressions down; and that is how he started to write poetry.

Some of these poems take the form of pledges or challenges; others are rhymes to cheer the men on the march, or spur them on to accomplish certain tasks. Thus, most of them are short, concise and written in simple, unadorned language with a strong sense of rhythm. Their raw materials come from the army and serve the needs of the army.

Since it is the glorious duty of a soldier to defend the motherland and the Party, military training to resist aggression is naturally an important theme in these poems. In order to improve their skill, PLA men train themselves the whole year round, in freezing winter and in sultry summer; on the march, in bayonet and target practice, in hand-to-hand combat, riding, swimming, climbing... and at night they even practise aiming at the stars to train themselves for night battles.

However, this training is only one aspect of PLA life. Our people's armed forces have strong class ties with the masses. This is what happens when they move to new billets:

In the silence of night
The men pack their kit and move on,
Striding swiftly but softly,
Not wanting to disturb
The peasants who put them up.

Instead of going into detail here, the poet simply touches briefly on the scene the morning after the troops have moved on, conveying the deep feeling between our army and our people. In another poem *Granny Sees the Troops Off*, he uses the words of an old peasant woman to express the heartfelt love of the masses for our armymen. Reading these poems we feel the nobility of spirit of our people in this great age.

This whole collection of poems breathes love of the motherland, love of the masses. Most of the poems express this fiery feeling of our armymen in a simple, unadorned manner. Poems like *The Unforgettable Dawn*, *Rest Assured*, *Motherland*, *Ready for Battle* and *Singing the "Internationale"* are songs in praise of the motherland and the masses, and pledges to serve them whole-heartedly. This feeling, which comes from the bottom of our soldiers' hearts, is the keynote of these poems.

The sixty-six short poems in this collection also present interesting new ideas, word-pictures of incidents in army life and poems with lively rhythms such as *Joy of Marching*, *By the Camp-Fires*, *Our Answer to the Swallows*, *Little Painter* and *Narcissus*. These simple, fresh, moving verses provide much food for thought. They reveal Wang Shih-hsiang's familiarity with army life which has enabled him to seize upon evocative details to capture the spirit of our armymen and invest common episodes with deep meaning.

Of course, his poems and his feelings have their source, and that source is our spirited army life. Because Wang Shih-hsiang's poems stem from real life, he has become a soldier-poet with a distinctive language of his own.

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