THE BUILDERS

Liu Ching



AFTER the land was distributed among the tillers in the Land Reform of the early fifties, two kinds of "builders" appeared in China's countryside. One wanted to go it alone, to build up his family fortunes in the old way, looking out only for his personal interests. The other wanted to build a society that would benefit all the people, to farm together, helping one another, advancing in stages from mutual-aid teams to co-operatives, and on to more advanced forms. This novel describes the struggle between these two trends.

Liu Ching probes deeply into the characters who populate his fascinating book: Liang Sheng-pao, the determined young peasant who fights to make mutual aid a success; his father, old Liang the Third, who wants only to build the fortunes of his own family; the pretty Kai-hsia, Sheng-pao's sweetheart, who is confused about her role in the new society; prosperous peasants who connive to wreck the socialistic advance; poor peasants who rally round the standard that is leading them forward; and many others. All are presented in a style that is forceful, warmly human, delightfully humorous, and richly flavourful.

List of Principal Characters

Liang Sheng-pao poor peasant, a mutual-aid team leader, a candidate member of the Chinese Communist Party.

Members of His Mutual-aid Team

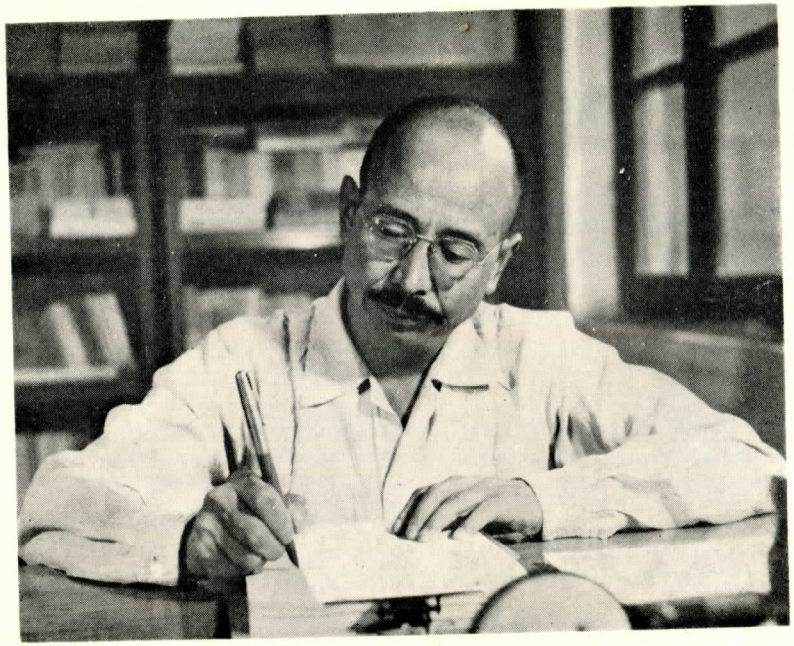
Kao Tseng-fu poor peasant, assistant team leader.
Feng Yu-wan poor peasant, militia captain.
Huan-hsi (Jen Chih-kuang) poor peasant.
Jen the Fourth poor peasant.
Wang Shuan-shuan poor peasant.
Kuo Suo poor peasant.
Pai Chan-kuei poor peasant, ex-corporal of the Kuomintang army.
Feng Yu-yi middle peasant.
Liang Sheng-lu well-to-do middle peasant.

Liang the Eldest well-to-do middle peasant, Sheng-lu's father.
Liang the Third poor peasant, Sheng-pao's step-father.
Blind Wang poor peasant, Shuan-shuan's father.
Liang Hsiu-lan Sheng-pao's sister, a Youth Leaguer.
Hsu Kai-hsia Sheng-pao's sweetheart, a member of the Hsiapao primary school Youth League branch committee.
Chao Su-fang Shuan-shuan's wife.

Secretary Yang assistant secretary of the Weiyuan county Party committee.
Wang Tso-min secretary of the Huangpao district Party committee.
Lu Ming-chang secretary of the Hsiapao township Party branch.
Pan Fu-tai head of the Hsiapao township government.
Han Pei-sheng government agronomist.

Kuo Chen-shan deputy to the Weiyuan County People's Congress, chairman of Frog Flat's people's deputies, a member of the Chinese Communist Party.
Sun Chih-ming (Blabbermouth Sun) member of Hsiapao township's civil affairs committee.

Kuo Ching-hsi (Iron Man) well-to-do middle peasant.
Kuo Shih-fu well-to-do middle peasant.
Yao Shih-chieh rich peasant.



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Socialism is something new. A severe struggle must be waged against the old ways before socialism can be brought about. At a given time, a section of society is very stubborn and refuses to abandon its old ways. At another time, these same people may change their attitude and approve the new.

— Mao Tse-tung



Prelude

1929 was one of the worst years in Shensi Province's long history of famines. During the first snowfall in November, famine victims, moving down from the plain north of the Wei River, filled the streets of Hsiapao Village. The temple, the clan halls, the grain mills, the grinding sheds were jammed with refugees, men and women crowded together, all speaking in rough up-country accents. For several days after the snow stopped falling, villagers had to go out every morning with spades and mattocks and bury the nameless sufferers who had died by the roadside during the night.

Tillers! In those years, whenever there was a drought they were like blades of grass stricken by frost. They simply had no resistance.

Hsiapao was a fine place. It lay south of the Wei River in the fertile rice paddy area that runs for hundreds of *li*[1] along the foot of the Chinling Mountains. Opposite Hsiapao, in the distance, rose the darkly menacing Mount Chungnan. To the rear of the village was a bluff where a high plateau of yellow soil ended abruptly.

About eight hundred families occupied Hsiapao's thatched cottages and tile-roofed houses, strung out in neat lines on the

[1]One *li* is equal to half a kilometre or roughly one-third of a mile.

north bank of the green Tang Stream. The villagers had gathered little from the dry land on the northern side. But in the paddy fields on the southern shore that summer they had cut barley. In the autumn they had crossed narrow foot-bridges all along the stream with load after load of rice, the bound stalks dangling heavily from the ends of their shoulder poles. It was this modest harvest which attracted the droves of famine sufferers.

Every day from morning till night, tattered refugees, shoulders hunched, huddled in gateways of the village compounds. Each held a stick beneath his arm — a weapon against wild dogs, made of a branch he had pulled down from some tree along the road. The refugees told essentially the same tragic story, and all pleaded to be saved. Some, large hot tears rolling down their wizened faces, asked whether anyone wanted to adopt a small child. It made the villagers very unhappy. Many tried to avoid the famine victims. People who heard their plaints felt so badly that they were unable to eat when they got home.

But Liang the Third,[1] a former tenant-peasant who lived on the paddy land south of the Tang Stream, was a man of tougher fibre. All day long, carrying a short pipe without a mouthpiece — he couldn't afford one — Liang wandered in and out among the refugees. He seemed to be looking for someone. A large powerful fellow about forty, Liang wore an old cotton-padded jacket that hadn't been washed in years. It was a mass of rent cloth with strings of dirty cotton hanging from the sleeves. On his head was a towel cloth that looked as if it had been picked out of a cinder heap, it was so black. But in spite of his appearance, from his lively step and alert manner you could see at a glance that the big fellow was seething with energy. The people of Hsiapao began to get suspicious.

A few days later, they observed that his activities followed a regular pattern: He sought out only women in their thirties, with or without small children. Some of the villagers wondered whether Liang, who had lived alone for so many years, could be intending anything improper? But he behaved with complete

[1]Meaning here the third child born in his family.

propriety, listening to the tales of misfortune of the women refugees, meditating on their words and nodding sympathetically.

Then one day, when Liang again came across from the southern side of the Tang Stream, he was a changed man. His head was freshly shaven, the stubble was gone from his face. A round skull-cap borrowed from his brother, Liang the Eldest, who ordinarily wore it only when visiting relatives, replaced his dirty towel-cloth headgear. His old padded jacket obviously had been mended and patched. People hardly recognized him. Grinning broadly, Liang the Third tenderly wrapped in his brawny arms a three-year-old boy who was standing in the snow dressed in a torn padded jacket left to him by his deceased father. Then Liang turned to a widow in her thirties whose ragged garments were nothing but patches, and led her to live with him in his thatched cottage on the southern side of the Tang Stream.

Liang's dwelling was across the stream from Hsiapao Village at the eastern end of a small settlement of thatched cottages. There were no villages in the paddy area, only scattered groups of four or five families, people whom poverty had driven from neighbouring villages. Forced to take up their abode here, they eked out a bare existence on rented paddy fields. A few of the lucky ones prospered. Their family fortunes grew; they built homes and compounds. But the paddy fields as a whole, from where the Tang Stream flowed out of Mount Chungnan to where it joined the Lu River on the northern plain — an area, roughly thirty *li* long by three *li* wide — were an impoverished region known as "Frog Flat". On summer nights the thrumming of frogs in paddy fields could be heard on the plain a dozen *li* away.

When his grandfather brought him to this land of frogs, seated in a wicker basket suspended from one end of a carrying pole, Liang the Third was only a little tyke. His father, as physically powerful a man as Liang the Third later became, had been one of the most "reliable" tenants of the wealthy Landlord Yang of Hsiapao Village. He actually managed to build

a three-room house beside the thatched cottage they had originally settled in, and found Liang the Third a wife. Having expended his last bit of strength, and full of hope that Liang the Third would continue to improve the family fortunes, he left the world of men, quite satisfied.

But Liang's luck was bad. Two draught oxen perished in succession. Then his wife died in child-birth, and the baby with her. Not only could he no longer rent paddy fields, he was forced to dismantle the three-room house his father had erected so laboriously and sell the timbers and tiles. He himself went back to living in the old thatched cottage. The elm tree which had grown up on the spot where the house used to stand was higher than the crumbling earthen compound wall and as thick as his thumb.

After the death of his wife, how desolate and lonely the compound was! Facing west, the thatched cottage squatted there like a doddering old man. Part of the earthen compound wall had been eaten away by autumn rain, but the lone occupant had no desire to repair it. He kept no pigs or poultry. What did he care if marauding wolves or weasels decided to pay a call in the night? Weeds in the courtyard grew as high as the window-sill, but Liang didn't bother to cut them down. He never had any visitors anyhow.

But now that he had brought a woman home, the breath of life returned to his compound. The men of a neighbouring family named Jen had already helped him clear out the weeds; the women gave his low-roofed narrow shack a thorough cleaning. Everyone laughed and said that from this day forward Liang's table and little cupboard would no longer be covered by a perpetual layer of dust.

Forty-year-old Liang the Third was like a child. He couldn't conceal his joy. He gave the up-country woman some old garments his dead wife had left, insisting that she wear them and convert one of them immediately into a pair of padded trousers for her little boy. The child's bare legs, thin as hemp stalks, trembled with cold beneath his over-sized old padded jacket. Liang boasted to the up-country woman before his neighbours

that he was strong. He would go deep into Mount Chungnan and fell timber, burn charcoal, cut brushwood. With the earnings from their sale he would again buy a draught ox, rent some paddy land, improve the compound. He would raise the little boy as his own son. Together they would build up the family property. . . .

"I never lie, Little Treasure's Ma. Do you believe me?"

"I . . . believe you." The up-country woman looked at her new husband's powerful frame, saw his enthusiastic expression. Embarrassed by this emotional outburst in the presence of neighbours she had only recently met, she lowered her head. Probably because she had endured hunger and privation for so long, her thin waxen face was unable to register happiness.

Liang was disappointed by her reaction. "Well, you'll know me better as time goes on."

Although he guessed that the woman's feelings were complicated, at the moment he couldn't very well say much to her. All the affection he felt for her, he lavished on the child. When Little Treasure first entered this strange thatched cottage, he sat stiff and constrained on the *kang*[1] and gazed timidly around. It was all so new to him. His eyes avoided the troupe of kids who had gathered at the edge of the bed and were curiously examining their new neighbour.

"Little Treasure," said Liang warmly, walking over to him, "when your ma finishes that pair of pants, you'll be able to go out and play with them." He indicated the other children.

"I don't want to," Little Treasure replied in a low voice, head down, looking at his fingers.

"Why not? In the paddy field ditches there are cranes and blue storks and herons. Wild-geese, too. Did you have those in your old home north of the Wei?" Liang asked laughingly. He was doing his utmost to give the mother and child a good impression of the place, to make them feel at home.

"I won't go," the little boy replied stubbornly. "I'm scared."

[1] A brick platform, heated in winter from underneath, and used as a bed and for other purposes in a northerner's household.

"Scared of what? Water fowl never hurt anyone, silly."

"I'm scared of dogs. . . ."

Liang burst out laughing. "In good clothes, what dog would bite you?"

With a big thick hand that was as roughly calloused as the bark of a tree, he fondly patted the small head resting on the spindly neck. Liang the Third loved the child like a father. Because the boy's face was so thin and sallow, his brows seemed particularly dark and his eyes especially large; they fairly flashed with intelligence. As the old saying goes: "In a child of three, at one glance you can see what the adult will be." Liang was very pleased with the boy.

For the first few days neighbours, men and women, dropped into Liang's shack frequently to see the new arrivals. These naturally included his brother, Liang the Eldest, a beancurd pedlar, and his nearest neighbours, the Jens. Even friends living much further away came. When this one left, that one called. Finally, there were so many people that they overflowed on to the threshing ground outside the compound gate, chatting and laughing. The men could not repress their animation. Several of them teased Liang with broad remarks. Of course this was rather disrespectful, but his freshly shaven face wore a proud smile that seemed to say: "So you thought Liang the Third was finished, eh? I'm still going to build a family."

After a few more days passed, there was no sign of Liang in daylight hours, either in Hsiapao Village or in Frog Flat. But on the sunny side of compound walls that enclosed thatched cottages, on street corners, wherever people gathered, peasants were discussing with interest Liang's up-country woman.

"Ah, now there's a wife for you," some cried approvingly. "Slow to speak but a fast worker. She's a woman who knows her mind. Her parents died in the famine, her brother and sister-in-law ran away from it. With her husband dead, she had no one to turn to. She set out alone with the child from north of the Wei and came all the way down here, the foot of the southern mountains. It wasn't easy."

"Liang and she must have been fated to marry, so the Old Lord of the Sky drove her down to the banks of the Tang Stream. Does she have only this one child?"

"They say she had a little girl also, but the cold and hunger were too much for her, and she died on the road."

"Oh! The poor woman. How her heart must ache. How old is she?"

"She says she's thirty-two, but she looks at least forty."

"What are you gabbling about? She's so thin, and all those days on the road in the wind and sun — naturally it put ten years on her. Wait until she's fattened up a bit and gained her strength back, then you'll see."

"I hear she's wearing Liang's big padded pants. Is that right?"

"Sure. Maybe they're big, but what of it? That padded jacket she came in is so torn, it's pitiful. That's why Liang keeps going up to Mount Chungnan. That mother and son aren't pictures you can hang on the wall. They've got to be fed and clothed."

All of Hsiapao became involved in a debate as to whether Liang should have picked the woman up the way he did. Some said that although fate had bowled Liang over, he had struggled to his feet. Maybe he could build up the family fortunes again. In a few years the boy would be old enough to help him. If the up-country woman could bear him another couple of kids in his old thatched cottage, his chances of recovery would be even better.

But others didn't believe that you got anything so cheaply in this world. Who ever heard of getting a wife without spending a single copper? They were willing to stake their heads on it: After the New Year the woman's brothers would come for her and take her home, or someone from her former husband's family would demand the child, or the woman herself would become moody and demand to go back to her village north of the River Wei. In a word, Liang's thatched cottage would never know peace.

"Wait and see," was the advice of the holders of both points of view.

Making the rounds of Hsiapao every day with trays of bean-curd hanging from the ends of his carrying pole, pedlar Liang the Eldest was quite concerned over people's opinions of his younger brother. His big ears took in every word. Late one night, Liang the Third came back from Mount Chungnan with a load of charcoal. He burned charcoal in the mountains and sold it in the city, rising at cock's crow and returning long after dark. Liang the Eldest went furtively to his brother's compound gate and called him out. Then the two walked through the darkness down a path dotted with grass roots in the direction of the paddy fields.

The next day, Liang the Third did not go into the city with his charcoal. First thing in the morning he set out for Huang-pao Town, five *li* upstream. When the peasants paused in their morning's labour for breakfast, someone saw Liang returning home, a basket of bean sprouts, cabbage and bean noodles in one hand, and a jug that must have contained at least a catty of wine in the other. All morning, Liang bustled about the village streets. One moment he was here, the next moment he was there, his big agile body practically flying. He looked very busy, very tense, and very mysterious. When someone called to him, wanting to ask how the up-country woman was faring, he shouted over his shoulder:

"I'm in a hurry. Some other time."

Night fell. On the gravel and round stones of a bank of the Tang Stream, a lantern flame no bigger than a bean gleamed eerily. Five men, one woman, and a small child, shivering with cold, were gathered around the lantern.

Liang the Third carefully proffered in hands as rough as bark the foot of machine-made red cloth he had bought in town that morning. In a moved voice he said:

"Fellow villagers, for our sake you're suffering cold and chill."

"It's nothing. Say no more. What's a little cold?"

"We hope that you two will live together till you're old and grey. That's all we neighbours want."

"That's it exactly. Right. You've said it right," cried Liang. "All the stars are out. Let's get started."

Then the poor scholar, who was busy all winter writing deeds for people who had to sell their land, put on his spectacles. He spread the red cloth on a flat rock as large as a millstone. According to local superstition not even grass would grow on a spot where a contract for the remarriage of a widow was written. That was why the sandy bank of the stream, already barren, was chosen for this ceremony. Liang the Third cautiously held the lamp while the other men squatted down in a circle, their eyes fixed on the brush pen moving over the red cloth.

After the brush pen was capped in its slim bronze tube, the bespectacled scholar solemnly raised the red cloth with both hands and read slowly the words he had inscribed:

> The contractor of this marriage covenant, née Wang, was a native of Liu Village south of Fuping. Because her first husband died and her village was stricken by famine, mother and son were forced to wander from home, with no means of support. Today, plagued by hunger and cold and in danger of losing her life, she is willing to remarry and become the wife of her benefactor, Liang Yung-ching. She makes this contract of her own free will, with no obligations to any third party, and will never revoke it. The male child she has brought with her, known by the infancy name of Little Treasure, also a famine refugee, shall use the surname of his step-father when he grows up. Word of mouth being unreliable, this covenant is made as written proof of the marriage.

As these final words were intoned, all eyes turned to the long thin face of Little Treasure's Ma, who was listening carefully.

"Agreed?" asked the scribe.

"Agreed," she said quietly, in her up-country accent.

Her thin hands tenderly stroked the head of Little Treasure. The boy was standing in front of her, very close. She looked at the freshly-shaven seamed face of Liang the Third, goodness, devotion and determination shining in her eyes.

"This is a starvation year, Little Treasure's uncle. Why must you go to this expense? As long as you're good to my son, it'll be the same whether we have a marriage contract or not. No matter how hard our life is together, if my son can grow up . . . become a man. . . ."

She broke down and sobbed. Catching her sleeve in withered fingers, she wiped her eyes. The others sadly lowered their heads. They didn't have the heart to view her stricken countenance.

Masculine valour surged up in Liang's bosom. Standing before the widow and her son, he suddenly felt that he was one of the strongest men in the world.

"Our son," he corrected her decisively. "Let's have no more talk of 'your son' and 'my son' after this. He must call me 'pa', not 'uncle'. That's all I have to say."

After the parties to the marriage, the witnesses and the scribe each put an "X" beneath the place where his or her name was written on the red machine-made cloth, everyone went to Liang the Third's thatched cottage where they ate a meatless meal the beancurd pedlar Liang the Eldest had been preparing the whole day, and spoke many auspicious words. Then the guests departed.

The following spring, the famine victims who had spread out in the paddy region along the Tang Stream all disappeared in a few days, like a flock of seasonal birds. People kept an eye on Liang the Third's woman to see whether she would begin gazing off into the distance in the direction of the northern plain. Women neighbours, bringing their sewing, called on her in Liang's thatched cottage. They chatted with her, probing for any remark that might indicate she still thought of her old home north of the River Wei.

But, no. Unless it was necessary, the woman seldom left the compound gate. She sat at home, mending the torn cloth shoes and socks of her man, who was working all day in the mountains. Liang was very poor. Even including the paths and what used to be the threshing field outside his gate and which he now planted with vegetables, he had just one and one-fifth *mou*[1] of ground. Only by strenuous labour could he make ends meet.

[1] One *mou* is equal to one-fifteenth of a hectare or roughly one-sixth of an acre.

In the spring, when the city dwellers stopped burning charcoal for warmth but while the paths that went into the mountains were still too icy to permit Liang to go in and fell timber, he cut brushwood on the slopes and sold it as fuel for kitchen stoves in the city or in Huangpao Town. Often the woman would have to wait for him to bring home grain before she could cook. But she didn't mind his poverty. She liked him because he was warm-hearted, because he loved her child, because his neck was iron-stiff and refused to bend under the weight of hardship.

The couple neither quarrelled nor sulked. Hard-working, patient, they reposed all their hopes in the future. Their neighbours, the Jens, often strolled outside Liang's compound wall after the evening meal, cocking an inquisitive ear when they passed the tiny rear window, blocked with dried branches, of Liang's thatched cottage. But except for Liang's weary sighs, all they heard was husband and wife discussing how they must build up the family fortunes, come what may, for the sake of Little Treasure and for their own old age.

Ten years passed.

On the site of the razed three-room house, the elms were as thick as rice bowls. Their leaves and branches interlaced dozens of feet above the ground with the foliage of trees which Liang the Third's father and grandfather had planted outside the earthen compound wall. Liang's courtyard, like the tree-lined dwellings of his neighbours, had also become cool and shady. But the family's progress was far behind the development of its natural surroundings. Within the compound walls, the only dwelling was still the dejected-looking old thatched cottage.

The family fortunes had not improved.

Liang the Third was past fifty and his back was bent. Where his neck met his shoulder, years of heavy carrying poles had formed a callous as thick as a fist. Liang had also developed a chronic cough which came back every winter and

spring. He no longer had the strength to wrest an income from long treks into Mount Chungnan.

At thirteen Little Treasure had a ruddy face, dark brows and large eyes. He was a good height, and you could see at a glance that he was going to make a fine sturdy peasant. After having been sufficiently instructed by his mother and step-father on how a person should behave, the thirteen-year-old boy confidently began to work. He took a job as a half-pay hired hand for a wealthy landlord named Lu, in Hsiapao Village.

Little Treasure started on the twelfth day of the first lunar month. On the fifteenth at dusk, crossing the stream, he returned to the thatched cottage. Without a word, he flung himself sobbing on the *kang*.

His mother, now in her forties, patted him gently on the shoulder.

"What's wrong, Little Treasure?"

The boy only sobbed more bitterly.

"Don't cry, child." His mother stroked the towel cloth that covered his head. "Tell ma, don't you want to be a hired hand? If you've changed your mind, your pa can call it off. In another year or two—"

Still weeping, the boy sat up and shook his head.

"What happened? Was the landlord bad to you?"

"I was . . . in the courtyard . . . eating. . . ." Little Treasure sobbed.

"Speak up. Stop crying."

"The landlord's son . . . crept up . . . and took a handful of dirt. . . ."

"What about the handful of dirt?"

"He threw it . . . in my rice bowl."

"Why? Did you tease him?"

"I . . . no. . . . That rich kid . . . picks on people."

Liang who had been listening to all this, his face dark as iron, asked angrily: "And your bowl of rice? What happened to that?"

"The landlord . . . dumped it . . . in the pigs' trough."

"What did he do to his son?"

"Nothing . . . just scolded him . . . a little."

Husband and wife, who both had been furious, calmed down and talked the matter over. Since the landlord had scolded his son, they might as well forget it. When you worked for other people and ate their food, all you could do was bow your head and get along as best you could.

"Child." The mother stroked the boy's head. "You don't understand much yet. Poor families are a grade lower than others. If we want to stop being put upon, we have to build up the family fortunes, raise our own cattle, till our own land."

"Right. That's it exactly," Liang inserted. "First get a draught ox, then rent some paddy fields from the landlord, then . . . just like your ma said. Understand?"

And so, that was how Little Treasure began his career as a hired hand at the age of fourteen. By the time he was eighteen he was skilled in all things a peasant needed to know and was earning as much as the best paid hired hand in Hsiapao Village. Studying every move of the chief hired hand, Little Treasure learned all about farm work, including the most difficult kinds of sowing.

The third summer after he joined Landlord Lu's employ, he returned home one evening at twilight, leading a little yellow ox calf at the end of his sash. He forded the stream and led the ox into their courtyard.

"What's this?" was how his bow-backed step-father greeted him. There was premonition of misfortune in Liang the Third's bones.

"Lu's old cow has died," the boy reported with a satisfied smile, tying the calf to one of the elm trees. "This calf is too young. Lu was afraid it would die if it didn't get any milk."

"He's given it to us?" The wrinkled face of Little Treasure's Ma lit up.

"Lu give anything away? Think again. That pig wouldn't give you a broken needle—unless you paid him for it. Isn't his nickname Lu the Miser?"

The boy's parents stared. They asked in unison: "Then what's this all about?"

"I bought the calf for five silver dollars. He's taking it out of my pay."

"*Aiyayaya*! You stupid child. How could you do such a thing?" Liang groaned, his face blanching. The blow was too much. His bow-back scraping the wall, he dropped to his haunches, his grey head sinking despondently on his chest.

He was such a picture of misery that Little Treasure's Ma was on the point of tears. She upbraided her son.

"You! You're not a child any more. How could you be so foolish? If rich old Lu was afraid the calf might die, what chance have we to keep it alive in a place like ours? Anyhow, you should have talked it over with your pa first. You're much too cocky. That dirty Miser Lu. Cheating our young boy like that."

Liang rose to his feet and took two steps closer to Little Treasure. On trembling fingers he calculated for the boy what they could have bought with the five silver dollars — How much corn and how many days it would feed them, how much cloth and how many garments they could make of it, how much charcoal and how many months they could burn it. And now. . . . Pointing at the frightened calf gazing uneasily at its new surroundings, Liang cried in great agitation:

"What are we going to do with that puny little thing?" He shook his thin hands hopelessly. Life was just too much.

Little Treasure's Ma sat down on the stone step, which was all that remained of the razed three rooms, and began to weep, dabbing her eyes with the hem of her tunic. When she thought of how poor they were, and how the son she had brought with her had hurt his step-father, and how brashly this boy who was just coming out in the world had behaved, she couldn't help shedding tears for her own unhappy fate.

But Little Treasure was unruffled. In fact he smiled at their worries. When Liang started to untie the calf from the elm tree and wanted to lead it back to Miser Lu, the boy stopped him.

"That's just giving in," laughed Little Treasure, putting one hand on the knot. "We'll never build up the family fortunes

at this rate. How many years does a hired hand have to work before he can save enough for a full grown draught ox? The calf only cost a few dollars. Ma can feed it on thin rice gruel. When it gets a little bigger you can cut some grass for it on the stream bank. In a few years, we'll have a big ox of our own."

Liang released the lead rope. So the boy was planning to till their land.

"Will it live?" Liang asked timidly.

"What if it doesn't? It only cost a couple of dollars. Didn't you have two big oxen die on you when you were young?"

The old man dropped his head and walked away, embarrassed beyond words. He felt ashamed. All his life he had worked hard, like an animal, relying solely on his physical strength. He didn't have nearly the brains of this youngster.

Little Treasure's Ma, seeing that Liang was no longer angry, dried her tears and smiled.

Another three years passed. Little Treasure actually made all the necessary preparations for them to farm on their own. One by one, he bought implements cheaply from Hsiapao peasants who had gone bankrupt. In the compound he built another thatched cottage, this one with two rooms — one with a *kang* on which he slept, the other with a trough for the ox, now fully grown and the object of much envy and admiration. Liang was brimming with joy.

He kept his word. The baby girl Little Treasure's Ma gave birth to five years after coming to Frog Flat was already past ten. Liang made an engagement for the girl and with her gift money bought a child-bride for Little Treasure — the eleven-year-old daughter of another poor tenant-peasant. From then on, Little Treasure adopted his step-father's surname. Since Liang the Eldest's two sons both had "Sheng" as the first part of their given names and Little Treasure was of the same generation, his given name became officially "Sheng-pao". He was now a man.

Sheng-pao's eagerness to build up the family fortunes was a hundred times keener than that of his step-father. The first

year, he rented eighteen *mou* of paddy land from Miser Lu and borrowed enough from the landlord to spread liberal amounts of fertilizer. Sheng-pao and the old man slaved in the fields all that year. In summer, the busiest season, when Sheng-pao came back at the end of the day he always ate his meals squatting on a quilt spread on the *kang*. Otherwise, when he fell asleep in the middle of eating, the bowl might drop to the floor and break.

Liang the Third didn't have the strength to go home. He would crawl out of the paddy, his hands and feet plastered with mud, and lie in the green grass by the stream. Little Treasure's Ma would bring him his food. Poor old Liang. Afraid that people might steal his water and release it into their own fields, he slept every night on the bank. The mosquitoes stung his face, arms and legs mercilessly. But the old man worked on without complaining. At times he even smiled happily. Once again he had achieved the incomparable glory of raising his own crop.

To keep their debts down the family tightened their belts. For a whole year they ate no salt and burned no oil in their lamps.

That autumn the stack of rice straw on the site of the three razed rooms was higher than the old thatched cottage. Unfortunately, they never did get a chance to store the rice in the hampers they made from mats bought specially for the purpose in Huangpao Town.

For after paying the rent share to the landlord and returning his loan for the fertilizer — plus forty per cent interest, they watched the rest of their harvest being carted away by the village tax office. Little Treasure's Ma threw herself down on the stone roller on the threshing space outside their compound gate and wept aloud. Sheng-pao's sister and child-bride joined her in loud howls of grief. The last of their grain was sent off like the corpse of a member of the family. Sheng-pao knitted his black brows in a frown. For several days afterwards he did not speak, mute to all questions.

Liang, his back bent, followed his step-son around. "Don't feel bad, Sheng-pao," he mumbled. "This is the first year, only the first year. We haven't built up any reserve. Be patient. It'll be better after a few years."

"A few years? With a large family like ours, what are we going to eat in the meantime?" Sheng-pao demanded angrily.

"The old saw puts it well: 'Borrow your grain, return it at harvest. And you can glean enough from the threshing field to last another few days.' It's better than working as a hired hand, isn't it? At least we get some stalks for fuel this way."

Yes, what else could they do? Of course it was better than sleeping in the landlord's stable. Sheng-pao's brow smoothed out. He went back to work in their rented fields.

Two more years went by. The Kuomintang government grabbed Sheng-pao for military conscription. Liang the Third determinedly sold the yellow ox and bought him out. To avoid his being dragged off again, Liang sent him to hide on Mount Chungnan. Liang returned the eighteen *mou* to Miser Lu, who rented them to another poor tenant. Liang was neither angry nor hurt. He accepted everything that happened. It had to be. The world-weary old man urged his family not to take things too hard. To struggle against Fate was useless.

No longer could they hear the lowing of the ox in the shed. The old man, the old woman, their daughter, and their child-bride daughter-in-law, all depended on the money that Sheng-pao intermittently brought back from Mount Chungnan. They were always hungry.

The old couple had added quite a number of grey hairs. They were more kindly, more affectionate than ever. They had no particular hope; they weren't struggling for anything. They lived quietly, like moles in the ground.

In spring, Little Treasure's Ma took her daughter and daughter-in-law, aged thirteen and fourteen respectively, to the untilled land south of the paddy fields and gathered wild vegetables. In summer they picked fallen wheat heads on the northern plain. In autumn they combed the road for rice

grains that had dropped from the carts. In winter they gleaned the paddy fields for rice and barley.

People spoke approvingly of the old couple. Difficult times had brought them together; hardship was welding them closer. Liang the Third gave up smoking. Leaning on a stick, he coughed and wheezed along, unable to clear his eternally clogged throat. Little Treasure's Ma drummed lightly on the old man's thin back to ease him. She often looked at him with eyes that had once been beautiful but now were surrounded by a web of wrinkles and asked worriedly:

"How do you feel, Little Treasure's pa?"

"Me? Won't die yet!" And he would break into another paroxysm of coughing.

They never spoke now about building up the family fortunes.

In the summer of 1949 the Tang Stream area saw the greatest movement of troops and the worst military chaos since warlord Liu Chen-hua had besieged Sian twenty-three years before. The people of Hsiapao began repairing the cliff caves near the northern plain for refuge in case of emergency. The residents of Frog Flat dug secret caches inside their compounds to hide their girls and young men. The situation was very tense. It was said of the Kuomintang soldiers retreating from the north that when they saw any property they stole it, when they saw a young man they conscripted him, when they saw a girl they ravished her. Could the end of the Kuomintang be coming at last? Buddha be praised!

Artillery thundered for several days on the northern plain along the railway and in the neighbourhood of the county seat. Then one night the dogs of Hsiapao, Huangpao Town and Frog Flat barked until dawn. Liang and his wife concealed their daughter and their child-bride daughter-in-law. They themselves curled up into tight balls in their thatched cottage. They didn't dare shut their eyes all night. Along the road on the north side of the Tang Stream they could hear voices and the sound of horses and carts, but they were afraid to go out and look.

The next morning, both banks of the Tang were as still as death. Not a soul was in sight. After breakfast, someone pounded on the compound gate, frightening the entire household into a fit of trembling. But when the old man opened the gate it was only Sheng-pao, just returning from heaven knows where. His eyes were dancing.

"We've been liberated!" he cried.

"What?"

"The world is ours!"

"Eh?"

Liang blinked. He couldn't make head or tail of what Sheng-pao was saying. Later he saw Sheng-pao running around Hsiapao and Frog Flat, shouting things which in his opinion were entirely too bold, and he was very uneasy.

Several days later Sheng-pao crossed the stream from Hsiapao and came home for a meal. Slung across his back was a shining rifle — not one of those home-made jobs that people used for hunting wild boars, bears or leopards on Mount Chungnan, but the quick repeating kind those Kuomintang soldiers who had tried to conscript Sheng-pao a few years before had carried. When Liang saw the thing, his heart beat faster. He wouldn't let Sheng-pao bring it into the house.

"What do you want with that gun?"

"I'm the leader of our people's militia," Sheng-pao announced. He explained to the old couple the necessity for a militia, and in an authoritative voice told them that a whole series of tremendous changes were coming — including a division among the people of the land of Yang the Tenant-skinner and Miser Lu.

"What? Is the Communist Party tough enough to set itself against those two?"

Sure enough, the winter of the following year Liang the Third was given some ten *mou* of paddy field. The old man walked around in a dream for days. He simply couldn't believe it. In the past he had planned and calculated day and night: Rent some land, put your life's blood into it, skimp, save, buy a paddy field a fraction of a *mou* at a time, and

gradually, gradually, build up some family property of your own. He had never been able to do it. Sheng-pao was much cleverer than he, and Sheng-pao had not been able to do it either. But now, people had only to say the word, and the Liang family was the owner of ten *mou* of rice paddy.

Liang just couldn't remain in his compound the winter of the land-reform year. He ran about, his hand cupping his ear, listening here, listening there. Leaning on his stick, he wandered among the paddy fields, peering at the new ownership markers. Different emotions flitted uncertainly across his ashen wrinkled face. At times he looked happy, at times he looked doubtful. His wife was worried. The old man dashed about in the cold wind so much, he coughed all night. But the moment she took her eyes off him, he was gone again. She would hurry to the compound gate and there he would be, with his big body and bow-back, just as she expected, alone in the empty paddy fields.

One day she ran after him as usual and tried to pull him home.

"No," he said firmly, struggling to free his sleeve from her grasp. "I feel too pent up in the house."

"What are you standing here for?"

"I want to see." He waved his long arm proudly over the paddy fields in a wide sweep.

"What's there to see? It's been divided up among us all."

"I still want to look at it."

"What's wrong with you? Do you ache anywhere?"

"I feel all right."

"What is it then? You've been looking awfully dazed lately."

"There's nothing wrong with me."

"If there's nothing wrong, then quit running around."

But no matter what she said, the old man wouldn't return to the thatched cottage. Often he would squat by the land that had been given him until long after dark. It was as if he feared someone might steal it away.

A few days later, Liang heaved a melancholy sigh and finally told his wife what was troubling him.

"Little Treasure's Ma, my mind is as tangled as hemp."

"Why? Isn't everything fine now?"

"To tell you the truth, it doesn't seem real. I think I must be dreaming. I run out and look, but those ownership stakes are still in the paddy fields."

Little Treasure's Ma couldn't help laughing.

"You *are* an old fool." She pointed at the landlord's possessions which they had received as their portion — the blue glazed jug, the single-share plough, the small wooden cabinet. "Don't we have these? You can see them without even getting out of bed. Why do you have to go running around in the fields?"

"I can see them all right. But the land, I'm worried about the land. It's land that's the most important!"

One day when they had finished their meal, Sheng-pao got up to leave. He was in a hurry to cross the stream to Hsiapao. A meeting of the township government had been called in the big temple. The old man stopped him.

"Little Treasure, I want to ask you something. This ten *mou* of land we've been given —"

"Be quick, will you?" Sheng-pao was at the threshold. "I've got to go."

"What I want to know is — Are you sure we don't have to pay a single grain as rent?"

"Who would we pay it to? The landlords' old deeds have all been burned."

"Won't the township government want any?"

"Old muddle-head. How many times do I have to tell you before you'll believe me?"

"Then, according to you, this land is all ours, every bit of it?"

"Right."

"Wait, Sheng-pao, don't go. Tell me clearly." Liang followed him to the compound gate and grasped his arm. "Where's our deed? The old saw puts it well: 'Don't plant if you have no deed.' "

"What's your hurry? New deeds will be issued after the New Year."

"Ah, I see. Good. Go to it, Little Treasure," the old man shouted after him from the gate. Sheng-pao was already walking down the grassy path to the stream.

Strength inexplicably seemed to flow back into Liang the Third's shrivelled old body. He made a mighty effort to straighten the back that had been bent for years, and actually managed to walk erect. When spring came, his asthmatic cough was much better. He threw away his stick and moved about his compound in quite a sprightly manner. In Huang-pao Town he bought some Mount Chungnan vines and wove a long-handled basket. He went out with it every morning before daylight and picked manure on the main road from Huang-pao Town to the city. His mind was filled with visions of becoming as self-sufficient as some of those well-to-do peasants he knew in Hsiapao.

One night he dreamed that he no longer lived in his thatched cottage but in a fine house with a tile roof, and it stood on the site of the three-room building he had razed years ago. The two shacks on either side had been converted into tile-roofed wings! Ho-ho! Liang the Third was the owner of a splendid compound. He wore winter clothes with thick padding. A strong blue sash bound his waist. He was deliciously warm, so heavily upholstered in fact that he walked a bit clumsily. Still, what could he say? The clothes had been made for him by his son and daughter-in-law. They were so devoted. He could only wear the heavy garments and parade about his splendid courtyard.

"Their devotion touches my heart," Liang thought in his dream. He threw himself with greater zeal into the endless tasks about the house. In the rear courtyard were pigs, chickens and ducks. Horses and oxen munched grass in the front courtyard. Taking care of all these domestic animals kept Liang very busy. But he enjoyed the work. It was a real pleasure. The grunting, clucking, quacking, neighing and mooing of the livestock, blended with the joyous shouts of the children at play, are the most intoxicating kind of music to a peasant's ears. Liang positively revelled in them.

When he awoke, he found that he was still lying on the *kang* in his old thatched cottage.

"Little Treasure's Ma." Smiling happily, the old man took advantage of the fact that his daughter and child-bride daughter-in-law were not at home to confide in his wife's ear, "I'm going to tell you something, but you mustn't breathe a word to another person."

"What is it? What's tickling you so?"

"Listen, if our Little Treasure puts as much into this land as he did into those eighteen *mou* we rented from Lu the Miser, you and I will have some good days yet, you'll see. This is just between us, now. Do you believe me?"

Little Treasure's Ma smiled at him affectionately. The pleased expression on her wrinkled face gave him his answer.

"I'm telling you. It won't be many years before that three-room house I razed will be built again. If we do a little better, it won't have a thatched roof this time — it'll have a tile one. If we two don't live in a tile-roofed house, I may die but I won't close my eyes." The whiskers around Liang's mouth trembled with the intensity he put into these words.

"You needn't swear it so hard," laughed the old woman. "Let's see if we can do it."

"We *will* do it. We must. Our Little Treasure will see to it."

But after one more year had gone by, Liang disappointedly came to another conclusion. Sheng-pao wasn't nearly so interested in building the family fortunes as he was in doing his job. When the land deeds were issued and the new owners threw themselves into increasing their family incomes, some of the village government personnel backslid and devoted a lot of their time to personal affairs. But not Sheng-pao. He was keener on his duties than ever. The township government had only to send for him and he'd drop whatever he was doing on the farm and rush across the stream.

Standing there alone, Liang thought it strange. How could such a clever young fellow lose the peasant's only road to prosperity? His ruddy cheeks, his dark-browed big eyes, his honest-looking mouth with its lower lip slightly thicker than the upper — these were still the same. But his heart had changed. It was no longer the heart he had when he tilled those eighteen *mou* of rented land. That heart had been replaced by one that was ardently committed to his job. Sheng-pao's behaviour gradually aroused the old man's anger.

Sometimes Liang suspected that Sheng-pao wasn't satisfied with his skinny little child-bride who was ill so often. One night the old man secretly followed him at a distance to see whether he was going to the shack of that girl with the bad reputation, Blue Moth. But no, the young fellow went straight to the meeting place. Damn it all. These past few years Liang hadn't foreseen that Sheng-pao would be receiving a different type of education outside the home. The young man no longer gave any thought to building the family fortunes. He was too wrapped up in his public duties.

When the old man learned that Sheng-pao had joined the Communist Party he staggered as if from a blow. For three days he couldn't leave his bed.

"*Ai*, Little Treasure, what do we want to get mixed up with that party for? We're tillers of the soil. Why should we join? We're not trying to become officials. Can we make a living out of going to meetings? If you've time to spare you ought to spend it fattening up our stock, repairing our tools. Go down and resign from that party right now, you silly fool."

The reply he received was accompanied by a beaming smile which came straight from the heart.

"That would just be giving in." The young fellow repeated the words he had used a dozen years before when he brought the calf home from Lu the Miser. Only this time his voice was more resonant, more proud.

He's not my own flesh and blood. What else can I expect? The old man muttered to himself.

Not long after, the pathetic little child-bride died. Tears streamed down Liang's ashen wrinkled face. His fingers, gnarled as tree roots, couldn't wipe them away fast enough. The girl had been like a daughter to him. During the years when Sheng-pao was hiding in Mount Chungnan, in the bitter winter when the miry paddy field froze solid, Liang, his wife, his daughter and the child-bride all used to huddle under one miserable quilt. The temperature of his declining old body helped to warm the puny child. She considered him not a father-in-law but a father. Even a stone will heat if you hold it in your bosom for three years.

When the girl was encoffined, the old man threw himself on the *kang* and cried so bitterly that the neighbours were moved. They averted their faces and wiped their tears.

Sheng-pao only gazed sympathetically at the departed and sighed sadly. There had never been much of a relationship between them. They were seldom together.

After the girl was buried, Liang the Third took Sheng-pao aside for a heart-to-heart talk.

"Little Treasure," he said, "your pa has let you down. I didn't do a good job. I found you a wife who wasn't strong. But what's past is past. I want you to find a girl of your own liking and remarry right away. You're coming along in the world. You can get someone easily. Get married, get married, then we can all live happily together."

But his warm-hearted words drew no more response than if he had been talking to one of the stones on the flats of the Tang Stream. By the spring of 1953 Sheng-pao was really beginning to hit his stride. He plunged deep into the drive to develop mutual-aid teams,[1] and did things which many people thought were ridiculous, laughable, brainless.

[1] Mutual-aid teams, organized by peasants under the leadership of the Communist Party after land reform, helped them to work together collectively. The members' private ownership of land, draught animals, farm tools and the crops harvested on their land were kept intact. Such a form of mutual aid had the advantage of helping some peasant members through difficulties arising from a shortage of draught animals and labour power. It promoted agricultural production and increased the income of all members.

Little Treasure's Ma wondered whether he wasn't being too brash, but she didn't try to impede him, like the old man did. At times she even defended him. The glow of health had returned to her face, and when Liang the Third saw it graced with a loving smile for Sheng-pao he burned with inward irritation.

Their daughter, who had been named Hsiu-lan, was already nineteen. She was studying in the fourth year of primary school in Hsiapao Village. Hsiu-lan also sided with her brother, and this increased the old man's feeling of hurt.

The contradictions and agreements within the walls of the compound of Liang the Third, and the contradictions and agreements in Fifth Village (Frog Flat) of Hsiapao Township were interconnected during the years of the socialist revolution. They comprise the main content of these "tales from life". . . .

Part I

1

Early one spring morning before the peasants living along the Tang Stream wakened from their slumbers, the sound of the rising waters became audible; the ice and snow on Mount Chungnan were beginning to thaw. On both banks of the stream, in Hsiapao Village, in Huangpao Town, in the near hamlets on the northern plain, roosters in thatched cottage compounds amid the misty paddy fields greeted each other and the dawn. Heard from the road winding across the plain, the gurgling of the stream and the crowing of the roosters had a soft elegance which enhanced the hush that falls shortly before daybreak.

The air was fresh and fragrant; it gave a feeling of exceptional coolness and ease.

Stars faded from the deep blue sky, seen through idly drifting clouds, leaving only the crescent of the waning moon. According to the old lunar calendar it was the end of the first month. Before the sun rose from the plain around Huangpao Town, the east turned a fishbelly white. Then the morning clouds were encrimsoned, and their hues reflected on the yet unmelted snows draping the weird-shaped peaks of Mount Chungnan. On the wheat shoots, which had recently been hoed, on the green leaves of the young barley in the rice fields, on the tender grass just emerging along the roadside, on the banks of the river and stream, dewdrops glistened.

Liang the Third was one of the few old men in Hsiapao Township in a position to enjoy this morning beauty. He had risen before daylight and filled his basket with manure he picked on the highway between Huangpao and the county seat. As he deposited the contents of his basket on the manure heap outside his compound gate, his daughter Hsiu-lan, who had

just left her warm bed, came through the gateway, fixing her hairpins, a school-bag on her arm. She crossed the threshing ground and walked off towards the Tang Stream. Liang's wife had also just got up. She was snapping sticks of the remaining brushwood, preparing to cook breakfast.

Carrying his manure basket, Liang entered the small courtyard. He cast a disdainful glance in the direction of the thatched cottage where his step-son Sheng-pao slept alone. Liang hesitated, wondering whether he should wake the "important personage". The old white one-eyed horse in the shed Sheng-pao had built behind the shack after Liberation, whinnied a fond greeting, no doubt recognizing the step of his old master. His belly full of ire, Liang flung the basket into the entrance-way beneath the cottage's overhanging thatch and stamped into the shed.

A moment later, he emerged with a rake in his hand and once more proceeded to the threshing ground outside the gate. He began raking over the rice roots he had gathered when their mutual-aid team was hoeing the paddy fields. He had hitched the old white horse to the stone roller on the threshing field and ground the wet earth from the roots, leaving them to dry in the sun for two days. Dried roots made good fuel.

"Slumber on, my young gentleman," he muttered balefully. "You can rise when breakfast is ready. Out all night at meetings, can't get up in the morning – what kind of peasant do you call yourself?"

The old man didn't know when Sheng-pao had returned from his meeting. He gave the one-eyed old white horse its night feeding himself. For convenience' sake he slept on a small *kang* in the corner of the shed. "I let you sleep in a nice clean shack, but you never do any farm work," he thought. "Just keep it up, young fellow. See how long I'll go on being your groom."

"Has Hsiu-lan left for school yet, Uncle Liang?"

The old man looked around. It was Kai-hsia, the daughter of Widow Hsu of Kuan Creek. Humph! Dressed so neat and clean. Must be trying to hook some man.

"She's gone." He went back to his raking, head down, his manner plainly showing that he didn't wish to speak to her.

Kai-hsia's light steps moved down the path leading from the western edge of the threshing ground to the Tang Stream.

Again Liang raised his head. Narrowing his old eyes, he peered distastefully after the girl. She was also carrying a school-bag. Two long braids hung down her back. "You keep away from our Hsiu-lan," he muttered into his greying wispy beard. "She's not going to turn out like you. Twenty-one years old and still unmarried. Sooner or later you're sure to do something shameless."

When Kai-hsia's father was still alive, he had engaged her to a man in Chou Village, at the foot of the mountains. The year the region was liberated, the man wanted to go through with the marriage, but Kai-hsia refused. She said she was too young. When she reached eighteen, the legal marriageable age, she still would not marry him because the match had been arranged without her consent. Recently, when the new marriage law was proclaimed, Kai-hsia had the engagement formally annulled.

In Liang the Third's opinion, only a person with bad intentions could do such a wicked thing. He was afraid that Kai-hsia would influence Hsiu-lan to take the same path. The boy with whom Hsiu-lan's parents had arranged a match had joined the Chinese People's Volunteers and was now fighting the Americans in Korea. Liang wanted them to marry soon, but of course at present that wasn't possible.

His wife, who had just filled a jug with water from the spring in the white poplar grove, came walking back along the outer wall of the compound. Good.

"Look here. You," he cried harshly. Suppressing his anger with an effort, he stared out at the village-dotted plain extending from the foot of Mount Chungnan.

Surprised at his scowling visage, the old woman set down her jug.

"What's wrong? What are you so mad about?"

"Look here, you," the old man raged, raising his voice. "I ask you. I know you can't control Little Treasure. But can't you control Hsiu-lan either?"

"What's the matter with Hsiu-lan?"

"I'm not talking just to hear my own voice. I'm telling you straight. Hsiu-lan is my own flesh and blood. I engaged her to that boy in the Yang family personally. I'm not dead yet. I'm not going to let her blacken my name."

"What are you talking about? . . ."

"You tell Hsiu-lan for me. She's not to go running around with that widow woman's daughter Kai-hsia."

"Oho." His wife understood at last. She smiled. The thing wasn't nearly so serious as she had thought from the expression on the old man's face. The wrinkles in the corners of her eyes contracted and she laughed her clear laugh. "Kai-hsia's all right. Are you afraid she'll give Hsiu-lan some disease?"

"Don't argue. What she'll give Hsiu-lan spreads quicker than any disease."

"If Hsiu-lan changes, you can come to me."

"By that time it'll be too late."

"Well, what do you want to do? The girls are both in the same school."

"There's only one thing. Let Hsiu-lan quit."

"That would be just fine. The man she's engaged to has been decorated for merit in Korea and promoted to chief of his gun crew. At the New Year, everyone went, beating drums and cymbals, and congratulated his family. I suppose you heard about that? When the war is over and he comes home, what if he thinks our girl isn't good enough because she has no education? A lot of glory that'll add to your name."

The old man's whiskered mouth quivered. He wanted to retort but he couldn't think of an answer. He coughed and again began raking over the dried rice roots. After his wife disappeared through the compound gate, he stopped and gazed at the snow-covered peak of Mount Chungnan, turned crimson

by the rising sun. He was sorry he had chosen this topic for an opening. He should have spoken about Sheng-pao refusing to get out of bed in the morning. Liang hated himself for being too soft. He always tried to avoid clashing with Sheng-pao directly. Still, what if Sheng-pao was in the Party? Could he do anything to an old man?

By the time Liang had finished raking over the roots, the bright morning sun was already shining on the waters of the Tang Stream.

From the homes in Hsiapao Village and Huangpao Town, north and east of the winding Tang Stream, the smoke of breakfast fires rose, joining together in a cloud like some huge monster which writhed off towards the cliffs at the end of the plain. People's voices, the cries of beancurd and bean sprout vendors, rang through the streets of Hsiapao. Rubber-tired carts, bicycles and pedestrians were already coming and going along the highway from Huangpao to the county seat. By now it was broad daylight.

The old man went back into the courtyard and leaned his rake against the thatched cottage. He looked at Sheng-pao's room and took a belligerent stance.

"The sun is shining on your backside. Aren't you ever getting up? Master Liang."

In the room there wasn't a sound.

"Are you going to sleep till dark?" the old man cried in a higher pitch.

"Who are you yelling at?" Little Treasure's Ma called from the kitchen.

"Our great man. Who else would still be in bed at this hour?"

The old woman appeared at the kitchen door, a poker in her hand. She laughed.

"Why don't you open the door and see if Sheng-pao's there?"

Liang pushed the door open. On the *kang* was only a pillow. Even the quilt had been taken away.

"Where's he gone?" Liang turned around and demanded hotly. "It's not even a month since the last time he went to the county for a meeting. Where could he have gone?"

"Don't you know?" the old woman smiled. "When Secretary Wang of the district Party committee stayed with us those few days, he helped the mutual-aid team draw up a production plan. We're going to use a new strain of rice seed this year, didn't you hear? Little Treasure went to Kuo County to buy the new seed."

"When did he leave?" Liang asked furiously through clenched teeth.

"While you were gathering manure."

"Why didn't he say anything to me?"

"He said he told you."

"He told me, he told me. And I told *him* not to go. Why did you let him leave, eh? Are mother and son working together to kill this old man? What am I to you two, anyway? Your servant? What are you up to?"

Liang charged ranting out of the compound, then charged back in again, slamming the gate each way. He couldn't control himself; he was working himself into a frenzy. Since Sheng-pao wasn't at home, he could really let off steam. He'd never have a better chance.

"Nothing doing," he raved, once more rushing to the threshing ground outside the gate. "As long as Liang the Third has a breath left in his body, he's not going to let them push him around. And that's the truth." He was hopping mad.

The old woman, brushwood twigs sticking to her tunic, a poker in her hand, was very alarmed. Liang had been sulking for days, but she had never thought he'd blow up so violently. She knew from his "them" that he was lumping her and Sheng-pao together. Holding on to her patience with an effort, she tried to calm the old man down.

"Quit your yelling, pa," she said pleasantly. "I'm always telling Sheng-pao not to rile you. But he says no matter how he talks to you, he can't get your stubborn old brain to change. He says the only way is to show you. When you see for yourself, you'll have to believe him. Of course I'm only a housewife. I don't know much about these things. Anyhow, you shouldn't make such a racket. The neighbours will laugh at us."

"Show me, eh? He's wasting his time," shouted Liang in the general direction of Hsiapao Village across the stream, as if addressing the eight hundred families resident there. "Who ever heard of planting wheat after you've gathered the rice in this part of the country? Did you?"

Liang didn't even look at his wife. He kept his back to her. But she spoke to him calmly.

"What if I haven't? Secretary Wang knows that our Little Treasure is always doing things for everyone and he's urged him to try it out on our mutual-aid team's land. Our boy is a Communist. Of course he respects Secretary Wang's wishes."

"He's always doing things for everyone? Did he ever do anything for me? Eh?" yelled the old man, glaring and gnashing his teeth. "When I picked him up out of the snow at the age of three and carried him home, he didn't even have a pair of pants to cover his backside. Don't you remember that? A fine mother and son. What's happened to your hearts? Did a dog eat them? I work myself to the bone, bringing him up, and for what? Tell me that." Liang felt so put upon he almost wept.

A sharp pain stabbed through his wife's breast. Her eyes grew large and she burst into tears. She ran into the shack, threw herself down on the *kang* and sobbed bitterly. It was the first time he had ever reminded her, even during a quarrel, of her unhappy circumstances some twenty years before.

Outside the compound, his torn padded jacket scraping the earthen wall, Liang slowly slid to a squatting position. He had stopped shouting, but he was still furious. His head and neck were twisted, his felt skull-cap had slipped to one side.

The uproar brought the neighbours — Jen the Fourth and his wife, the widow and son of Jen the Third, the wife, son, and daughter-in-law of blind old Wang the Second. All hurried over to Liang the Third's compound to try and restore peace. Two daughters-in-law of Liang the Eldest started for the com-



Liang the Third

pound, but they were halted by their father-in-law halfway. Bald, flecks of grey in his beard, Liang the Eldest was quite prosperous now. He had given up peddling beancurd more than ten years before. During the land reform, he had been classified as a well-to-do middle peasant.

"Where do you think you're going!" he demanded. Pompously, he informed the girls, "There'll be no end of quarrels in that old thatched cottage from now on. Are you going to go running over every day? Your uncle Liang the Third is a cast-iron knife. He looks fierce, but goes blunt at the first bump. Don't you think he could handle Sheng-pao if he were really sharp? Go on home."

Several of the women neighbours hastened into the thatched cottage to comfort Little Treasure's Ma. The men spoke soothing words to Liang the Third outside the compound gate.

"*Hai*! Is it worth it?" asked Jen the Fourth with a sigh. His back also was bent with years of toil on Mount Chungnan. "You're old and so is she. What's there to argue about, brother?"

"Uncle." Huan-hsi, seventeen-year-old son of Jen the Third's widow, squatted down before Liang and urged him sincerely, "Uncle, don't get so mad."

"*Hai*! You're both old. What's the use of carrying on so?" Jen the Fourth, past forty, was very agitated. He was full of well-intentioned advice, but he didn't know how to put it into words.

Squatting by the wall, Liang the Third hooked a hand over the back of his neck and spat angrily. He didn't say a word. These people annoyed him. They all belonged to Sheng-pao's mutual-aid team. They were still poor after the land reform, and they relied on the help of the team to till the land they had received. He'd known it for some time: It was for their sake that his son Sheng-pao was doing so much running around.

The hours of sunshine lengthened with spring. Except for someone here or there gathering water chestnuts or wild vege-

tables during the day, Frog Flat was deserted. Flocks of honking geese had already bidden farewell to Tang Stream and flown across the bare mountains of northern Shensi to Inner Mongolia. The long-billed, long-legged herons, blue storks and cranes had left the muddy river's edge for the miry paddy fields and ditches, where they hunted little fish and insects.

Sun-rays warmed the fresh green barley coming up in the rice fields. Buds were darkening the bare branches of the peach trees in the orchards at the southern end of Kuan Creek. The spring flowers people had planted to protect the grave mounds were now a mass of brilliant yellow.

Spring, ah, spring. To the plant and animal world you bring renewal, hope and joy. But what did you bring our friend Liang the Third?

He lay alone, his head pillowed on his arms, in the wide wheat field near the bank of Kuan Creek. Liang didn't know what to do with himself. Although he had eaten virtually no breakfast, he didn't feel hungry. He swallowed constantly to moisten his dry throat.

Lying on the soft yellow earth and tender young wheat, he crumbled a handful of soil in his fingers as he gazed up at the endless blue sky and the white clouds drifting westwards. A hawk soaring above circled gradually lower. At first Liang paid no attention, but soon there were four hawks, and then five, and he realized they were after him.

"Spawn of the demons," he yelled angrily, sitting up. "I'm not dead yet."

The hawks saw that he was alive. They flew off to seek their meal elsewhere.

Liang had wandered out to the wheat field aimlessly, and just lay down. He had a vague desire to find someone to whom he could pour out the misery that was in his heart. But after reclining in the field for a long time, he couldn't think of anyone he could confide in without fear of being laughed at. Family troubles were not a thing to be talked about in public! . . .

He hadn't intended to mention the painful events of twenty years before, when his wife and little Sheng-pao had entered his door. His rage had made him speak too cuttingly. Only after seeing how hurt his wife had been did he realize that he shouldn't have said anything. No matter how intimate you are with people, you shouldn't prod their old wounds.

But he wasn't sorry that he had quarrelled with her. He had been looking for an excuse to blow up, believing that this would cause her to put a check on Sheng-pao. Far better than clashing with his step-son directly. But he had gone too far and made his wife weep. Liang hated himself for his stupidity. He had no self-control.

Popping firecrackers in a lane in Kuan Creek Hamlet startled Liang from his brooding thoughts.

"A roof frame's being set in place." Liang sat up and shaded his eyes. He gazed in the direction of the lane, muttering, "A new roof frame. A new tile-roofed house for Frog Flat."

"I must go and have a look," he thought.

On the southern side of Kuan Creek the land was higher than the paddy fields opposite, and here forty or fifty families had formed a community known as Kuan Creek Hamlet. After the People's Republic was established in 1949, the hamlet residents combined with some forty households of former tenants and poor peasants, who had migrated to the paddy fields from other parts of the countryside, to form a single community named Fifth Village, which was under the administration of Hsiapao Township.

The builder of the new house was Kuo Shih-fu, a well-to-do middle peasant. Liang envied him greatly. When Shih-fu came to Frog Flat as a boy with his father and two brothers, they had rented a piece of land, built an earthen compound wall and a thatched shed and moved in. Now they were a family of twenty-odd people, occupying a handsome compound with tile-roofed houses on three sides. Today they were completing the square with a new building in the front. For years, Liang had been dreaming of rebuilding the three-room house his father had erected, but he hadn't been able to do even that.

Oh! What a lot of people were helping! The whole Flat seemed to have turned out. Now the helpers were coming down the ladders while the carpenters gave final raps here and there with their hammers to make the roof frame of white freshly planed beams and struts fit more snugly. The central beam and the pillars supporting it were decorated with colourful good luck symbols and auspicious phrases inscribed on red paper. The felt-capped heads of middle-aged and elderly men, the black-hatted and towel-covered heads of the young fellows, the bun-in-the-back, long-braided and short-bobbed heads of the girls and women, were all tipped back as their owners gazed up at the new roof.

Liang the Third, in his worn padded jacket, silently slipped in among them. Not even the people next to him turned to see who had come. Liang too tilted back his head with its tattered felt cap and looked.

Now the carpenters tucked their axes and planes into their waist sashes and also descended the ladders. From the near courtyard the delicious aroma of boiled and roast pork was emanating, and the fragrance of strong mulled wine. Shih-fu and his two brothers wandered in and out among the carpenters, the relatives who had sent gifts and the neighbours who had helped with the frame, inviting them to a meal. Some accepted, some politely declined.

Among the spectators, Liang noticed the rich peasant Yao Shih-chieh. Broad of shoulder and thick of waist, at forty he looked ten years younger. Dressed in a clean padded jacket of black cloth, he stood gazing around proudly, chest high. There always was a mocking gleam in Yao's crafty eyes. Now his manner seemed to be saying: "Jealous? You'd better be satisfied with just looking. What if the Communists gave you a bit of land—do you really hope to build a house like this?" Liang could see it in his rich peasant face. No question about it. He knew Yao. No matter how honest and kindly he tried to appear, inside, Yao was all rotten, like his father before him. They came from the same stock.

Aha! And there was Kuo Chen-shan. The big fellow loomed above the crowd like a heron among paddy birds. He was talking to some people around him in his rich resonant voice. Chairman of the village deputies, a Communist who had joined the Party in 1949, he enjoyed the highest prestige of any man in the village. Liang knew that Chairman Chen-shan and rich peasant Yao were always pecking at each other like a pair of fighting cocks. Before Liberation, Chen-shan couldn't outpeck Yao; since Liberation, Yao couldn't outpeck Chen-shan. During the land reform, the rich peasants had behaved very meekly for a time. When it was over, although they didn't talk tough, their backbones stiffened. Now these two enemies were here as guests of the house-builder, Shih-fu, both waiting to join the second round of feasters. Two strong men, face to face.

"You stick to your Party," Liang respectfully advised Chen-shan, although he didn't speak the words aloud. "But why should you pull our Sheng-pao in too? He isn't the kind who likes to quarrel. If you take him into the Party, how can an old man like me farm alone? You have two brothers. If one of you works on the outside, the others can still tend the land. It's easy for you to have public spirit."

Old Liang didn't dare give voice to these sentiments. In the presence of competent people, or someone who was better off than himself, he had an overwhelming feeling of inferiority.

Oh, oh! Old Kuo the Second had come too. *Tien*![1] an old man like that had walked all the way from the upstream section to see the setting of the roof frame. Liang gazed at Old Kuo, standing there leaning on his stick, his hair and beard snowy white, a man who had worked hard all his life. He was bent so far forward at the waist, his spine looked as if it had snapped. Liang had the highest regard for Old Kuo, of all the residents of the paddy land. When he had migrated to Frog Flat with his son Ching-hsi years ago, he had brought only a few small farm implements whose handles were worn thin with use. Today the Kuos were a large family, and doing well.

[1] Heaven above!

Ching-hsi worked tirelessly; his nickname was "Iron Man". He was a very devoted son who never forgot the care his father had given him as a child after he lost his mother at the age of five. As a sign of gratitude, he saw to it that the old man had two drams of spirits every day.

The sight of that good-hearted and fortunate old man made Liang think of his own disrespectful son. He felt so aggrieved he was almost ready to weep. He hurried over to Old Kuo. Here was the very man to listen to his troubles. This dear old fellow would never gossip about him.

Those who had not been invited to the feast turned from discussing the new building to the question of village housing in general. Most people lived in thatched cottages. In spring they feared the big winds would blow the roof off. In autumn they feared the rains would disintegrate the earthen walls. Who knew how long it would be before they too could construct tile-roofed houses? Could they hope to gather as much rice as Shih-fu? Impossible. Of course it would be nice if every family could hitch up a rubber-tired cart and transport their rice to the Huangpao Town market. Maybe they could get each stalk to grow as tall as a persimmon tree, and they'd knock the rice off with bamboo poles. Ridiculous. A joke.

"Ha-ha-ha! . . ." A dozen bearded and beardless men threw back their heads and laughed towards the clear blue sky.

They observed that Liang the Third and Kuo the Second were standing together, talking cordially. A young prankster in the crowd named Blabbermouth Sun suddenly shouted for everyone to be quiet, then proclaimed solemnly:

"We have here among us another man who is soon also going to build a tile-roofed house. I'm referring to that old boy." He pointed scornfully at Liang.

The crowd roared with laughter. Showing not the slightest respect for an elder, a man walked up to Liang without a word and snatched at his worn felt cap.

"Let go. Let go," Liang begged, pressing his cap to his head with both hands.

"No. *You* let go. Let everyone see how much bigger your skull is than the heads of us ordinary folk. They say that all great men have big heads, but we've never had a good look at yours."

Only when the shamefaced Liang vowed he would start cursing, and Old Kuo had added his urgent pleas, did the merciless hand release the tattered felt cap. People looked at Liang with varying expressions in their eyes — sympathetic, contemptuous, uninterested — as he humbly straightened the cap. Liang never got very angry no matter how shabbily he was treated. Until he built up the family fortunes like his eldest brother and Old Kuo, naturally he couldn't hope for respect.

Waggling his white beard, Old Kuo scolded the young men. "Why are you picking on this honest old fellow?" he demanded.

"Haven't you heard?" cried Blabbermouth, clapping Old Kuo on the shoulder. "He's going to be rich. The whole village is talking about the wonder his son Sheng-pao is going to perform with the mutual-aid team he's leading."

"But I thought the leader of their team was Liang the Eldest's son, Sheng-lu."

"You're behind the times," exclaimed Blabbermouth dramatically. "That was changed long ago. Last autumn Sheng-lu went to the city for a meeting on team outputs and he came back with a citation. Liang the Eldest said, 'Let me see it.' The minute he got his hands on the citation he didn't even look at it but tore it to shreds. Then he gave Sheng-lu a strong talking to. After that, Sheng-lu began back-sliding. Early this February it was Sheng-pao who went into the city for the meeting of mutual-aid team leaders."

"Oh, I didn't know about that," said Old Kuo.

"Even last year, though Sheng-lu was the team leader in name, Sheng-pao did most of the running around," Liang the Third explained unhappily.

Old Kuo blinked his wrinkled eyelids with their snowy white lashes as he observed Liang's distressed manner. "What if he *has* become a team leader?" he said soothingly. "Isn't my own son, Ching-hsi, a team leader too?"

"Just listen to you," Blabbermouth said to Old Kuo with a laugh. "You never come out of the house. You don't know what's going on. How can you compare Iron Man's team with Sheng-pao's? Sheng-pao's team is our district's key team. When he went to that meeting in the county seat, he accepted a challenge from the best team in the entire county. Now he's added three more families to his team." He turned to Liang. "How many families have you got in your team altogether, uncle?"

"Uh . . . eight."

"You see. Other teams have three, or at most five, and they're only temporary. Big-brain Wang helped them draw up a production plan personally."

"Who's Big-brain Wang?"

"The Party secretary of our Huangpao District. Who's got more brains than him?"

"Ah, Committeeman Sun," a bystander interrupted in vexation, "they weren't wrong when they named you Blabbermouth. Once you get going, you can't stop. When you meet Secretary Wang face to face, you're always bowing and scraping. But behind his back you have the nerve to call him Big-brain."

Although the reference to Sun as "Committeeman" was meant as sarcasm, he was in fact one of the members of the township's civil affairs committee. (Each village within the township had one resident committeeman for each of the township's five administrative committees — civil affairs, finance and grain, production, education and culture, and military affairs.)

Sun laughed a bit awkwardly, but he refused to be diverted. "Now this production plan, grandpa," he said to Old Kuo, "I hardly dare tell you. It might scare you to death."

"How much are they aiming for?"

"An average of six hundred catties[1] of rice per *mou,* and on their experimental plot — a thousand."

"*Aiya*! These modern young fellows certainly are bold." Old Kuo glanced at Liang the Third. Liang was pale with rage. He looked ready to collapse.

[1] One catty is equal to half a kilogramme or a little more than one pound.

"That's nothing." Blabbermouth continued. "This autumn after they gather their rice, they're not going to plant barley. They think barley's too coarse."

"What *will* they plant?"

"Wheat."

"*Aiya*! Land is like a man. You can only take so much out of it. Besides, where are they going to get extra hands for the work?"

"So you've got nothing to worry about." His story finished, Blabbermouth laughed at Liang mockingly, wrinkling his small nose and little eyes. "With each *mou* of land yielding the grain of several, if you can't build a tile-roofed house, who can?"

Glaring, Liang turned his back on him. "Demon's spawn," he cursed Blabbermouth inwardly. "You make a joke of other people's troubles. I hope you never find a wife. May you die a lonely bachelor."

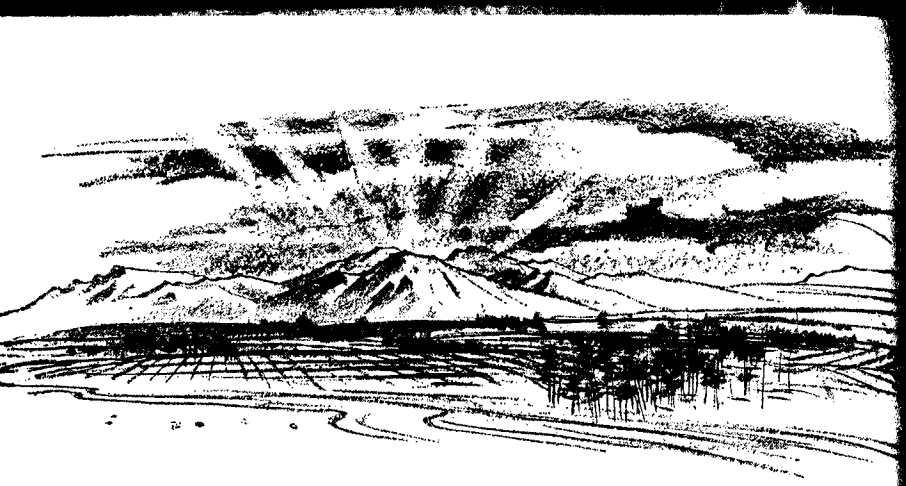
The discussion again became general. Some said Sheng-pao was too young and headstrong. Others said he had been given a few words of praise up in the county and now he was walking on air. Someone ventured to predict that if he didn't fulfil his team's plan he'd probably be criticized. One opinion was virtually unanimous: If Chen-shan, chairman of the village deputies, were in charge of such a mutual-aid team, it might stand a chance. Sheng-pao was overestimating himself. After he cracked his skull, he'd realize that iron was iron and stone was stone.

Liang's whole being was concentrated in his ears. He took in everything people said. And their words chilled him to the heart.

His gaze lingered on Old Kuo's ruddy countenance, with its white brows and beard and crown of snowy hair. Liang didn't understand. The old man spoke slowly and in a low voice; how had he been able to teach his son to know his place? Liang was anxious to learn his method.

"Let's go, Old Kuo," he begged. "Let's go to your place and have a chat. What do you say?"

"Good. You're usually so busy, even when I invite you, you don't come."



2

"Hsiu-lan."

"Mm."

"I — I want to ask you something."

"Well, what is it? Why are you acting so mysterious?"

Kai-hsia seemed amused. Her big eyes were fixed on Hsiu-lan, but she didn't speak.

The two girls were returning from school in Hsiapao Village. Walking shoulder to shoulder along a grassy path on the bank of the Tang Stream, they were approaching a narrow footbridge. Dusk was falling, and there had been some rain that early spring day. White snow mantled the peaks of the Chinling Mountains. Beneath a scarlet-streaked sky, the deep green waters of the placid Tang Stream meandered across the paler green of the wide central Shensi plain. The gorgeous background accentuated the youthful freshness of these pretty country girls.

"What is it? Kai-hsia, speak up, for pity's sake. Quit looking at me so gimlet-eyed. Do you think you can probe into my heart?" Seeing that Kai-hsia only smiled, Hsiu-lan was sure that she had something special in mind.

"Let me ask you," Kai-hsia finally said with a laugh, "where do you go every morning after the third class?"

"To the next classroom."

"Which one?"

"Why, only my regular classroom."

"Pooh-pooh! You may be there, but your heart's not. Think you can fool me? Every day when the postman comes from Huangpao Town, you sneak out the back gate and go to Big Crossroads. What for?"

"You're just making this up," Hsiu-lan, blushing, protested weakly.

"Oh, am I? I've been watching you for days. And today I caught you. I followed you and saw you go into the post office with my own eyes. Is it because you can't wait to get a letter from Yang Ming-shan? Confess."

Hsiu-lan's healthy face went red down to her neck. She was a good, honest girl. Her forehead was like her mother's, but her cheek-bones, her mouth and her nose were all like Liang the Third's.

"Don't be too anxious," Kai-hsia teased. "You sent your letter only a month ago. He's on a battlefield in a foreign land. You can't expect a reply this soon. Are you longing for him? Tell big sister, how does it feel to be so terribly in love?"

Hsiu-lan whirled to clutch her tormentor. But Kai-hsia was prepared, and she fled, laughing. Blushing, biting her lower lip angrily to mask the joy in her heart, Hsiu-lan pursued her hotly. The two girls, holding their school-bags, raced in circles on the grassy bank. Finally, weak with laughter, Kai-hsia collapsed to the ground. Hands strong as a boy's yanked her braids from behind.

"Will you behave or not?" Hsiu-lan demanded of her captive.

". . . Behave. . . ." Kai-hsia was choking with mirth.

"Will you ever dare talk nonsense again? Will you?"

"Never . . . never."

Only after Kai-hsia vowed that she would guard the secret with her life did Hsiu-lan release her. The two girls resumed their journey back to Fifth Village.

The truth was that Kai-hsia secretly envied Hsiu-lan. Her sweetheart was a hero on the Korean front, while Hsiu-lan herself led a settled life at home, attending school. With such a sweetheart what girl wouldn't walk with a light step, study calmly, eat heartily, and dream sweet dreams? Even if she had to wait a few years before she could marry, what did it matter?

Kai-hsia hated the village gossips who said that she had broken her engagement with the Chou Village man because she thought he wasn't handsome. There were always vulgar individuals who judged people with noble ideals by their own low standards. She couldn't be bothered with them. Since the new society gave her the freedom to choose her own husband, she would certainly seek a progressive-minded young fellow who was doing something useful for the community. That was the only kind of man by whose side she would be willing to live. Although a few years of the flower of her youth had passed in fighting for the dissolution of the arranged match, Kai-hsia was in no hurry. She wanted to be sure that she got the right man.

Hsiu-lan's happiness had a strong effect upon her. Recently she had been thinking of men quite a bit. Not for physical reasons, but compared with Hsiu-lan, she felt that her own life was very empty. She certainly wasn't longing for marriage. If that were the kind of girl she was, she wouldn't have fought for three years until she succeeded in breaking her engagement. She wanted to be the same as Hsiu-lan — to have a man whom she could think of, and who would think of her, a man she could be proud of, who would make her feel warm and sweet.

Kai-hsia was aware of the fact that she had changed a lot since she had broken off the engagement. Before, she used to be lively and gay in the presence of the boys she knew. But now that she had the right to find a husband of her own choosing, afraid of being misunderstood, she was more restrained. She felt that many people, both in the village and at school, looked at her with different eyes. That was unavoidable. She was old enough to be the teacher of the little girls in her third-year class — Kai-hsia was the same age as the young women

teaching first and second year. Was it any wonder that she attracted attention?

It was different with Hsiu-lan. Engaged to a man in the Chinese People's Volunteers, she was admired as a hero's prospective bride. Kai-hsia didn't know what her own future would be. At twenty-one, she worried about this problem.

But Kai-hsia never discussed her troubles with anyone, not even Hsiu-lan. Her fair-complexioned face was always tranquil, composed.

After they crossed the bridge, she asked Hsiu-lan, "Have your pa and ma made up yet?"

"They still don't say much to each other. It'll take time for them to get back to normal."

"Is your pa still so crabby?" Kai-hsia queried, concerned.

"He's a lot better," replied Hsiu-lan, sensitively watching Kai-hsia's expression. She deliberately stressed her father's good qualities.

"My pa is really something," she said. "That day he had a long talk with Old Kuo the Second. Old Kuo must have urged him to make up. Anyhow, he came home and apologized to my ma. 'Forget it,' he said. 'Don't feel bad any more. I was wrong. From now on, I won't bother about a thing. Just give me my food and my clothes. That's all I'll ask.' And he walked out and went into the stable. My brother is right. He says our pa has a stubborn streak, but he's very good-hearted. Although he's always grumbling, his hands are never idle a minute."

Kai-hsia hesitated. "Your brother is a funny one. At home your folks quarrel about him, in the village some people laugh at him. Doesn't he care? Is he really so sure his mutual-aid team can fulfil its plan? Doesn't he have any doubts at all?"

Hsiu-lan smiled. She had a pretty good idea why Kai-hsia asked this.

"You're the funny one. How could he dash around so cheerfully if he had any doubts? He told us that after the meeting of the mutual-aid team leaders in the county, Secretary Yang had a private talk with him. Brother says with the Party leading

things, what's he got to worry about? Don't you know my brother? Once he sees his way clear, eight big ropes can't hold him back."

She was praising him on purpose, for she remembered that Sheng-pao and Kai-hsia had once been very friendly.

Her words went deep into Kai-hsia's heart. The older girl knew him indeed. During the land reform she had seen how, unobtrusively, solidly, he always acted firmly for the common good. But she hadn't guessed that he would have the courage to undertake this startling plan that had the whole township talking. "With the Party leading things, what's he got to worry about?" That was typical of Sheng-pao.

When the girls reached the Liang compound gate, Hsiu-lan invited Kai-hsia in.

"No. It's too late," Kai-hsia said dubiously. "I've got to go home."

But she didn't move. Gazing off at Mount Chungnan, covered with fresh sparkling snow, she thought of how contemptuously old Liang always looked at her, how coldly he spoke. She didn't want to meet him. At the same time, her large beautiful eyes swept through the open gateway and settled upon Sheng-pao's thatched cottage. She was very tempted to take advantage of the absence of this boy she so admired to sample the atmosphere of his room.

"Hsiu-lan. Wait a minute," a deep voice shouted.

The girls turned around. Chairman Chen-shan was coming their way from the stream bank, lightly balancing a huge log on his shoulder. When he caught up with them, the brawny village deputy stood the log on end and held it steady with one hand. His bristly face broke into a friendly smile as he greeted the two Youth Leaguers.

"Are you transporting lumber today, Chairman Chen-shan?" Kai-hsia asked.

"No. I'm coming from a meeting of the township government. I happened to run into a fellow on the road who was taking this log into Huangpao Town to sell. The price was

cheap, so I took it off his hands." He looked at Hsiu-lan, "Has your brother come back from the county seat?"

"Not yet."

"The township is pushing low-interest grain loans again this year to help peasants who are having a hard time. If people with extra grain lend it to those who are short, there's no chance for the usurers. All the deputies of Fifth Village are going to talk it over in my house tonight. If your brother doesn't get back in time, tell your cousin Sheng-lu to come. His family is the only one likely to have extra grain in this section anyway."

"That's right," Hsiu-lan agreed. "I'll tell him."

"Tell him to be sure to come."

"I'll tell him."

"Are you going home, Kai-hsia?" asked the chairman, turning to her with a pleasant smile. "You can carry these charts for me. Don't crumple them."

"Right." Kai-hsia took the roll of papers cheerfully, relieved that she no longer had to ponder whether to go inside. She said goodbye to Hsiu-lan and left with Chairman Chen-shan.

As they walked south along a ditch, Chen-shan, shouldering the big log easily, said with a laugh, "I hear you don't like going to school much."

"That's not true," Kai-hsia replied, surprised. "Where did you hear that?"

"Your ma told me," Chen-shan smiled. He couldn't see her reaction because the log on his shoulder was in the way.

Kai-hsia's face flamed. "Old muddle-head," she scolded her mother mentally. "Why must you chatter?" But, thinking it over, Kai-hsia decided she was wrong. Why should she conceal anything from the chairman?

"It's like this." Her school-bag in one hand, the charts in the other, Kai-hsia trailed behind Chen-shan on the narrow path. "I'm all confused," she explained in some embarrassment, "I'm too old for school. Even if I finish primary school, I won't go on to middle school. Wouldn't it be better if I started earlier with agriculture, with developing the mutual-aid teams?"

"No," the chairman of the village deputies retorted unceremoniously, poking his big head with its small skull-cap around the side of the log. "Of course not. If it weren't for Liberation could you have gone to school at all? In the old society we muddy-legged paddy dwellers couldn't even send our sons to school, to say nothing of daughters. It's only thanks to the Communist Party and Chairman Mao that we can do it today. As long as the school doesn't say you're over-age, you stay right there and study. Education is a fine thing. Cram in as much as you can swallow; it won't hurt your stomach. Don't laugh. It's true. When you study a lot, your brain gets smarter, you're able to write things. Whatever job you do, Kai-hsia, it's better to be educated. Do you follow me?"

The girl gazed respectfully at the burly chairman, dressed in an old padded jacket and carrying the heavy log on his shoulder, as he strode on ahead of her. Kai-hsia had the highest regard for this peasant Communist who always spoke convincingly. No one could help unravel the knots in her heart better than he.

It was the private opinion of many around Frog Flat that as an administrator Chen-shan was in no way inferior to Secretary Lu of the township Party branch. Only having a large family with many problems kept Chen-shan from giving up farming and devoting all his time to Party work. Kai-hsia agreed with this view. Her mother had told her: When Chen-shan was a young man, because he didn't have enough land, he had peddled earthenware in the hamlets and villages. When he set his load down in the middle of a village street and cried his wares, many women came out. Although most of them had no intention of buying, Chen-shan spoke so eloquently that they were happy to change their minds. He made them feel that to give their grain for his earthenware jugs and basins was the most intelligent, most sensible thing they could do that day. That's how persuasive a talker Chen-shan was.

Kai-hsia herself had been helped by the chairman's powers of speech. In 1950 when she started school, her ma had been opposed. It was Chen-shan, then chairman of the peasants'

association, who had talked the conservative old woman around. On the question of breaking off her engagement, she had argued with her mother for three years. In the end again it was the chairman who broke down her ma's old-fashioned prejudices.

Kai-hsia idolized Chen-shan because the clever peasant had been like a brother to her. She was alone in the world except for her widowed mother, but he had brought her into the political life of Fifth Village and taught her, a simple country girl, to know the taste of social struggle, a thing she had never even dreamed of. Today she was a member of the Youth League branch committee of the Hsiapao primary school. It seemed to her that after Liberation the sky had become bluer, the sun redder, the earth fresher. She was more and more eager to work for social causes. Kai-hsia felt that only by taking an active part could she be worthy of the country's liberation, of the education and training the Party was giving her.

On the cart road that led through the paddy fields to Kuan Creek Hamlet, Chen-shan effortlessly swung the log over from his left shoulder to his right.

"You go on with your studies for the time being," he said. "Don't get any silly ideas whatever you do. You're not studying for yourself, but for our country. This is the first year of China's big construction programme. Everywhere we're building factories, opening up mines, laying railways. But we've only just started, we're only breaking the ground. Our projects will need more and more people, and the countryside has to supply them. I hear that even many military men are being switched over to industry, so are more and more people from the lower government levels. There's no end to the demand. Do you follow me?"

Walking behind the chairman, her school-bag in one hand and the chairman's charts in the other, Kai-hsia listened attentively. She understood now: the chairman was again opening up a new world for her.

Kai-hsia's heart beat faster. His words stirred her. But then she thought of Sheng-pao, of working together with him in the mutual-aid team movement, and she said:

"I'm more suited to running around in our paddy fields, Chairman Chen-shan. Outside, I probably —"

"Hah, you think of yourself as only one inch tall." Chen-shan didn't try to get at what was in her mind. He went on pressing his point. "Looking down on yourself was a woman's trait in the old society, Kai-hsia. You ought to understand: Communists and Youth Leaguers, both male and female, are welcomed and wanted in every part of the country. Why?" He lowered his voice. "Because, just like here in our village, they're the bones and the people the flesh. Don't you know that?"

Kai-hsia was very pleased with Chen-shan. He always encouraged her not to underestimate herself.

"Surely you don't mean if the organization sends you, you won't go?" Chen-shan persisted. "Last year the provincial cotton mill was looking for women workers. They wanted two from Hsiapao Township. They said naturally Youth Leaguers would be best. At that time, I put your name up. But Secretary Lu said you hadn't broken off your engagement yet; if we sent you, the man's family would say we were preventing the marriage. But what's to hold you back if there's a call from another factory this year? People are fighting for the chance to go to Korea. If you could take part in national construction, would you refuse? In that case what does our country need Party members and Youth Leaguers for?"

Kai-hsia's heart sank. It was a question of principle, the way Chen-shan put it. Was this to be a new turning-point in her life? She'd have to make up her mind quickly — was she going to become Sheng-pao's sweetheart, or was she going to work in a factory in Sian?

"Will there be another call from a factory this spring?" she asked hesitantly, beginning to get a little worried.

"I hear a new textile mill has gone up east of Sian. It's bigger than the Number One and Number Two State Mills put together. They'll be needing over ten thousand workers."

Kai-hsia grow even more alarmed. "But there hasn't been any call yet?"

Not yet. But it's in the wind. Figure it out for yourself. With a mill like that finished, it can't be long before they start wanting people. I guarantee they'll ask for unmarried young folks this time too, including a certain proportion of Youth Leaguers. No question about it. Take my advice, Kai-hsia, and you won't go wrong. Your ma never had a son, though she's always longed for one. Why don't you be a son to her? Be bold, go out into the world. If you agree, you needn't worry about your ma not giving her consent. Just leave her to me."

Kai-hsia made no reply. Fortunately, the log on the chairman's shoulder prevented him from seeing her expression. Her fair face had grown sombre in spite of the rosy sunset glow. Chen-shan hadn't unravelled the knot in her heart this time. He had added to its heaviness.

Like anyone confronted with an unexpected crisis, Kai-hsia couldn't think clearly. Her feelings were mixed. She wasn't entirely uninterested in working in a factory. It deserved serious consideration. As a personal future it might prove more important, more ideal and more useful, than working in the countryside. Certainly its value to the Party and the country couldn't be denied.

Kai-hsia was sorely troubled. Only a few moments before, all her thoughts were of Sheng-pao, and there had been no contradiction between her love for him and her desire to do a useful job. She and Sheng-pao could have a happy home together and at the same time work towards setting new records in rice crop yields.

Kai-hsia didn't feel that her three years of schooling had injected any new element into her choice of a husband. She had started going to school in the first place so that if she were unable to break off her engagement she wouldn't have to be an ordinary peasant wife after marriage but could participate in the various community activities of Chou Village. It had never occurred to her that a new possibility would crop up abruptly — a possibility that was very appealing as a career, but in sharp conflict with her love.

Life, oh life, why are you always posing such difficult problems?

Kai-hsia had already decided that when Sheng-pao came back with the rice seed he was buying she would go to him and put an end to the unnatural distance they had kept between them during the past two years; she would openly and honestly discuss their feelings for each other. Now she wondered whether such a course was wise.

When Chen-shan and Kai-hsia were about two hundred metres from Kuan Creek Hamlet, to mask her concern the girl said with deliberate sprightliness, "Chairman Chen-shan, many people in the village are laughing at the plan of Sheng-pao's mutual-aid team. What do you think? Can they carry it out?"

Her big eyes gazing anxiously at the man walking ahead of her, Kai-hsia waited for his reply. Chen-shan halted, rested one end of the log on the ground and stood it upright.

"Hey! Blabbermouth," he shouted.

"*Ai*!" Blabbermouth responded. He was giving some pigs their evening meal beside a thatched cottage in the paddy fields.

"Come over here. I've got a couple of forms for you. Fill them out in the next two or three days and deliver them to the township government."

"Right." Blabbermouth put down his wooden slops ladle and trotted up along the small path between the fields. The twenty-four-year-old bachelor stared tremulously at the lovely Kai-hsia as he accepted the forms from her hand. After Blabbermouth went back to his pigs, Chen-shan again set the log on his shoulder and strode off vigorously. He made no reply to Kai-hsia's question.

With a timid smile, the girl persisted, "Can they produce so much, Chairman Chen-shan? A number of people in the village are laughing at them. It sounds risky to me."

"If they can, they'll be of some help to the team's poor peasants and ex-hired hands."

"Secretary Wang, the last time he came to our village, called the mutual-aid teams 'buds of socialism'."

But Chen-shan obviously didn't want to discuss this. He gave a stern cough and said, "If it weren't for liberation, if we were still in the old society, you'd be married and living in Chou Village four years by now. After you'd had your first baby you'd be stuck, whether you liked it or not. It would just be your hard luck. In the old days, a woman couldn't read a word. The kitchen stove, the well, the grist mill — that was her whole world. And what could she do about it? But what a difference today. Our women are free. Any woman who uses her head, who studies, who sticks it out, ranks the same as any man. Think it over."

"All right, I will." Their paths separated and she said goodbye. From the way the chairman spoke, it seemed to Kai-hsia that he didn't approve of her alliance with Sheng-pao. She wondered whether her mother could have put him up to talking to her about it.

Aiya! What was she going to do? Kai-hsia had a child-like faith in the chairman. He had seen so much more of the world than she. He was already famous in the paddy fields when she was still a toddling infant. During the land reform, Chen-shan became known as the "Dive Bomber". At mass accusation meetings against tyrannical landlords, he had only to give one shout and the accused would wet their pants in terror. Kai-hsia sincerely respected him. To her, his prestige was unshakable.

Of course he was quite right. She knew what liberation meant; she could sense its effect upon her the same way she reacted to hot and cold. The chairman was concerned about her, he encouraged her to progress, without the slightest selfish motive on his part. It was only due to his enthusiastic support of national construction. Why shouldn't she think over his advice? It seemed to Kai-hsia that to go against Chen-shan's wishes was tantamount to going against the wishes of the Party — pure ingratitude.

Ah! What's more the chairman didn't think much of Sheng-pao's mutual-aid team.

He apparently didn't agree that the mutual-aid teams were the buds of socialism. All he conceded was that they might be "of some help to the team's poor peasants and ex-hired hands". Kai-hsia wished she had more than just enthusiasm for building socialism, that her mind was better developed. Who was right — Sheng-pao or Chairman Chen-shan? At first, Kai-hsia had thought that Chen-shan was irritated because Sheng-pao had announced his bold plan before talking it over with him. But now she realized that the attitudes of the two towards the mutual-aid teams were completely different. Maybe the chairman was right. Many of the peasants didn't seem interested in forming mutual-aid teams. As to socialism, most peasants could hardly pronounce the word. It was a brand-new concept to them. Could that be why Sheng-pao's efforts were being laughed at?

"Oh, Sheng-pao," thought Kai-hsia as she turned into her lane in Kuan Creek Hamlet, "why didn't you discuss it with Chairman Chen-shan before you talked so big at the county meeting? You're so rash. How can you succeed without the chairman's help?"

The deepening twilight added to her depression. She was beginning to worry that her loved one might go down in shameful defeat. Chen-shan held such a strong position in the village and in the Party. Unless he supported Sheng-pao and encouraged his team to fulfil its production plan, what odds they would have to fight against. Kai-hsia hesitated. Hadn't she better get hold of Hsiu-lan immediately and have her pass this information on to Sheng-pao? Let him think it over carefully. At least he could modify his goals so that he wouldn't look too bad later on.

But no, that was impossible. Only the grass by the side of the path, the waters of the creek, the barley in the paddy fields, could know the words the chairman spoke to her today. "Whatever you do, you cannot repeat what Chairman Chen-shan said," she told herself. "They're the only Communists in our village. You must never stir up trouble between them."

When she was taking part in the land reform movement with Sheng-pao, how often she had thought, "Wouldn't I be lucky to have a husband like him." Although she never said it aloud, her expressive eyes conveyed plainly to Sheng-pao what was in her heart, upsetting him delightfully. And she knew that Sheng-pao cared for her — he blushed whenever they met. But today, when she was at last free to marry him, this important change had to come into their lives.

"Yes, Sheng-pao, you're a splendid young fellow," thought Kai-hsia. "But how can you be so bold and confident about mutual-aid teams and so terribly slow when it comes to me? If only you'd come after me with a little more courage, a little more drive, we might have settled everything before you went off to Kuo County to buy seed, and I'd never have landed in such a fix."

3

From an oil lamp on an altar table used for offering prayers to ancestors at the New Year, black smoke was rising. The lamp's feeble light fell on the faces of the peasants sitting or squatting on low benches before it.

Chairman Chen-shan stood beside the table, leaning against the whitewashed wall, addressing his assembled guests. On the wall were two red satin banners that had been awarded to Fifth Village. One was for having been the first village in Huangpao District to pay the grain tax in 1950. The other was for having taken the most active part, in 1951, in the movement to resist U.S. aggression and aid Korea. Fifth Village had won both these honours under the leadership of Chen-shan, chairman of the village deputies. On entering his thatched cottage and seeing these banners, no one could help but say to himself: "This Chen-shan is certainly a forward-going fellow."

Chen-shan had a remarkable memory. He explained in his own vigorous language the advantages of the plan to lend grain to the needy without forgetting a thing the head of the township government and the township Party secretary had said. Although the poor peasants and hired hands had all been given plots under the land reform, he said, they had little capital to fall back on. Unless the village government could persuade people with surplus grain to lend them some at low interest, they would be forced to borrow from the wealthy at usurious rates. Not many mutual-aid teams had been formed as yet, and the poor peasants and former hired hands still weren't firm on their feet. The government had to take a hand. Otherwise they might run up new debts and have to sell the land they had received. . . . Chen-shan made it very plain.

"This shows the importance of village administrative personnel," he concluded, in language a bit too highflown for his simple audience. "Fellow deputies. After we check up and discover who in each ward is short of grain and who has a surplus, we'll call a mass meeting and urge everyone to cooperate. Any village cadre with extra grain ought to be among the first to offer a loan. Our village has never been backward in any way. Let's not slacken now. We don't want our neighbours on the northern side of the stream to laugh at us."

"Cut it short, will you, Chen-shan?" called his mother. She was already in bed in the darkened east wing.

"Lamp oil costs money. You can't scoop it out of the Tang Stream," she was heard complaining to her daughter-in-law. "If I had known he was going to talk so long, I would have insisted that he hold his meeting at the school. That's government lamp oil over there. I wouldn't care if he talked all night."

Chen-shan reddened furiously. His mother was making him lose face. He could see that the others were holding back their laughter only for fear of embarrassing him.

Luckily, the old woman said no more. If she had, her important son might have flown at her.

"Anybody have any ideas?" Chen-shan asked, forcing a smile. He dipped his pipe into his tobacco pouch and began filling the bowl. He gazed around the room authoritatively.

There was a dead silence. The snores of Chen-hai — Chen-shan's younger brother — were plainly audible in the west wing; from the east wing came the sound of the ox munching sliced corn stalks. The night was very still. Someone was playing a fiddle, soft and pleasant to the ear, in one of the thatched cottages in the paddy fields beyond Chen-shan's compound wall.

No one spoke. Deputy from the village's First Ward, Shih-fu, the well-to-do middle peasant, his lowered head crowned by a round felt skull-cap, was squatting on his heels, drawing lines on the earthen floor with the metal bowl of his pipe. Kao Tseng-fu, a hard-up peasant in a torn padded jacket, sat on a

stool holding a sleeping four-year-old boy in his arms. Deputy from the village's Second Ward, he gazed with annoyance at Shih-fu's diagram. Third Ward's deputy, Iron Man Ching-hsi, whose filial devotion to his father Old Kuo was so admired by Liang the Third, also had surplus grain. Wearing a towel-cloth head covering, he sat leaning against the whitewashed wall, his eyes closed. He had put in a hard day's work and was worn out.

Sheng-pao, the Fourth Ward's deputy, had not returned from the county seat. His alternate, Sheng-lu, had not come either. Instead, the ward had sent seventeen-year-old Huan-hsi. The boy had been instructed to listen and report back what was said, but he was not to speak.

His pipe in his mouth, Chen-shan exhaled smoke through his mouth and nostrils. In a serious but not unpleasant manner, he called:

"Hey, Iron Man. Have you come here to take part in this meeting or to sleep?"

"I'm not asleep." Iron Man immediately straightened up on his low bench. He smiled awkwardly. "I heard everything you said."

"Well, in that case, what do you think?"

Iron Man gave an embarrassed laugh. He tilted his chin in the direction of well-to-do peasant Shih-fu, still sketching lines on the earthen floor, meaning that Chen-shan should ask him to speak first. Although Shih-fu didn't see this, some sixth sense told him that he was being indicated, and he alertly raised his head. With the habitually conceited air of the wealthy, he cast a supercilious glance at Iron Man.

"Speak your piece," he ordered. "You've got a mouth of your own, haven't you?"

The honest Iron Man laughed shyly and blinked, his face reddening.

"Go ahead and speak then," Chen-shan said to Shih-fu, sailing with the current. He hoped to get this well-to-do fellow to lend grain again to the needy peasants as he had in the past.

But Shih-fu replied pompously, "Let the others speak first. There's something I have to think over."

"What is it you're drawing there?" queried Chen-shan. Pipe between his teeth, he carried the oil lamp over and squatted down beside him. Chen-shan saw lines crossing in various directions. "What is this, anyhow?" he asked. "Tell us."

"It's nothing, really," said Shih-fu with a casual laugh. "Just my new stable. Should I have separate doors for the stalls and the fodder section, or just one? With one door, I'd have to put the trough running north and south. The horses would face east with their tails to the west. If I have two doors, the trough would have to run east and west, and the horses face north with their tails to the south. Both ways have their good points and their bad. With only one door, the stalls would be roomier and I'd save on lumber for the extra door. But it would be a nuisance getting the animals in and out, and the air wouldn't be so good. With two doors, the air would be all right, and I could get the horses in and out easily, but bringing them fodder would be more trouble. I can't make up my mind." Shih-fu pointed with his pipe at the diagram on the earthen floor.

Rage surged up in Chen-shan's chest; the purple veins in his temples throbbed. He thought: "All the time I've been talking, you've been fooling around with this. And you have the nerve to explain it to me in detail." The brawny chairman ground his teeth, and the oil lamp trembled in his shaking hand.

But he couldn't let his personal feelings interfere with the grain-lending plan. Holding his fury in check, he said coldly:

"You can figure that out after you get home. First talk about our public business."

Shih-fu rose to his feet. Haughtily he placed the hand with the pipe behind his back and clasped it in his other hand. Then he stepped forward two paces, chest extended, as if to show everyone the contrast between his padded jacket of fine black cloth and the tattered garment which Tseng-fu was wearing.

"Friends," he began. In honour of the roof raising on his new house, Shih-fu's moustache had been neatly trimmed. "As

you all have seen, this year I'm building a three-room house. In the past, when I had extra grain and you told me to lend it to our poor neighbours, I always did. But this year, honestly, my family is hard up."

At this, both Tseng-fu and Huan-hsi gave a hoot of laughter. Iron Man either was just playing up to Shih-fu, or perhaps he really thought their interests were the same. Anyhow, he sighed and said:

"Of course, tiles and lumber and wages and meals for building that new house all must eat up an awful lot of grain."

Chen-shan's big eyes glared at him. Tseng-fu, the sleeping child in his arms, turned to him and said:

"Don't think Shih-fu is as simple as you, Iron Man. He had his building materials prepared two years ago. This year he only had to pay out wages and meals to his workmen. Think it over. Would a man who can plan like Shih-fu ever let himself run short? Like fun."

Iron Man's laugh was a bit strained. "I didn't know. From what you say, maybe he does have some surplus —" The word "grain" was on the tip of his tongue, but Shih-fu's angry stare made him swallow it down again.

Tseng-fu and Huan-hsi were laughing at him. Iron Man liked to go with the breeze and please everyone, but he was always getting caught in the middle.

"Shih-fu," said Chen-shan sternly, keeping a pleasant expression with an effort, "do you mean to say you don't have two or three *tan*[1] of grain that you can lend to our village needy?"

"I can't spare a single measure. There are more than twenty people in my household; they all have to be fed. And I've got a boy in school in the county seat."

"So the phrase 'All peasants are one family' doesn't mean a thing?"

"Just listen to you. Even my own family won't have enough to eat till the summer harvest."

[1]*Tan,* a measure for grain, was equivalent to 120 kilogrammes in weight in this locality then. The standard *tan* used in China today equals 50 kilogrammes or 110.23 pounds.

"Then we ought to count you in among the needy," said Chen-shan with heavy sarcasm. He looked at Shih-fu compellingly. He wanted to force him to submit.

But Shih-fu showed no sign of either compliance or agitation. He was obviously striving to give the impression of a serious determined man who had nothing further to discuss.

Chen-shan's bristly face darkened. Shih-fu's unexpected hardness was causing everyone to look at Chen-shan as if to say: "You're the chairman of the village deputies. Why don't you do something?" Chen-shan knew that if Shih-fu wouldn't lend any grain, there was even less hope of expecting anything from Iron Man, Sheng-lu and other ordinary middle peasants. Of course at the township government meeting all the chairmen of the village deputies had said that it was going to be difficult to arrange grain loans this year. But surely at least a little could be done to help the neediest families. Especially since Fifth Village had one of the best administrations in Hsiapao Township.

"Shih-fu." There was a note of warning in Chen-shan's voice. "Don't decide now. It's true that you're building. But no one's going to believe that a big household like yours can't scrape together a bit of grain to lend. Think it over. Unity between the poor and middle peasants is important."

The well-to-do Shih-fu raised his felt skull-cap with the hand holding his pipe, and with the other pleasurably scratched his shaven pate. Shih-fu was past fifty. There were flecks of grey in his close-cropped hair. Everyone watched him, waiting for him to speak. But he only replaced the cap and began leisurely filling his pipe, evidently deep in thought. Then he drew a match from an inner pocket and lit up. Until the meeting disbanded, the arrogant middle peasant maintained his silence.

As the deputies were leaving the dark courtyard, Shih-fu suddenly became very friendly and affable.

"Huan-hsi, my boy," he called. "Your uncle Jen the Fourth borrowed seven measures of grain from me the spring before last; in the autumn he only returned two. Last year he borrow-

ed five more, but didn't give back a one. That's ten measures, exactly one *tan,* he owes me."

"You . . . what do you mean?" the youngster demanded angrily.

Shih-fu sighed heavily. "Ah, my boy, you don't know what trouble I'm having building that house."

"Oho!" Huan-hsi at last understood. He shouted: "We're all trying to arrange loans for families that are hard up, and you're pressing to collect old debts. Don't you know that my Fourth Uncle didn't have a furrow of ground to his name before land reform? Two years ago, he was given a bit of land, but he still has to stint and scrape. He never can catch his breath. You're having trouble, but you're building a house. I suppose my uncle's having it easy — out all day with his shovel and mattock working as a day labourer. If he had any grain don't you think he'd repay you?"

"Just listen to the boy. What are you getting so hot about? What am I — a landlord? Are you trying to tell me what to do?"

"Anybody who presses for debts in the spring shortage season is worse than a landlord."

"Chairman. Did you hear him?" Shih-fu appealed to Chen-shan. "Those loans were made through you personally. You said then that I'd get my grain back in the autumn. If he can't repay me now, it doesn't matter. I can wait. I only asked. But this boy can't even answer me politely. What kind of unity between poor and middle peasants do you call that?"

With a hurt sigh, he walked out of the compound gate, shaking his head.

"We have no grain. Even if you take the case up to Peking, we still have no grain. You can get on your horse and go." Huan-hsi stood on the clearing outside the gate and shouted after him childishly. A graduate of the township's primary school, he didn't give a rap how prosperous Shih-fu was.

Chen-shan's head felt paralysed, as if it had been clouted by a stick. He wanted to say something that was both biting and yet entirely in keeping with policy: First to criticize Shih-

fu for throwing up a smoke-screen and passively resisting the government's call; second to criticize Huan-hsi for his bad attitude. But he couldn't think of any suitable words. To put it simply, he was stupefied by Shih-fu's unexpected attack. For the moment Chen-shan couldn't understand what made him suddenly become so inept.

After they all had gone, the big fellow stood alone outside his compound gate. Stars shining through the bare branches of the trees seemed to be laughing at him: "What's happened to your prestige?"

Chen-shan hated himself for not having anticipated that Shih-fu would throw his weight around. Grinding his teeth, he grated, "A fine Communist I'd be if I couldn't handle the likes of you. We'll see about this."

"Chairman," a low voice called. Chen-shan turned quickly. Tseng-fu was standing behind him, holding his child. With the little boy in his arms and strings of dirty cotton hanging from his torn padded jacket, Tseng-fu presented a forlorn picture.

"You'd better go home and put Tsai-tsai to bed," Chen-shan advised.

"I've been waiting to talk to you alone."

"What about?"

"Yao is moving his grain to his father-in-law's place in Huangpao Town."

"Why?"

"Why? Would a rich peasant be up to anything good? He says his father-in-law is borrowing it. Actually, they're lending it out in town at high interest." Tseng-fu dropped his voice lower. "Chairman Chen-shan, I've also heard that Shih-fu is doing the same thing in Chai Village, using his brother-in-law's name. This campaign to lend grain to the needy, Chairman Chen-shan . . . it isn't going to be easy."

Accustomed to obedience from every peasant in Frog Flat, Chen-shan couldn't fall asleep, though the hour was late.

Past events, one after another, reviewed themselves in his mind.



Kao Tseng-fu

Shih-fu and his two brothers had been dressed in clothes as tattered as Tseng-fu's when they first arrived in Frog Flat. Unable to rent enough paddy to meet their needs, they had to hire themselves out as day labourers, like Jen the Fourth was doing today. Shih-fu had worked without a let-up. He never even had time to get his head shaved. Brushwood twigs matted his straggly locks, the flesh between thumb and forefinger on both of his hands was split and constantly bled. The women of the family had only unlined trousers to wear in winter. The children had no pants at all; their little legs were red as turnips from the cold.

One winter something unexpected happened. A big landlord sold forty-eight *mou* of paddy fields along the Kuan Creek to the commander of a Kuomintang cavalry division. The new owner, who was from a warlord family of bandit origin and lived in the county town, knew nothing about raising rice and had neither the interest nor the inclination to deal with the many tenant-peasants to whom the land was rented. He sent an emissary into Hsiapao Village to find a single reliable family which could rent it all. Shih-fu and his brothers were selected. As a result, a few years later, Shih-fu was the owner of a horse and cart and had become quite prosperous. The threshing ground outside the brothers' compound gate was piled mountain high with brushwood. Chen-shan could remember this as clearly as if it were yesterday.

Shih-fu often would dress himself neatly, take a pair of bamboo baskets covered by clean white towel cloths, and go into town to pay his respects to his "God of Wealth". Each of the four seasons, no matter how busy he might be, when the peaches were ripe Shih-fu presented peaches, when the persimmons were ripe he delivered persimmons. Duck eggs in spring, melons in summer, lotus in autumn, water chestnuts in winter – these were indispensable "gifts". Each time Shih-fu returned from town, he glowingly exaggerated how well he had been treated in his patron's mansion – How old Madame had instructed the armed guard to escort him to her chambers in the main building, how solicitously she had asked him all about the land.

. . . He gushed so fulsomely that his audience of tenant-peasants was disgusted. "What?" they taunted. "You mean you didn't get down on your knees and kowtow to the old lady?"

But Shih-fu didn't care whether people loathed him or envied him. As the tenant of forty-eight *mou* of paddy, he was able to build up his family fortunes. Every winter bankrupt smallholders, misery written on their faces, sold out to him, placing their land deeds into Shih-fu's horny hand. Finally, his own holdings grew so large that he decided to sublet the rented land. Many of the local tenant-peasants played up to him, and from among their number he selected a few to be his sub-tenants, including the present chairman of the village deputies. Chen-shan at that time, because he couldn't rent enough land, was peddling earthenware on the side.

"How much rent must we give for this paddy?" the new tenants had asked.

"The same as I pay the landlord," Shih-fu replied magnanimously.

"And how much is that?"

"I. . . . *Hai*! Creek bank land—there's a fixed rate for that."

"Four measures of grain per *mou*?"

"Uh . . . that's right. . . ." Pretending to be searching for something, Shih-fu turned his face away.

A few of the new tenants exchanged glances. Although they were suspicious, they didn't say anything. But Chen-shan had fixed his big eyes on Shih-fu's uneasy face.

"I thought you were paying three measures for this land, uncle," he said bluntly. "When did your rent go up?"

Shih-fu flushed crimson. His lie exposed, he blustered to cover his embarrassment.

"Rent or not, that's up to you. You're always the hardest one to talk to." Shih-fu's tone was that of an elder addressing one of the younger generation.

"Now, uncle. . . ." For the sake of keeping the rent down, Chen-shan threw face-saving to the wind. "Didn't poverty drive us all from our native village to Frog Flat together?

What did your family look like then? Beggars who've just had a mouthful shouldn't be hard on starvelings longing for a meal."

Red and shamefaced, Shih-fu dropped his felt skull-cap covered head. After a while he raised it again and, still blushing, said:

"This really puts me on a spot. Everyone knows how many presents I have to send the landlord each year. You'll all be tilling the land, but he deals only with me. If I gave him less gifts, he might think me ungrateful. If I asked the rest of you to share in the cost, how could we figure what each should give? I thought and thought, and finally decided the easiest way was to ask for a little more rent. So . . . so . . . I really don't know how to put it to you."

"That's all right. You did the right thing." Several of the tenants weakened, unwilling to speak further about this delicate subject.

"No. It's not right," said Chen-shan, his face hardening. "How many *tan* of grain are those presents worth that Uncle Shih-fu gives to the landlord? Have you thought about that? Only a fraction of what he'll be getting if we each add one measure per *mou*."

Without a trace of civility, he had turned to Shih-fu and said: "We'll do it this way, uncle. The next time you want to send gifts, just let me know. I'll get everyone to chip in."

Shih-fu had hated Chen-shan from that day onward. If he saw Chen-shan coming, he went out of his way to avoid him. If he couldn't help meeting him, Shih-fu twisted his lips into a faint grimace of a smile. He might mumble something, or say nothing. But in the paddy fields, Chen-shan had acquired prestige. He was respected as the leader of the exploited tenants.

After Liberation, Chen-shan was elected chairman of the village peasants' association and Shih-fu's attitude towards him suddenly changed. Now when they met, Shih-fu's face crinkled in a big smile right up to the corners of his eyes, and he hailed the chairman obsequiously:

"Chen-shan, how are you? Had your dinner yet?"

Then land reform rocked Hsiapao Village like a storm. When Chen-shan strode through the paddy fields, the land trembled beneath his feet. He was the most important man in Frog Flat. His ardent words and bold actions reflected the longing of the poor tenant-peasants for land and proper farming conditions. Chen-shan's large eyes grew bloodshot from lack of sleep. He hadn't seen Shih-fu for two months. People said the old man was ailing. He couldn't eat. He had become so thin, he was just skin and bones. He probably wouldn't last long. Chen-shan thought it a pity that a man who loved to work so should just fade away.

One snowy night Chen-shan returned home from a meeting of the township government. He climbed onto his *kang* and was taking off his clothes when he heard someone rapping on his compound gate.

"Who's there?"

"It's me," said the voice of Blabbermouth.

Chen-shan went out and opened the gate. But it wasn't Blabbermouth who confronted him. A dark figure, tall and thin, bent far forward at the waist, tottered into the compound. Blabbermouth was holding him by the arms from behind to keep him from falling.

"Blabbermouth, who is this fellow?"

"Me," said Shih-fu in the timid tone of a criminal.

"What is this, anyhow?" Chen-shan demanded, mystified.

The three of them walked into the house — into the same room where the peasants met tonight to discuss the low-interest grain loans. Shih-fu looked thirty per cent mortal and seventy per cent ghost. His eyes were sunk deep in their sockets. He was like a corpse who had just crawled out of his coffin. Chen-shan was shocked.

"Uncle has come to learn nephew's decision," the old man said humbly. His head, topped by a felt skull-cap, hung low.

Chen-shan didn't understand.

"Uncle's fate is in nephew's hands. If you tell me to live, nephew, I'll live —"

"What's he talking about?" Chen-shan asked Blabbermouth.

The garrulous young man coughed, cleared his throat, and plunged into his spiel.

"He's afraid of a public accusation meeting. The past two months he hasn't been able to eat or sleep. If he hears the slightest noise outside during the night, he sends one of his family out to see whether militiamen are watching his house. If anyone drops in during the day, he's sure that it's to summon him to an accusation meeting, and he breaks into a cold sweat. Tonight, he came to my place and begged me to bring him to see you."

"Hah!" Chen-shan was amused. "He thinks I'll use my position to get even with him for a private grudge?"

Shih-fu didn't utter a sound. He didn't even raise his head.

"You needn't worry," Chen-shan announced authoritatively. "The land-reform team has analysed your case and decided your class status. You're a well-to-do middle peasant. Formerly, you played up to the landlords. You must recognize your wrong-doing and reform. From now on you must go along sincerely with the poor peasants and hired hands."

Shih-fu looked up, joy shining in his sunken eyes. His soul had returned to his emaciated frame.

"Relatives or not, we peasants are all one family." Chen-shan couldn't refrain from giving his uncle a bit of a lecture. "You hated me when I wouldn't let you squeeze some extra rent out of us for yourself. You avoided me, you wouldn't even speak to me. Little did you know that your worthless nephew was actually saving you from becoming a sub-landlord."

Shih-fu hung his head lower than ever. He sighed deeply with the air of a man who despised himself thoroughly.

When Chen-shan came home again the next day, his mother said: "Shih-fu has sent us a basket of cakes, a jug of wine and a package of fine noodles. The wine is in the cupboard; I left it for you. The cakes and noodles I sent to your brother-in-law. He's very sick and can't eat rice."

"What? Ma." Chen-shan's big eyes were popping from his head. "We can't accept presents. We've got to return them. Have you sent them off already?"

"Yes."

"How could you be so short-sighted? People will say I was protecting him from getting a bad class status."

"How was I to know?" the old woman argued, using the weight of her position as a mother. "I thought if a man was trying to get on the good side of you and we refused his gifts, he'd feel hurt. You know Shih-fu loves to deliver gifts. He used to send presents to the landlord in the county town. Now he's delivered some to us. How could I tell this was any different? If you must refuse, buy another basket of cakes and send that back to him."

"Enough, enough, enough," Chen-shan said to himself. "If we've accepted then we've accepted. I haven't protected him. If people want to gossip, that's up to them. Besides, Shih-fu's such a calculating bird. If, in my position, I return his gifts, he's sure to get hysterical again."

Chen-shan thought it would be too wasteful to drink the wine. At the next market day he had his younger brother, Chen-hai, take it into Huangpao Town and sell it and buy the ox a new bridle and halter.

Shih-fu gradually regained his health. When the landlords' fields were distributed, he was strong enough to take part in driving the stakes with the names of the new owners in the plots of paddy. He was extremely zealous in this service to the poor peasants and hired hands. Biting his lower lip with the effort, he pounded the name stakes vigorously. Whenever he met anyone, he would say, like an incantation:

"All peasants under heaven are one family."

And when Chen-shan, the chairman of the peasants' association, appeared, Shih-fu grew more diligent still. It was as if everything would go to seed were it not for him. Sheng-pao, Tseng-fu and Kai-hsia were irritated by Shih-fu's hypocrisy, but Chen-shan didn't see anything wrong. The fellow was making progress, wasn't he?

After land reform was completed, Chen-shan suggested that a small primary school be built in Kuan Creek Hamlet. Let the children of the poor peasants and hired hands become educated. At a meeting of the whole village, he fixed rich peasant Yao with an imperious gaze and proposed that as a gesture of support to the cultural liberation of the former downtrodden, Yao contribute his four big white poplars to make the beams; the poor peasants and hired hands would contribute the labour. Filled with admiration for Chen-shan's bold plan, every man and woman in Frog Flat watched Yao's unhappy face. Yao hesitated, then raised his head, gave Chen-shan a hostile glare, swallowed hard, and consented.

Immediately, the sly Shih-fu rose amid the crowd. He offered his own two white poplars to demonstrate, he said, the "unity between the middle and poor peasants". This announcement was greeted by thunderous applause.

During the first general election, on Chen-shan's recommendation, Shih-fu was chosen deputy from east Kuan Creek Hamlet to the township people's council. In the spring of 1951, Shih-fu loaned the needy peasants of his village six *tan* of grain. The following spring, he loaned five more. At meetings of the township government, this brought glory to Chen-shan. The chairmen of other villages wondered what magic words the chairman of Frog Flat used to make his work go so well.

Now, lying in his bed, Chen-shan muttered: "So that's how it is, Shih-fu. Now that the government has proclaimed the land-reform period over, you've quit pretending. You've no respect for me at all. You've gone back to what you were before Liberation. We'll see about that. If I can't handle the likes of you, I'm no Communist."

But how *was* he going to cope with the old fox? Shih-fu's huge household was rich in land and had plenty of labour power, both male and female. With this at his back, the wealthy peasant felt powerful enough to challenge the government's call and the Party leadership in Frog Flat. Though Chen-shan racked his brains, he could think of no concrete measures he might take.

He began to realize that he was strong only when he was part of the stirring revolutionary tide. The main force in Frog

Flat had not been his personal prestige but the policies of the Party. If his prestige had been high, it was only because he had carried out those policies.

As this understanding dawned on him, the strapping village chairman broke into a cold sweat. He remembered all the criticisms his comrades had levelled against him during the Party rectification campaign. What a disturbing recollection.

4

Jen the Fourth put on his ragged padded jacket, tied it at the waist with a rope of rice straw, and shouldered his mattock and shovel.

"Send Kuei-hua with my food at noon. I'll be west of Kuo Village, making mud bricks," he said to his wife.

"Why not let the girl go along with you? She's fifteen. She can help."

"Who'll bring our meal?" Jen was interested in his wife's proposition.

"I will. What are you looking at? I may walk a little slowly because I had bound feet as a child, but I'll get your food to you, I guarantee."

"What I mean is — if you bring the food, who'll take care of the kids?"

"I can ask Huan-hsi's ma to keep an eye on them, can't I?"

Jen looked at the row of tots sleeping under the same torn coverlet, their small heads as downy as unfledged swallows. With horny crooked fingers he affectionately stroked the hair of the largest boy. He loved this child the best, for this one would be the first to relieve him of some of his heavy labours.

In the rear of the room, the little yellow ox calf began gnawing its trough. They didn't feed it at night. It ate only during the day, when Kuei-hua grazed it on the banks of the stream. Somebody had to watch that calf. It was always wandering into other people's paddy fields, quite uninvited, and gobbling up their barley sprouts. The owners' youngsters would curse the calf furiously. The calf didn't mind a bit, but Jen the Fourth was very embarrassed.

"No. Kuei-hua will have to tend the calf," he said decisively. He stepped over the threshold and departed.

Nearly fifty, Jen's back was stooped. The mattock and shovel he carried were both quite comical. The square-shaped shovel had been worn down till it was one third its original size and its edge was round. Only half of the mattock blade was left, and the handles of both implements were curved and thin where Jen's calloused hands had gripped them over the years. People often laughed at him, but Jen still used these tools when he hired out on odd jobs. What was there to laugh about? He couldn't afford to buy new ones. Thanks to land reform his family was no longer hungry from one season to the next, but it certainly hadn't made him rich.

If his burdens eased a bit and he could draw a few free breaths, he hoped very much to build an ox shed. Who wanted to have his whole family, large and small, all crowded together in the same thatched cottage with an ox calf? It lowed in the middle of the night, demanding to be fed. Or it spread its hind legs — the shameless little creature — and pissed all over the floor.

There was a big hole in the east wall of the hut, which Jen had stuffed with corn-stalks. But now that it was the season for repairing houses, Jen had to go out and make bricks for others. He had to earn some money for grain. Jen couldn't bear to hear the kids crying with hunger.

On the threshing ground before his compound gate he paused and took a deep breath of the sweet fresh air of early spring. Then he coughed loudly and spat, clearing the foulness from his lungs. The air, at least, was free. Why shouldn't he enjoy it?

Huan-hsi, his nephew, had already brought back a load of earth from the foot of the bluff north of the stream and was starting for a second. When he had no other work the diligent primary-school graduate built up a supply of earth for spreading in the ox enclosure.

"Where to, uncle?" asked Huan-hsi.

"Kuo Village. Going to make a fellow a thousand mud bricks."

"How much is he paying?"

Jen held up his hand, five fingers outspread, and waggled it twice. "Can buy quite a few measures of corn for that," he said with a grin of satisfaction. "Huan-hsi, you ought to get yourself a couple of odd jobs too. This is the slack time of the year. No use waiting for people to come and ask you. Just because you were a student, you mustn't be proud! Find work for a few days and earn some grain for the family. When Sheng-pao comes back and the mountain paths are hard again our mutual-aid team will be going into the mountains."

With a springy step Jen set out through the few peach trees at the northern end of his threshing ground. Huan-hsi followed, his empty baskets dangling from the ends of his shoulder pole. Happy to see his uncle in such high spirits, he decided not to relate what Shih-fu had said the previous night.

"What did they say last night, Huan-hsi?" Jen asked as they walked along. "Will there be low-interest grain loans this year?"

"Don't ask."

"Why not?"

"It's hopeless."

"I'm no blind fortune teller, but I knew this was coming. I never really believed we could get another loan." Jen smiled cheerfully, proud of his analytical powers. "We won't have to borrow grain from the big peasants any more," he said happily. "From now on, we can rely on our own mutual-aid team."

Huan-hsi was after all only a youngster and he couldn't repress the hot words which still seethed in his chest. His hatred of Shih-fu and his love of his uncle gripped him like demons and forced him to tell Jen the Fourth how the well-to-do peasant had pressed for his debt.

Jen grew tense. Halting, he turned sharply around and demanded hotly:

"What other dirty things did he say?"

"Go on," the boy urged him. "Go make your bricks. You don't have to worry about a wolf or tiger until he comes after you." Huan-hsi knew at once he shouldn't have mentioned it.

Jen's jaunty spirits collapsed. With lack-lustre eyes he stared off at the snow-covered peak of Mount Chungnan. Poor fellow. When a peasant owes a debt his slumbers are always uneasy.

After a while, Jen suddenly started back with a determined stride.

Huan-hsi stopped him. "Where are you going? You promised to make bricks for a man. Why don't you do it?"

"We won't be able to eat with any of the money — why should I be such a sap? Son of a bitch. I'm going to Shih-fu."

"What for? The loan went through the chairman's hands. Shih-fu can't dun you directly."

"I'm going to ask him to take a knife and kill me and be done with it!"

"Why get yourself all worked up? My guess is he's not really pressing you. He's only using this method to shut the village cadres' mouths. Just don't expect any more low-interest grain loans from the big peasants, and you'll be all right."

Jen the Fourth scowled. His thin face was dark as iron.

"Now do you believe what Secretary Wang's been telling us?" Huan-hsi took this opportunity to educate his uncle a bit more. "Mutual aid and co-operation are the only way. Unless we poor peasants organize and help each other farm, we'll never be able to stand on our own feet."

After the rain the sun beat down, raising a depressing suffocating steam. It was as if the centre of the earth were on fire; the plain gave off hot vapours. If you picked up some black earth and kneaded it with your hands, it stuck together like a piece of dough. Warm sun of early spring. From the blue firmament, it generously cast its rays on all brick-making peasants, stripped to the waist.

On the threshing ground outside Chen-shan's gate a big yellow ox stood lazily beside the pole to which it was tethered. From time to time it turned its head back, to left or to right, extended its long tongue and licked its gleaming golden hide.

A flock of devoted speckled hens followed a proud rooster to the base of a huge pile of stalks and diligently scratched for grains. Obviously this was the approach to a large peasant compound.

Chen-shan and his brother Chen-hai were making earthen bricks at the southern end of the clearing. The burly Chen-hai, dressed only in a sleeveless undershirt and trousers, worked quickly, shovelling mud into the moulds which his brother passed him. They intended to break up their *kangs* and grind the old smoke-blackened bricks into fertilizer for the rice shoots. The new bricks would be used to build new *kangs*.

Blabbermouth Sun squatted beside a stone roller, his head bent over a piece of paper on which he was writing. "Right," he said, halting the movement of his cheap fountain pen. "The First, Second, Third and Fourth Wards' mutual-aid teams are all entered."

"Did you list the able-bodied separately from those who can do only half a day's work?" asked Chairman Chen-shan, pouring a shovelful of mud into a mould.

"Yes."

"What about the horses, oxen and donkeys?"

"They're all listed separately. Do you think I make a mistake every time?"

"Second Ward has a lot of middle peasants," Chen-shan said. "But its only mutual-aid team is Tseng-fu's, with four poor peasants. The last time Secretary Wang came to our village, Tseng-fu said he wanted to get a couple of middle peasants to join. I wonder whether he's been able to do it. You'd better run down and ask him, Blabbermouth, before you finish the list."

"Right," Blabbermouth assented cheerily. Carrying his sheet of paper, he strode jauntily from the threshing ground, singing a comic song.

As he rounded the western end of the compound wall, he suddenly fell silent. Hastily, he fastened the buttons of his cotton-padded jacket and set his black cap on straight.

Kai-hsia had finished her breakfast and was on her way to school, bag in hand.

Grinning from ear to ear, Blabbermouth hailed her ingratiatingly. "Eaten yet?"

"Yes."

"Say, see if I've done this right, will you?" Blocking her path, Blabbermouth held the sheet of paper in front of Kai-hsia's fair face, and stared hungrily at her lovely eyes.

The girl forced a laugh. "You make entries all the time. Why should this be wrong?" She slipped around him and hurried on.

"You don't know, Kai-hsia," he shouted after her. "Once I made an awful mistake. The township Party secretary bawled me out."

"What beautiful long braids," he whispered to himself.

"She listens to Chairman Chen-shan," Blabbermouth mused happily, as he continued walking south. "Now if I can get him to say a few words for me, the chances will be eight to ten in my favour."

Narrowing his eyes, he turned and gazed ecstatically at Kai-hsia's retreating figure. Then he proceeded in the direction of Tseng-fu's thatched cottage.

Tseng-fu was one of the unluckiest men alive. Though Tang Stream Gorge in Mount Chungnan was very deep, when you got to Dragon's Lair you reached the end. But to Tseng-fu's hard luck there seemed to be no end at all. When he was six, his father had disabled himself permanently by slicing off four of his fingers while cutting grass for a landlord. Having lost his means of earning a livelihood, Tseng-fu's father was forced to become a beggar. He brought the boy up on his meagre pickings. As soon as Tseng-fu was old enough, he was given into a landlord's service as a hired hand. He stuck it out in this profession until the land reform in the winter of 1950, when he was given six *mou* of land. In the spring of 1951, the people's government loaned him money to buy a draught ox.

Just as he was beginning to get on his feet, his wife died in child-birth, and again he was down. Although he hadn't repaid a copper on the three-year loan, he had to sell the ox

to get enough money to bury his wife. The only way he could get his land tilled was to invest, with three other poor peasants, in a single ox — they said wryly that each of them owned one leg.

Looking after the four-year-old boy his wife had left, half the time Tseng-fu lived like a man, half the time like a woman. At the moment, he was doing a woman's work — grinding corn on the grist mill of his neighbour, the rich peasant Yao.

"Tsai-tsai, is your pa home?" Blabbermouth asked the little boy grandly. He was in high spirits.

"No," replied the child, who was playing in front of the door of the thatched cottage.

"Where is he?"

"Over there." Tsai-tsai pointed to the mill shed outside the compound with the tile-roofed houses.

Tseng-fu must have heard them talking. Wearing his tattered padded jacket, and holding the whisk broom used for sweeping the millstone, he silently emerged from the shed.

Bitterness and worry were permanently stamped on Tseng-fu's thin face. A taciturn man in his thirties, Tseng-fu always looked as if he had just been weeping in private. As a matter of fact, even when he buried his wife, he hadn't shed a tear. His hard life had given him the ability to grit his teeth silently and withstand any blows Fortune dealt him. He never protested, he never complained. With his farm tools, he did a man's work. With his kitchen utensils, he did a woman's. He often had to carry his motherless child in his arms at night while attending various village meetings as people's deputy. When he crossed the Tang Stream for a meeting of the township council, little Tsai-tsai went with him, riding on his back.

Now, some corn meal still adhering to the tip of his nose, he walked up to Blabbermouth.

"What did you want to see me about?" he asked quietly.

Blabbermouth gazed at Yao's handsome compound and sniffed scornfully. In an officious voice which he hoped made him sound like an official from the county, or at least the township, he demanded loudly:

"What's this? So you're on good terms with the rich peasant again?"

"Who?"

"Is Yao the only man in Kuan Creek Hamlet with a grist mill?"

"What are you driving at?"

"I'll tell you what I'm driving at. People will say one of our village deputies to the township council is getting pally with a rich peasant. No wonder ordinary peasants are taking up with rich peasants again. They can see that the atmosphere of the land-reform days is gone."

"Twaddle," laughed Tseng-fu. "Don't try putting on airs with me, Blabbermouth. If you've anything to say, speak up. I'm busy."

"Have you added any more families to your mutual-aid team?"

"Not one."

"Why? Didn't you say you were going to add two middle-peasant families?"

"They won't join."

"Then you're still four able-bodied men and one draught animal?"

"That's right."

After Blabbermouth left, Tseng-fu thought to himself as he pushed the roller around the grist mill: "Chairman Chen-shan's giving most of his time to his own farm. He's gone cold on his community work. My mutual-aid team is short of draught animals. If we could get a couple of middle peasants to join, they'd bring a few animals in. Chen-shan could persuade them; his prestige is high. But though he's promised to speak for us, he's never done it. He turns all the duties the township gives him over to Blabbermouth, while he and his brother Chen-hai run their family's affairs. Blabbermouth can't be acting so diligent for the sake of the people; he's bound to be up to some trick. He's still got those same greasy ways he had as a salesman in that big merchant's shop in Huangpao Town. If only there was someone who could remind Chairman Chen-

shan of his duty. What a pity. Chen-shan's a good, capable fellow."

When he had finished grinding the meal, Tseng-fu went into the flagstone-paved courtyard of rich peasant Yao to return the whisk broom.

"Just put it there," Yao ordered irritably, his full face dark beneath his round felt skull-cap.

As Tseng-fu placed the little broom on the window-sill, he took a quick look inside. On the floor were several bulging sacks of grain. Tseng-fu discovered what he had wanted to learn when he purposely borrowed the broom from this courtyard.

"So he's at it again," Tseng-fu thought to himself as he walked out of the compound gate. The thing was like a knot in his heart. Rich peasants were shipping grain to relatives in other villages and, in their names, were squeezing the poor. Needy families in Fifth Village, by devious methods, were borrowing grain outside at usurious rates of interest.

All day Tseng-fu squatted on his heels on the clearing before his thatched cottage weaving a rice-straw window screen, at the same time keeping a vigilant eye on the movements of his rich neighbour. He did this neither out of curiosity nor from any sense of responsibility; it was a strong class feeling that made him so concerned about this rich peasant's shipments of grain. The exploitation of any poor peasant hurt Tseng-fu as much as if he had been the victim himself. He hated his neighbour uncompromisingly, to the marrow of his bones. It seemed to him that exploitation by a rich peasant was no less despicable than exploitation by a landlord. During the two-year land-reform period, Yao had turned over to the village government ten *tan* of grain every spring for relief loans to needy families. But now that the new deeds had been issued, the rich peasants, no longer fearful of being classified as landlords, were once more showing their nastiness. Tseng-fu was determined to find out just where Yao was shipping those sacks of grain.

But even by the time the sun was disappearing behind the Chinling Mountains, and the spring chill was sweeping down

on the plain from Mount Chungnan, and Tseng-fu's fingers were too frozen for him to go on with his weaving outdoors, he still had seen no sign of activity from his neighbour.

That night, around eleven, the moon shone on the paper window pane of Tseng-fu's cottage. Holding his little son in his arms, he was lying on his *kang,* his eyelids heavy with drowsiness. But like all people with things on their mind, he was unable to sleep. When he heard his rich neighbour's gate creak, his head cleared immediately, and his eyes became alert.

Hastily, he dressed and went out. The dark figure of a man driving one donkey and leading another was passing the cedar-fringed ground of the Yao family cemetery.

"Hum! That fellow's up to no good," Tseng-fu thought. He quickly shut the door of the cottage in which little Tsai-tsai was sleeping and dashed off in the direction of Black Dragon Creek where Feng Yu-wan, leader of the people's militia, lived. The sound of Tseng-fu's racing footsteps roused all the dogs in Kuan Creek Hamlet. Their furious barking accompanied him right to Yu-wan's shack.

"Yu-wan. Yu-wan," he called, gasping for breath.

"Eh?" the militia leader's voice answered from inside.

"Quick."

"What is it?"

"Get up."

An instant later, fully dressed, a rifle in his hand, Yu-wan burst out of the door. His burning eyes fixed themselves on Tseng-fu questioningly. The militia captain was tough and tensed for battle as his hand fumbled for the buttons of the padded jacket.

Tseng-fu grasped him by the arm and in a low voice told him what he had discovered.

"The needy families in our village are waiting to borrow low-interest grain, and Yao slips out every night to deliver his grain elsewhere."

"I'll stop him. I'll ask the son of a bitch what he thinks he's doing."

Yu-wan flew off down a path gleaming white in the moonlight through a field of dark barley shoots in the direction Tseng-fu had indicated. Tseng-fu himself set out vigorously for Chen-shan's shack.

"We've got you at last," he said to Yao mentally with satisfaction. "If you're not lending grain at usurious interest, why should you be sneaking it out in the middle of the night?"

"I'll tell the chairman of the village deputies, then Yao will catch it," he thought. "Chen-shan will fill his big chest, look Yao in the eye, give a roar like a dive bomber, and Yao will shrink smaller than a mouse when it sees a cat."

How happy this prospect made Tseng-fu. Everyone respected Chen-shan; Tseng-fu wasn't the only one. Even in the days before Liberation when Yao was a little king in Frog Flat, Chen-shan wasn't afraid of him. People called the creek Yao used for irrigation Tyrant's Creek. Any time he wanted water, with a righteous air he would block the outlets of the poor tenant-peasants, although they might be just in the process of watering their paddy fields. No one dared protest.

But one summer big Chen-shan and the strapping Yao fought on the grassy bank of the creek. With Chen-shan holding Yao by the collar and Yao clutching Chen-shan by the shirt, the two men crossed the Tang Stream to Hsiapao Village and marched into the big temple where the Kuomintang township government office was then located. This boldness on the part of Chen-shan made him the hero of all the poor tenant-peasants; he had done what every one of them had longed to do but didn't dare.

Tseng-fu was confident that Chen-shan, today chairman of the village deputies, would certainly not permit any rich peasant to sabotage the loan of grain to needy families.

He strode energetically up to Chen-shan's gate and knocked. The chairman responded from somewhere inside. A few moments later, the gate creaked open and Chen-shan appeared, holding together a jacket that was draped over his shoulders, his big body still exuding the heat of his warm bedding. Lean-

ing forward slightly, he listened to Tseng-fu's hasty report. Chen-shan's hatred of Yao and his anxiety to make the grain-lending programme a success whipped him into a rage against the rich peasant. Tseng-fu could feel the hot breath from Chen-shan's hairy nostrils blowing against his face. He had been right to inform the chairman.

"Let me get my belt sash, then we'll go."

Chen-shan went back into the house. Tseng-fu waited happily at the gate. He was sure that by now Yu-wan's flying legs had caught up with Yao.

But when Chen-shan again emerged from the compound he had changed his tune. "*Aiya*, Tseng-fu, I've just thought it over. We can't do this."

Tseng-fu hesitated.

"Why not? Our government's calling for low-interest grain loans, and Yao's shipping it out to earn usury. We've a right to nab him and question him."

"Where is he getting usury? From whom? How many loans has he made? How much interest is he charging? Have you got all these facts?"

"Well, no, not yet."

"It's no good, Tseng-fu. Yao will never admit it."

"He won't, eh? Then we'll ask him – if you're not after high interest, why are you sneaking grain out in the middle of the night?"

"And he'll say the grain is his; it's nobody's business whether he moves it during the day or after dark. Tseng-fu, our government has announced that the land-reform period is over, the private property of landlords and rich peasants isn't frozen any more. That Yao is a vicious dog. We've got to be careful with him. There's no law against his shipping his grain," Chen-shan explained reasonably. He knew all the rules.

Tseng-fu was speechless. In his anger, he had acted hastily. Now he hesitated, a little worried. He had forgotten about the land-reform period being over. That was an important point.

"But the call for low-interest grain," he queried after a pause, "isn't that also something our people's government has decided?"

"Hey, Tseng-fu," Chen-shan chuckled, very friendly, "it's only a call. It's not a law. We can't force people to lend. I wish we could still operate like we did during the land reform, brother," Chen-shan added, in a burst of frankness. "It was much easier then. But those days are gone, I'm afraid."

And he gave Tseng-fu some well-meant advice. "Each of us has to start making his own plans, brother. Of course the Communist Party is good to the poor, but it can't run a land reform every year. The only way a man can pull out the roots of his poverty is by increasing his farm's output."

The chairman's words chilled Tseng-fu to the heart. His whole body became icy.

"How in the world can I increase output?" he thought. "It's all right for you to talk." He was beginning to get annoyed with this chairman whom he had respected so.

"But suppose Yu-wan has already stopped Yao? What should we do?" Tseng-fu shivered. He looked very dispirited.

"Do?" Chen-shan gave a self-assured laugh. "Just tell him to let the fellow go. If we don't bother him, he won't give us any trouble. It's cold out here. You'd better hurry. Where did you leave Tsai-tsai? You're much too eager."

Tseng-fu had no strength in his legs on the road home; his head felt wooden. It seemed to him that Chen-shan's show of concern for him was empty, valueless. His future appeared uncertain and difficult. He admitted he shouldn't have tried to stop Yao's grain; Chen-shan understood policy better than he. But Chen-shan's words, the way he spoke and laughed, showed that he was becoming prosperous, that he could no longer sense what was in a poor man's heart. Shortly after Liberation, especially during the early stage of the land reform when poor peasants and hired hands were being helped to recognize and join in the class struggle, Chen-shan had talked to them with warmth and sympathy. He was different now.

This change in the Communist who had enjoyed the highest prestige in the village was a blow to Tseng-fu. He feared that the way things were going it would be hard for him to hang on to the six *mou* he had received under the land reform. What could he do? He was short of food grain; he didn't know where he was going to get the money for this season's fertilizer. He still hadn't repaid the loan from the People's Bank for the purchase of the draught ox. Would he be able to borrow any more? If only he lived further downstream, he could join Sheng-pao's mutual-aid team. Maybe then he wouldn't have these problems. But his land was two *li* away from theirs.

Ho! Ahead, someone was walking towards him with large strides. Who was it?

"Yu-wan," he called tentatively.

"You're a fine one, Tseng-fu." Yu-wan's voice rang sharply across the plain in the silence of the night. "You're the limit. Yao was heading for Huangpao, and you sent me chasing off to the south."

"The crafty devil. He must have started south just to throw people off the track," thought Tseng-fu. "He probably circled round Kuan Creek Hamlet and then turned east. Yao's going to his father-in-law's place again." Aloud he said, "So he got away. All right, forget it."

Yu-wan pushed his black cap to the back of his head. The perspiration on his broad brow glistened in the moonlight. His rifle slung across his back, he stood before Tseng-fu.

"Is something bothering you?" he asked curiously.

"No, nothing." Tseng-fu was relieved that Yao had not been caught. He was careful not to say anything to this impetuous militia leader which would reveal his dissatisfaction with the chairman of the village deputies. "I'll tell you about it some other time," he said evasively. "Let's go back."

In the misty night Tseng-fu started home along a greyish path through the dark wheat fields. Walking alone, he thought of his beloved sleeping the long sleep twelve feet under, and of his pitiful little Tsai-tsai whom he had left like some inanimate object on the *kang* in their thatched cottage. He thought of the cold manner in which those two middle peasants had refused to join his mutual-aid team. He thought of the trouble he would have half month from now, when his food grain would be exhausted. Tseng-fu's nose itched. Tears blurred his eyes. But he bit his lip and wouldn't let them fall. Blinking a few times, he drew the tears into his throat. He could taste their saltiness as they slid into his stomach, in which reposed only a few bowls of thin corn-meal gruel.

"What are you bawling about?" he berated himself. "Your bones are hard. We'll meet things as they come. You got through the old society, didn't you? Even if Chen-shan isn't reliable, the Communist Party isn't just him alone. What are you scared of?"



5

Spring rain came hissing down. Through the rain-spattered window of the railway carriage Sheng-pao could see in the western part of the Chinling Range the pine-covered slopes of Taipo Mountain, and on the plain of the upper reaches of the Wei bamboo groves, farmland and towns — all shrouded in a misty white rain that extended over hundreds of *li*.

As the train pulled into Kuohsien, the county seat, dusk was falling on the railway station and the little street that ran off from it at right angles. Two minutes later the train, having discharged a few passengers at the small dripping station, unhesitatingly plunged again into the driving rain.

By then shopkeepers on both sides of the street had lit their lanterns and hung them outside their doors, illuminating the muddy thoroughfare. At the southern end of the street, the Wei River, swollen by the rain, roared through the darkness. It sounded as if the water was rising directly behind the houses. Actually, the noise was being magnified by the stillness of the night.

Because the river was so rapid at this time of the year, there was no evening ferry service. Passengers arriving on the late train had to spend the night in town. Attendants from the local hotels were explaining the situation to the newcomers and leading them to their various establishments. In a few moments the little street was empty. Only Sheng-pao remained. Pieces of gunny sacking over his head and shoulders and

wrapped around his bed roll, the young peasant stood alone in the inky darkness beneath an old mat awning extending from the wall of the station building.

Why didn't he go to a hotel? Surely they weren't all filled?

No, but Sheng-pao did have a small problem. He had come several hundred *li* to buy rice seed. The better hotels here charged forty or fifty cents a night. Even if you shared a large heated *kang* with several other guests, the cost was twenty cents. Sheng-pao hated to spend the money. When he left his home on the Tang Stream, this item had not been included in his budget. "Any place will do to spend the night," he had thought. He hadn't anticipated that the rain would strand him at the railway station. But he was only mildly disturbed.

"Damn the luck. Where can I go at this hour? . . ."

As he stood in the little street beside the station, his mind went back to the paddy fields of Frog Flat. Money didn't come easily to the poor peasants and former hired hands down there. They tried to make every cent do the work of two. How hard it had been, collecting money for the trip. People in other mutual-aid teams had assured him several times that when he went they would ask him to buy seed for them as well. But when he was ready to set out, none of them produced any cash. He even had to advance money for two families of his own team. If he hadn't, hey! — there wouldn't have been the breath of chance that every member of the team would switch to a better strain of seed as their plan provided.

"Sheng-lu." Angrily he recalled the behaviour of his cousin, the son of Liang the Eldest. "I've seen through you at last. Before our Party rectification discussions I didn't realize how important mutual-aid teams and co-operative farming are. I thought — you've got a lot of land and good draught animals; you be our team leader and I'll help out. What a farce. All you wanted was to get rich. How could you lead poor peasants and ex-hired hands to socialism? You gave me money for your own rice seed, but when I wanted to borrow three yuan you said that your father controls your family's money, though I know perfectly well that you do. All right. We'll

see if I can't buy seeds for the rest of the team members without your help."

Sheng-pao knew exactly how much money he had brought, how much seed he was going to buy, its cost of transport, and the price of his own round trip fare. How could he spend any extra, just for the sake of a comfortable bed?

People around the Tang Stream had only recently learned that in Kuohsien County there was a fast-growing strain of rice. It could be harvested early enough in autumn to allow the planting of a crop of wheat. The following summer, after the wheat was cut, there would be sufficient time to flood the fields and transplant rice shoots. In this way, with the help of fertilizer, you could get two crops a year. Sheng-pao's mutual-aid team had decided that this autumn they would not plant barley. You call barley grain? Rich peasant Yao and well-to-do middle peasants Shih-fu, Iron Man and Sheng-lu used it only to feed their stock. They never ate the stuff if they could avoid it. But the hard-pressed poor peasants and former hired hands, although they raised rice, could not afford it at their meals. They filled their stomachs with barley, millet and corn. To Sheng-pao this was unfair.

Before Sheng-pao had left, Jen the Fourth, his back bent with toil, had said to him gratefully, "If we make a success of this experiment of yours, we'll harvest twice as much from every *mou.* If that happens, my wife and I will pray all our lives for your happiness. What can I say? Our kids will be eating muffins of wheat. No more of that nasty barley."

"Even if our rice fields yield only two hundred catties of wheat per *mou,* Comrade Sheng-pao, with five thousand *mou* of paddy in Huangpao District – that's a million catties of wheat," Comrade Wang, district Party secretary, had said, his pencil rapping the table for emphasis. He had gazed deeply at Sheng-pao. The young team leader had seen the encouragement and trust in his eyes.

"Even if I have to sleep out under the eaves, I'm going to save that twenty cents," standing beneath the mat awning, Sheng-pao told himself. Used to the smell of rice root smoke

which came from the cook stoves at home, he didn't like one bit the odour of coal that filled the small street by the station.

Having made up his mind, Sheng-pao felt much better. Even the smell of burning coal didn't seem so sickening. As a child he had begged on the street and slept in a landlord's stable. As a youth he had been compelled to hide out for years in the wilds of the Chinling Mountains. But Sheng-pao never knew the meaning of the word difficulty. He felt that when doing things for the people, as the Party instructed him to, any hardship was really a pleasure. Only those who were always seeking rewards could never forget the hardships they went through for the people's sake. He remembered seeing waiting passengers sleeping in the railway station when he was getting on the train. That gave him a good idea. Sheng-pao grinned. He would spend a luxurious night in the railway station here. No need to sleep out under the eaves tonight.

A piece of gunny sack covering his head, another across his shoulders, a third protecting his bed roll, he walked into a small restaurant, a cheerful smile on his face. He ordered a five-cent bowl of noodles, then drank two bowls of the water in which the noodles had been cooked – there was no charge for this – to wash down one of the griddle cakes his mother had prepared for him. Unpinning the pocket flap of his padded jacket, he held the pin in his lips as he fished out a small red cloth packet. Inside this, wrapped in an old exercise sheet of his sister Hsiu-lan, were the worn bills he had collected from the hard-working members of his mutual-aid team. Sheng-pao selected a five-cent note, so tattered that it was in imminent danger of falling apart, and paid for the noodles.

Although both the restaurant waiter and cashier watched him with derisive smiles, he calmly consumed his dried-out griddle cakes with the aid of the free noodle-water. The fact that others laughed at his frugal peasant ways didn't upset him in the least. On the contrary, he kept reminding himself: When you're away from home, you've got to be cool and careful; otherwise you're liable to make mistakes or lose things. If you fail on this trip, you'll hurt the Party's prestige.

Sheng-pao was an honest fellow. During his two years as leader of the local militia, he had never strutted or blustered. He became a Communist in 1952, at the time of the rectification campaign to educate Party members in socialist ideology. From then on, Sheng-pao was more conscientious than ever. In both speech and action he appeared maturer than his twenty-seven years. Another man from Hsiapao, who joined the Party the same day as Sheng-pao, gave the impression that he was rather proud of himself the moment he stepped out of the conference room where the group had been formally accepted into membership. Sheng-pao was just the opposite. Feeling that whatever he did influenced not so much his own standing as that of the Party, at times he was, if anything, too reticent.

Leaving the restaurant, Sheng-pao walked across the muddy street to the railway ticket office. In 1953 the small stations on this line still didn't have any electric light. Once the train pulled out, the little station again became as dark as its surroundings. It was lonely and secluded, except at train time. Sheng-pao lit a match and looked around. He lit a second and chose a place to sleep. Then he lit a third match and spread his gunny sacking on the station's brick floor. He sat down and leaned against the baggage scale while filling and lighting his short pipe. Then he stretched out on the sacking and puffed blissfully.

"This is a fine place. Quiet, and plenty of room," he thought with a grin. "I'll have a good night's sleep here, and tomorrow, first thing in the morning, I'll cross the Wei, go to the rice region at the foot of Taipo Mountain, and buy our seed."

Perhaps because he was too excited, or maybe because he was in new surroundings, the young peasant so far from home was unable to sleep.

Outside the window of the ticket office he could hear the wind and the rain and the rushing Wei River.

Although far from home, he felt very close to the families living amid the paddy fields of Frog Flat. Sheng-pao thought of his mother. She must be worrying about him this rainy night, wondering where he was. He thought of Liang the Third, his

step-father. Was the old man angry because he was taking this trip? He thought of his sister, Hsiu-lan. She was sure to be explaining to old Liang, trying to make him see that Sheng-pao was doing the right thing. He thought of the reliable members of his mutual-aid team — Yu-wan, Huan-hsi, Jen the Fourth. And then he thought of Kai-hsia, and his mind refused to leave her — this girl who, unknown to him, was wondering whether to become his wife. With his eyes closed, he seemed to see her at his side, smiling, gazing at him fondly, stirring and disturbing him.

They had been together often during the land reform. Both had attended a conference of young activists in the county seat, and they frequently crossed the Tang Stream with administrative personnel and young activists from other villages to attend township government meetings in Hsiapao. Kai-hsia obviously liked being with Sheng-pao. She sat near him at meetings, and walked beside him on the road.

One dark night, when they were returning from a meeting of the township government, they found that the swollen stream had washed away the foot-bridge. Everyone had to wade across. Blabbermouth had wanted to help Kai-hsia, but she politely refused and put her hand in Sheng-pao's. Young Sheng-pao remembered the touch of that hand ever after, although the memory made him unhappy.

Eyeing them suspiciously, people began discussing them behind their backs. At that time Kai-hsia had not yet broken her engagement to the man in Chou Village and Sheng-pao's sickly little child-bride was still alive. After receiving a gentle hint from Secretary Lu of the township Party branch, Sheng-pao forced himself to stay away from Kai-hsia.

But now Kai-hsia was twenty-one years old and had ended her engagement and Sheng-pao's pitiful little child-bride had died. Could it be that he and Kai-hsia . . . ? No, it probably wasn't so simple. The girl was going to school. Maybe she wanted someone better than a muddy-legged peasant for a husband.

How could he learn what she really thought? His sister Hsiu-lan could find out, but he couldn't bring himself to ask her.

"Damn it all. This isn't the sort of thing you ask other people to do for you."

Still pondering how to fathom Kai-hsia's feelings, he fell asleep.

At daybreak the following morning, a wild-looking young fellow carrying a bed roll under his arm, a towel cloth tied round his head, appeared on the high yellow bank of the Wei River. Cupping his mouth with his free hand, Sheng-pao shouted for the ferry on the opposite shore, and continued yelling until the sleepy boatman came out of his thatched cottage. Then he strolled back and forth along the bank, gazing at the scenery, waiting for the ferry.

At what hour the rain had stopped during the night Sheng-pao didn't know. The sky remained overcast; dark clouds were still scudding over the whole eight hundred *li* of the Chinling plain. There probably would be more rain. Taipo Mountain, which he had seen last night from the train, now had its head swathed in clouds. Down on the Tang Stream, people said that the weather wouldn't clear until you could see the southern mountains. Maybe it was the same here with Taipo?

He noted with interest that in the upper reaches, the Wei was narrow and hundreds of feet lower than the plain on either side. Downriver, broad and only a few feet below its flat sandy banks, the Wei changed its course every year. Although the sharp slope and rapid flow upstream caused the river to cut a deep bed, the terrain of the lower reaches was flat. There the water was tranquil. The river broadened and formed wide sandbanks.

"It's high. The land is high here," mused Sheng-pao. "It's colder here than on the Tang Stream too." Standing still for a long time waiting for the boat, he was conscious of the difference in temperatures.

Why, of course. No wonder they needed a fast-ripening rice. Spring came later here, and autumn earlier, so the rice had a shorter growing period.

Was the soil also different from the soil back home? In the Tang Stream area, the earth was black and clayey. Here the

colour was lighter. Sheng-pao bent and picked up a handful of the rain-soaked yellow soil, squeezed it in his fist, then opened his hand. Sure enough, it was less sticky than his paddy field earth. He tossed it away and wiped his hand on a piece of gunny sack.

"*Aiya,* will the rice here grow all right by the Tang Stream?" he wondered. "Soil makes a big difference in crops. I've come all this distance. It will be terrible if the seed I take back doesn't grow well."

Sheng-pao began getting worried. He was burning to cross the river and get to the rice-producing area at the foot of Taipo Mountain and learn everything about the qualities of the local rice.

But it wasn't until thick white smoke was rising from kitchen stoves in villages all over the plain that Sheng-pao and a few other passengers were ferried across the Wei.

He stopped for breakfast in a tea-house in the eastern outskirts of the county town, spending a penny for a cup of boiled water, which he drank with a griddle cake he had brought from home. As he was eating, the spring rain began to patter down again.

Sheng-pao came out of the tea-house and looked around. It wasn't raining too hard. He took off the cloth shoes his mother had made and the white wool socks his sister Hsiu-lan had knitted and wrapped them in the gunny sacking. Then he rolled the legs of his cotton-padded trousers up to his knees so that the white cloth lining showed. He covered his head with one piece of gunny sack, draped another over his shoulders, wrapped his bedding in the third, and set off in the direction of the misty foot-hills of Taipo Mountain.

"That young fellow's a real hustler," he heard someone say as he was leaving the tea-house. "What's his hurry?"

Soon Sheng-pao had left the eastern outskirts of the county seat and was striding along through the spring rain. The dark speck he made upon the road was the only thing that seemed to be moving across the vast plain.



Liang Sheng-pao

His bare feet felt frozen when he first started walking, but before long they became accustomed to the cold sleety rain.

What's the rush, Sheng-pao? Why couldn't you have waited for the rain to stop? After all, how long does a spring shower last? You didn't want to spend money on a hotel room in town, but in the countryside you could have taken shelter from the rain in any village courtyard free of charge. Did you have to prove how rugged you are?

But that wasn't the reason at all. Sheng-pao knew there was a limit to the number of griddle cakes his mother had given him. If he finished them before he got home, what could he eat? Besides, having discovered the difference in the soil here, he was anxious to reach his destination quickly in order to learn whether the local rice seed was suitable for Frog Flat. If he were still at home, waiting ten days more or half a month wouldn't have bothered him. But once he started on his journey, he hated even a moment's delay. That's the sort of person he was.

As he walked along the muddy road through the rain, the rice seed had replaced Kai-hsia in his mind. It was as if his rosy vision of her the night before in the railway ticket office had never occurred. His heart was burning—not with the flames of love, but with the fire of an ideal.

Ah, you young peasants, when your hearts are enkindled you become enchanted. Nothing matters but your ideal. You forget to eat, you forget to sleep. Girls lose their attraction. No hardship daunts you. For the sake of your ideal, breaking off from your parents, even giving up life itself, doesn't seem too much of a sacrifice.

Twenty years before, when Sheng-pao was a child of six or seven, young peasants in north Shensi had formed Red guerrilla groups in the same idealistic spirit. Comrade Yang, assistant secretary of the county Party committee, himself a north Shensi man, had talked about this at a conference of mutual-aid team leaders during the first lunar month. In those days, he said, north Shensi, like the rest of China, was under the

iron rule of the Kuomintang army and government, the landlords and the gentry.

But the Red guerrilla groups which the young peasants organized under the leadership of the Communist Party began fighting to overthrow this rule. Secretary Yang said that in 1933 the older peasants thought the young fellows didn't have a chance, that they were just throwing away their lives. But by 1935 the guerrilla groups had become guerrilla detachments, and a Red government had been formed in the hills, and they gave the Kuomintang army a very hard time. The older men who formerly had scoffed now joined in the struggle.

After the blood of countless young peasants in army uniform stained the yellow hills of north Shensi in the course of many defeats and victories, finally, the year Sheng-pao was twenty-three, all of the Chinese mainland was liberated. Sheng-pao at last was able to come down from his hide-out in the mountains.

It was in the idealistic spirit of the Red guerrillas that he formed one of the first mutual-aid teams amid a sea of individualistic small-peasant producers. Secretary Yang put it well: The shooting phase of the revolution was over; the revolution to prove the superiority of co-operative farming, to produce more grain, was just beginning. Sheng-pao was determined to model himself after the older generation of Communists. He would devote all his ardour, intelligence, spirit and practical work to this cause of the Party. Only in this way, he felt, would life be interesting, stimulating.

During this same conference, Wang Tsung-chi, model peasant for the entire province and leader of a mutual-aid team in Tawang Village, had walked up to the microphone. Sheng-pao would never forget the stir his announcement caused.

"In our Tawang Village, except for my team whose members really helped each other, in 1950 the teams were mutual-aid in name only. But in the next two years, following my team's lead, fourteen teams reorganized themselves and went at it seriously. This month, two of our teams have combined to form an agricultural producers' co-op. . . ."

Sheng-pao was one of three thousand people listening. His heart beat fast beneath his padded jacket. He said to himself: "Wang Tsung-chi is a Communist and so am I. Why shouldn't I be able to do anything he can? His village is in the paddy lands along the Lu River. Mine is in the paddy lands by the Tang Stream. All peasants were equally ground down in the old days. If only someone gives our Tang Stream peasants a lead, they're sure to follow."

But then he had thought, "*Aiya*! How can I compare myself to him? He's over forty. I'm only in my twenties, and my standing in the village isn't very high. If Chen-shan were to take charge, and I gave him a hand, we might be able to do it. What a pity that Chen-shan doesn't think much of co-operative farming."

"Pah! What are you scared of?" he berated himself scornfully. "Wang says the main thing is to rely on the leadership of the township branch and district Party committee. With the Party on my side, what have I got to worry about?"

And so when Wang issued his challenge to sharply increase the output per *mou,* a young fellow in a black padded jacket, a towel cloth tied round his head, stood up in the audience, raised his arm and shouted:

"Liang Sheng-pao, Fifth Village, Hsiapao Township, Huang-pao District, wishes to speak."

After he had proclaimed his acceptance of the challenge and came down from the platform, the district Party secretary, smiling, was waiting for him in the aisle. The secretary shook his hand and, grasping his arm warmly, promised to come to Frog Flat after the conference to help him consolidate his mutual-aid team and draw up a production plan. Sheng-pao's heart glowed with joy.

Now here he was several hundred *li* from home, striding through the rain with vigour — a vigour stemming from that same enthusiasm which had possessed him the day he mounted the conference platform.

In spite of the icy spring rain, Sheng-pao was perspiring freely. He had to exert himself every minute to maintain his

balance on the slippery road. By noon he had covered thirty *li* and arrived at the paddy fields by the Yahung River. Although he'd had to wring out the gunny sacking three times, the rain had not soaked through. His padded clothing was only a bit damp.

How pleased he was with the world, this strong energetic young peasant.

6

As Kai-hsia sat listening to her teacher in the third-year classroom of Hsiapao's primary school in Kuan Creek Hamlet elderly men and women kept dropping in on her thatched cottage home in its persimmon-tree compound.

Each visitor solicitously sounded her mother out as to how Kai-hsia might feel about a new match now that she had broken off her engagement.

Several earnest intelligent young fellows of comfortably-off amiable families were recommended for the consideration of the "beauty" whose fame had spread all along the Tang: Upstream, a primary school teacher who had a bit of land which he rented out; downstream, the only son of a rich peasant; on the northern plain, a township government scribe—he also rented out his small plot of land; in town, a middle-school student whose father was a cloth merchant; and, in Kai-hsia's own village, Shih-fu's son Yung-mao, who was attending middle school in the county seat. All educated young men.

Yung-mao was from Fifth Village; no need to say much about him. The others, although from different localities, had also seen Kai-hsia before sending their matchmakers. Her loveliness, her charm had smitten them so, their appetites and sleep were affected. The matchmakers said if only Kai-hsia would consider their "proposal," they would be glad to discuss any reasonable conditions she might impose.

Ah, Kai-hsia, Kai-hsia. Perhaps you're the prettiest girl along the Tang, perhaps not. But if you hadn't taken part in social activities, if you hadn't gone to that conference in the county seat as a youth delegate, if you hadn't made a speech before an audience of ten thousand in Huangpao Town on May First in 1951, do you think a country girl like you, raised in a

thatched cottage, could ever have become so well known and attracted so much attention, no matter how pretty she was?

Kai-hsia's mother, her brass spectacles resting on the bridge of her nose, wound thread binding the earpieces to the frame, listened to the various matchmakers as she stitched a cloth sole for her daughter. The widow was quite pleased with Kai-hsia. To avoid any possible future embarrassment, she offered no hope to any of her callers. Still, the fact that so many big families of the rural middle class were seeking after the daughter of a poor widow gave her a lot of satisfaction. It gradually dissipated an apologetic feeling, which had been oppressing her for some time, towards the family in Chou Village.

She reported these proposals to the neighbour who lived diagonally opposite, her family "advisor" — the chairman of the village deputies.

Waving his hands in a negative gesture, the bristly-cheeked Chen-shan threw back his head and laughed.

"Impossible. Impossible. Not one of those suitors will do. Sons of rich peasants, small lessors, crooked merchants and prosperous middle peasants . . . backward blockheads, every one. All educated, but all working away from home. What girl Youth Leaguer would marry into the family of a man like that? Keeping her in-laws company all day, watched so closely that at night she couldn't even go out to a meeting. Do you think Kai-hsia would be such a fool? A bird that's escaped the cage isn't going to fly back in again. Ha, ha, ha!"

When he'd finished his laugh, Chen-shan earnestly advised the widow: "Don't talk to Kai-hsia about any of them. Tuck them away in the back of your head and forget 'em. Don't interfere with her studies. Studying is different from tilling the ground — you can't do it well if anything's troubling you."

"Right, right," she agreed. Then she smiled and said: "But —"

"But, what?"

"But Yung-mao is a good —"

"You mean that match appeals to you?" Chen-shan cried, amazed.

The woman laughed. She was obviously interested. "It's a good family. Shih-fu has a good household. He's got land and people to work it; he has a horse and a cart. His home is well lit; when he travels it's to the tinkle of horse bells. And we live right on the same street. I could see Kai-hsia every day."

Chen-shan listened impatiently.

"You like Shih-fu's prosperity, but does Kai-hsia care for Yung-mao?"

"Yung-mao's a student in the county middle school."

"How's his outlook?"

"His outlook, his outlook. . . ." The widow didn't know what to say, so she laughed. She had given this little thought.

Although he knew the answer, Chen-shan asked, "Has Yung-mao joined the Youth League?"

"What? Can't a Youth Leaguer marry anyone except another Youth Leaguer?"

"Of course not. You think Kai-hsia's still the same girl she was ten years ago, or even five? Not a political idea in her head? Yung-mao is a non-Youth Leaguer. When our primary and middle school students come home for their summer and winter vacations, our Fifth Village Youth League group organizes them to do propaganda. They write wall newspapers and go around making announcements through megaphones. But that Yung-mao is very listless. The Youth Leaguers have to call at his door and invite him, every time. Even so, he always brings a story book, and reads as he ambles along. Kai-hsia says he hasn't a bit of initiative — always dawdling; unless you push him he doesn't move. He irritates her to death. Do you expect her to marry him? Not a chance."

The widow smiled awkwardly. "I don't understand all these new-fashioned ideas."

"Then don't interfere. Just let her go on peacefully with her studies. Even if things come up at home, as long as you can get along without her, don't hold up her schooling. A widow and daughter as well off as you two are today — you ought to be grateful to Chairman Mao. Chairman Mao says we should

raise our cultural level. So you let her stick to school. Why did you treat her as a son and stay a widow all these years if not for her sake?"

Profoundly moved by the eloquent chairman, Kai-hsia's mother thought of woman's hardest lot—the life of a widow.

She remembered the day of the third anniversary of her husband's death. All the relatives had called. After a while they left. Only her eldest brother remained. Big Brother sat on the edge of the *kang,* puffing hard on his pipe. He had looked at his widowed sister with a troubled expression.

At last, he addressed her haltingly.

"Sister, you. . . ."

"If you've anything to say, Big Brother, speak out."

"What I mean is you . . . you . . . you—"

"What about me?"

"You have no son to support you when you're old—"

"Kai-hsia will be my son." Tears had welled from the widow's eyes as she sobbed, "She'll be a son to me. I'll remain a widow. I'd rather suffer . . . than have Kai-hsia . . . go with me . . . to someone else's home . . . and be abused. . . ."

"Forget it. Don't cry." Wiping his own tears with his fingers, Big Brother had said, "There's only one thing. You'll have to be careful of your reputation—"

"Don't worry, Big Brother. I won't do anything to make our family lose face."

And so it was that she passed a dozen or more years of strict widowhood, living only to be a mother to Kai-hsia. All the peasants in Frog Flat praised her virtue; there was never a word of rumour against her.

As the years passed, gradually, by both tangible and intangible means, she moulded her daughter in her own image. The result was that at seventeen Kai-hsia was a shy retiring girl. If anyone looked at her more than once she dropped her head and avoided his admiring gaze.

Kai-hsia's mother would never have dreamed that only a few months after liberation the years of training she had spent upon

her daughter would prove to have been in vain. After Kai-hsia attended several mass meetings, the persimmon-tree compound could no longer hold her. Stirred by the policy which the Communists had brought, the poor tenant-peasants of Frog Flat made strong demands for economic emancipation. Kai-hsia, stimulated in turn by their demands, longed for freedom as a woman. Chairman Chen-shan hinted to her that by participating in social activities she could hasten the solution of her own problem. The clever eighteen-year-old girl, at first solely because she didn't want to marry the man in Chou Village, plunged boldly into the turbulent stream of the mass movement. In the face of this thunderous torrent, how could her timid mother object? Besides, the widow was quite happy to see the rich landlords being overthrown. Let the girl join in, for the time being.

When the mother heard rumours that Kai-hsia and Sheng-pao were becoming exceptionally friendly, she realized that she had made a mistake. But it was too late for regrets.

She called at the thatched cottage of the neighbour who lived diagonally opposite.

"Chairman Chen-shan."

"Yes?"

"Come over to my place a while."

"What for?"

"I . . . I want to talk to you about something."

"Go ahead."

Kai-hsia's mother wiped her tears with the hem of her tunic.

"It isn't convenient here. Come over for a minute, can't you?"

Touched by her weeping, Chen-shan said: "All right. You go back. I'll be over just as soon as I move out this load of manure."

A pipe in his mouth, the bristly-cheeked chairman of the peasants' association soon entered the persimmon-tree compound. Kai-hsia's mother, tears streaking her face, led him into the house.

"Have a seat."

"Thanks. Let's hear what you've got to say."

The widow again raised the hem of her tunic to her streaming eyes.

"What is all this?" Chen-shan asked, puzzled.

"You've got to make my Kai-hsia quit the Youth League," the widow sobbed.

"But why?"

"She can't work outside."

"What's wrong?"

"I'm not going to let her go running around."

"Speak up, will you," the chairman demanded impatiently. "I don't like guessing games."

"That Sheng-pao is a devil," the widow stammered. "Flirting and fooling around."

"*Aiya!*" At last Chen-shan understood what she was driving at. He laughed heartily. "You're all wrong. There's no such thing. You shouldn't listen to idle chatter. Don't wrong a good man."

The widow's damp eyes widened in surprise.

"Who told you that yarn?" the chairman demanded hotly. "Tell me his name. Spreading rumours and making trouble—he won't get off lightly."

Chen-shan was so obviously in earnest that the widow's tears turned to smiles.

"Then you mean . . . they haven't—"

"No," the chairman said firmly. "You shouldn't listen to a lot of silly lies. Communists and Youth Leaguers only do things that are of benefit to the people. Rascals are always trying to smear our work. Since they can't convince anybody on that score, they make up sex stories. They only have to see a man and woman walking together, and that's it. Everything is blown up ten times its actual size. Listen to me, sister. Even if there's someone you suspect, don't you trust your own daughter? Is Kai-hsia that kind of a baggage? Don't let your imagination run wild. Crying and snivelling like this—people will laugh at you."

Although she believed Chen-shan, the widow still wasn't entirely convinced. When she thought of the difference between Sheng-pao's sickly child-bride and her own blooming Kai-hsia, she couldn't help feeling uneasy.

She pondered a while, then made a very simple request.

"If Sheng-pao could be expelled from the Youth League, I'd feel much better."

Chen-shan opened the thick-lipped mouth of his bristly face so wide and gave such a great wheeze of a laugh that for several seconds no sound emerged. The widow was too embarrassed to say more.

"My dear neighbour," Chen-shan gasped, when he had recovered a bit. "You've lost your wits. With Sheng-pao doing a fine job as the captain of our village militia, you want us to kick him out of the Youth League? You really kill me."

"Well, then you must look after Kai-hsia. Teach her."

"Don't worry about a thing. Not one of our village Youth Leaguers is going to leave the straight and narrow."

And for the next year or two after the start of the land reform, the widow did indeed relax. But when Sheng-pao's child-bride died and Kai-hsia broke off her engagement, she again requested the chairman to keep an eye on the relations between the two young people.

Ordinarily, on Saturday afternoon there were no activities in the Hsiapao primary school. Kai-hsia returned home at noon. On the edge of the *kang* she saw the basket they used when visiting relatives. Inside, covered with a spotless white towel cloth used only on special occasions were freshly steamed muffins of white flour, each with a decorative red dot on top. Next to the basket, Kai-hsia's visiting clothes were laid out—a blue cloth tunic and trousers set that was a great favourite among students in 1953.

"Tomorrow is the birthday of Second Sister's baby," said her mother. "I can't walk that distance, but you can go. Don't try to come back today; it's too far. Stay over at Sister's place tonight and come home tomorrow afternoon."

Kai-hsia had been thinking of consulting her Second Sister on the complications of her heart. After several days of pondering, she had decided that working in a factory would be more interesting than life in the countryside. But she couldn't help feeling that this would be unfair to Sheng-pao. Although nothing definite had ever been said between them about marriage, they knew they were in love. Wouldn't it be cruel if she simply left for a factory without a word? She wasn't the vulgar sort who could drop the man she loved the moment a chance to better herself came along. Kai-hsia wanted to talk things over with Second Sister and get her opinion. Who in the village could she confide in? Chen-shan? Hsiu-lan? Mama? She couldn't tell any of them.

After the noon hour, Kai-hsia left Frog Flat and crossed the Tang Stream. From Big Crossroads in Hsiapao Village she started down the highway that led to the county seat. As she walked she drew approving glances from the women, adoring stares from the boys, and envious looks from the girls she met along the road.

Mounting a steep rise, she entered upon the northern plain. The Wei River, the eight hundred *li* Chin Valley, villages, groves, the railway, all unrolled before her. On both sides of the highway, thorny locust trees, still without buds, marched off towards the north. In the fields, the winter wheat had turned a pale green. Larks and golden orioles, flitting among the branches of the locust trees by the roadside, flew in the same direction as Kai-hsia as if accompanying her, warbling a bird language no man could understand. Were they expressing astonishment that in this world there could be such a lovely girl?

Students returning home for the weekend from the county schools came walking towards Kai-hsia along the highway in twos and threes. Singing, chatting, laughing, hotly arguing, they fell silent as they drew near her, "saluting" her with their eyes. Some, after walking past, turned their heads for another look.

But Kai-hsia never gave them a glance. Carrying her basket, head high, she kept her big eyes calmly on the Wei valley stretching ahead. There was a cool reserve about her that discouraged any frivolity or disrespect. To Kai-hsia her beauty was something external. It had nothing to do with her intellect, her political consciousness or ability. She didn't consider it one of her merits. Attracting attention didn't make her self-satisfied in the least. On the contrary, the hungry stares annoyed her.

Yung-mao and several of his schoolmates came her way. Slim and fair, a cowlick deliberately left protruding beneath his black cap from hair fashionably parted on the side, Yung-mao was a giddy lad.

"Where are you going, Kai-hsia?" he halted and inquired solicitously.

"To Kuan Village," she said evenly.

"What for?"

"To visit a relative."

Kai-hsia's answers were reluctant, and she didn't stop as she replied. She had nothing but scorn for Yung-mao's ostentation. Kai-hsia pressed her lips together contemptuously. Yung-mao was as conceited as his prosperous father Shih-fu. His lack of interest in the propaganda work the students did at home during their vacations, his coldness to all the village campaigns, piled up more than enough unpleasant reactions in Kai-hsia's mind. She had plenty of reason to despise him.

"What's so wonderful about you?" she mentally demanded of Yung-mao. "Your family has a lot of land only because your father licked the boots of a big landlord. What right have you to put on airs? Don't you give me the eye. Who could feel drawn to that ugly face of yours?"

A cart pulled by a team of horses hove into view. Seated on one of the shafts, a long whip in his hand, was Kuo Shih-hua, Shih-fu's youngest brother. The cart was filled with men and women passengers.

"Well! Kai-hsia, where are you going?" Shih-hua hailed her when they were still a good distance apart.

After she replied, the cart owner, all smiles, said, "On your way back tomorrow, I'll give you a lift, free of charge."

"I can walk," the girl retorted. To herself she said, "Pig. Talking so disgustingly before a cart full of people. You think the whole world is like you — always trying to get something for nothing?"

"Hey!" The cart had already passed, and Shih-hua turned to shout at her back. "Kai-hsia. Wait at the turn-off to Kuan Village tomorrow. I'll come by in the early afternoon."

"No," Kai-hsia called over her shoulder. "Shameless wretch," she thought. "Who wants to ride on your cart? You don't even take your own nephew when he goes home from school for the weekend, just to leave room for another paying passenger. Him you won't pick up — only me." Kai-hsia knew that Shih-fu wanted her for a daughter-in-law. Well, he could keep on dreaming.

After descending the northern end of the plain, Kai-hsia walked through a little hamlet by the Lu River bridge, consisting of a restaurant, a tea-house, a small inn and a bicycle repair shop. Suddenly her heart leaped and all the blood rushed to her head. Kai-hsia bit her lip and prepared herself for a tense moment.

Sheng-pao was striding towards her from the bridge, his perspiring face gleaming in the sunlight. Because he was hot, he carried his towel-cloth headgear in his hand. When he saw Kai-hsia, Sheng-pao blushed a bright red.

"You're back," she hailed him mechanically, striving to look calm.

"Yes," he cried, happy and excited, a big moist hand pulling the open edges of his tunic together. He didn't want Kai-hsia to see him looking so sloppy.

His eyes were upon her, but she dropped her head, not daring to meet his gaze. Scuffing a pebble with her toes, she wondered: Whatever shall I say to him?

"I bought two hundred and fifty catties of rice seed," Sheng-pao announced triumphantly, to break the awkward silence.

"Where is it?"

"On Shih-hua's cart. Didn't you meet him just now?"

"Why didn't you ride on the cart with the seed?"

"Huh! That Shih-hua has a black heart. He counted the sack of seed as one passenger. If I went with it, I'd have to pay an extra fare. I told him: You just take the seed; I'll walk behind."

Moved, Kai-hsia raised her head and looked at Sheng-pao's flushed face. Remembering Chen-shan's coolness to what Sheng-pao was trying to do, she felt very badly. "You're so enthusiastic," she thought, "but can you succeed?" Suddenly she noticed that a number of people by the roadside were observing appreciatively the rather intimate manner in which she and Sheng-pao were conversing. Embarrassed, she left him and walked on. Had they been alone in the fields, she would have said much more.

When she turned her head at the top of the arched stone bridge, Sheng-pao was just looking back at her. Torn between two desires, Kai-hsia was more confused than ever. Once again she was inclined to remain in the countryside with him. She decided that they must have a talk after she had seen her sister.

7

One sunny morning in early spring, peasants — smoking pipes, carrying manure baskets, walking with hands behind their backs — were seen on the many small paths atop the banks of the paddy fields, all moving in the direction of the compound containing the thatched cottages of Liang the Third.

"What kind of seed has Sheng-pao bought?"

"It's called Hundred Day Ripener. They say it takes only a hundred days from the time you transplant the seedlings to the time you harvest."

"Very strange. We've always gone by the rule: 'A month for the shoots to turn green, a month for them to grow, a month to put out grain heads, a month to ripen yellow.' That Hundred Day Ripener is quicker by twenty days."

"But who knows how good it is?"

"Sheng-pao claims it has a short stalk with many grains."

"Won't it develop long stalks and small heads if you give it extra fertilizer?"

"They say plenty of fertilizer is good for it, as long as you irrigate at regular intervals."

"Aha! Can there really be such a strain of rice? How much seed did Sheng-pao bring back?"

"More than a *tan*. They say after he gives a share to each member of his mutual-aid team, he'll still have some left over."

"You think he might let us have a little? I'd like to try it."

The shortness of the growing time of the Hundred Day Ripener attracted wide interest in Frog Flat. Peasants jammed Liang's compound. The noise was deafening. It sounded like the Huangpao Town grain market. Many peasants had come from Hsiapao Village, across the stream. Some hoped to buy the seed, but a number were simply curious. To

satisfy his curiosity, a peasant will sometimes travel dozens of *li*.

They shoved their thick hands into the open sack, drew out pinches of seed, placed them on their palms and examined them carefully. They pressed the seed with their thumbs, blew lightly on the split husks and peered again. They put the exposed kernels in their mouths, chewed reflectively and spat them out. Then they exchanged views.

The general consensus was — not bad.

Sheng-pao, his head bound with a towel cloth, was measuring out the seed and pouring it into containers which members of his team had brought. Yu-wan, wearing a black cap and a peasant's padded jacket bound at the waist by an army belt, stood scale in hand, weighing the containers before and after they were filled to check the net weight of the seed. This young captain of the militia gave the peasants of Frog Flat the impression he was rather proud that so many people had come to witness the division of the seed among the members of his mutual-aid team.

"Hey, Sheng-pao, that's no way to figure!" shouted old Jen the Fourth.

"What's no way?" demanded his nephew Huan-hsi. The primary school graduate parted his hair on the side like a city boy.

"Say, Sheng-pao," the old man insisted on speaking to the team leader directly, "you didn't add your living expenses into the cost of the seed. That's not right. You ran around for us for days. That was very good of you. But you shouldn't have to lose anything by it."

"What a nuisance you are." Yu-wan, who was weighing the old man's container, cut him short. "How many times do we have to tell you? Sheng-pao didn't stop at any inns on his trip, and he ate only the griddle cakes he brought from home. What living expenses did he have?"

"Only the griddle cakes he brought from home. Don't they cost anything? What were they made of — mud?" Jen the Fourth stuck to his opinion.

His mud griddle cakes made everyone laugh, but Jen himself was quite serious. He knew that the price of the seed included only the original cost plus the shipping charges and Sheng-pao's round trip ticket, but not his living expenses. That wasn't fair. In the few days that Sheng-pao was away in Kuohsien County, Jen the Fourth had earned ten yuan making a thousand mud bricks. But a strapping young fellow like Sheng-pao not only didn't earn a penny in that time, he had to lay out living expenses to boot.

Even if Sheng-pao insisted on working gratis for the community, what about his old father? Jen had seen how bitterly Liang the Third and his wife had quarrelled over this, and it made him unhappy. Their mutual-aid team would be stronger if old Liang could be made to feel a bit more satisfied. But Jen wouldn't say this before so many people. He mentally berated Yu-wan for his crudeness, for his failure to consider other people's feelings. Irked that Yu-wan was ignoring him, he remarked:

"You only think of yourself. You don't care about anybody else."

"Enough. Forget it. Who wants to argue with you? Our team leader isn't a petty skinflint, he's a Communist."

"Oh? I suppose Communists don't have to eat? I suppose they don't need clothes?"

Sheng-pao, one hand grasping the sack of seed, the other holding the measure, gazed at the rope of rice straw that had to serve as a sash for Jen the Fourth. With a friendly smile he said, "You needn't worry about me. Just look after your own family."

Huan-hsi was annoyed with his uncle's garrulousness. "Empty talk," he chided him. "You haven't even paid for your share of the rice seed. Sheng-pao had to advance it for you. Now you're saying we ought to give more money. How are you going to do it?"

"If I can't pay up this minute, I can owe it to him, can't I?"

At this, a contemptuous smirk appeared on the face of the prosperous Shih-fu, who was standing in the crowd a short distance off, wearing a felt skullcap. Beneath his neatly trimmed moustache, his lips twisted scornfully as if to say: "You haven't repaid me yet for those low-interest grain loans I gave you these last two years, but you still say 'owe, owe.' That's all you know — 'owe.' "

The sharp-eyed Huan-hsi spotted his expression. Furious, the boy whirled on his uncle Jen and snapped: "Take your container and go. You've got a lot of work to do."

Very satisfied with the seed that was given him, Jen the Fourth, after many grateful words, finally turned to leave. It was only then that he saw the prosperous Shih-fu. Jen's face paled, then turned a brick red. Remember how angry he became the morning Huan-hsi told him how Shih-fu had asked to be repaid? Perhaps now you're thinking: *Aiya!* Maybe Jen is going to throw down his bamboo container and fling himself at Shih-fu in a battle to the death.

Well, you can relax. The old saw is right: "Beggars are meek, debtors can't argue." Jen the Fourth was still weighed down by poverty. Averting Shih-fu's cold stare, he silently left the compound and went home.

Sheng-pao and Yu-wan continued measuring out the grain for the members of their mutual-aid team. After these had gone, a share was set aside for Yu-wan.

Now the former beancurd pedlar, Liang the Eldest, stepped up to Yu-wan and held out a sack. Leaning on a fine cane made of wood from Mount Chungnan, the tall bald-headed old man stood waiting. With a righteous air he demanded:

"Weigh this sack for me."

"What for?" Yu-wan didn't understand.

Liang the Eldest ignored him. With the combined authority of the eldest of the clan and a well-to-do citizen, he ordered Sheng-pao:

"Give me five measures."

Sheng-pao looked at him in surprise. "But cousin Sheng-lu has already taken your family's share home."

"This is for my married daughter. She's visiting us for a few days and she's heard that your seed is good. She wants to try it."

All eyes were on Sheng-pao. Leaders of several other mutual-aid teams, after examining the seed, had asked for some, and Sheng-pao had agreed to share it among them if there was any left over.

Yu-wan was enraged. He had no patience with unreasonable people. When Sheng-pao, preparing to set out on his journey, had asked Sheng-lu for a loan of a few yuan, this arrogant old bird, on behalf of his son, had unceremoniously refused. Now he had the gall to demand seed for his visiting daughter. Clutching the scale, his lips a straight line, Yu-wan stood stock-still. He wouldn't weigh the old bald head's sack.

A disdainful smile on his flabby ashen face, Liang the Eldest gazed at the mutual-aid team leader as if to say:

"The Eldest has spoken. We'll see whether you give me my due respect, young fellow."

Sheng-pao hesitated awkwardly, the measure in his hand. He thought to himself: "Of course he's trying to beat me down with his seniority in our clan. What shall I do? His horse is the best in our mutual-aid team, and his family has the only cart. We can't do without him. But he's pushing me too hard. I won't give him the seed. Let's see what he's going to do about it."

Huan-hsi, who had already taken his seed home and returned, thought of a clever means of helping Sheng-pao out of his difficulty. He heaved a regretful sigh and said to his team leader:

"It's a pity you didn't take more money with you when you went. You could have bought more seed."

"What?" shouted Liang the Eldest, cocking his bald head to one side and narrowing his eyes in a baleful stare at this mischievous young man. "Didn't my family give money? He's got seed left over. If others can share, why can't his own relatives have some? We'll pay for what we get. We won't owe anyone a penny. Besides, when a Liang is talking to a Liang, what business has a Jen got butting in?"

He was so fierce that Huan-hsi didn't dare reply. The crowd in the compound fell silent, like an audience watching a tense scene in a play.

"Ah, let him have the seed," thought Sheng-pao, changing his mind. "It wouldn't be worth it to have him quit our team for a couple of measures of seed. I'll give in to him this time."

"Uncle," he said, forcing himself to smile, "it's like this. I have some extra seed, but the leaders of other teams in our village have already spoken up for it. Still, if you really want some for elder sister's family, I'll let you have a little."

"How much?"

"Two measures, uncle, how about that?"

"Bah, not enough to plant half a *mou*."

"Three," said Sheng-pao with an effort.

"Four," cried Liang the Eldest, coming down one from his original demand.

"Leave me a little face, uncle," said Sheng-pao, pointing at the other people in the courtyard. "We want everyone to think it fair."

The old bald head looked around at the darkening visages, and saw the angrily glowering eyes. He relented.

"All right. Three, then."

But Yu-wan, the weigher, had disappeared. Irritated beyond words, he had put down the scale, taken his own seed and stalked out. Sheng-pao had to do the weighing himself. At last he got rid of this man with the greying beard whose age inspired no one's respect.

The crowd closed in on Sheng-pao. Everyone was clamouring for seed.

"I want two measures."

"How about two for me?"

"All I want is one — just enough to raise seed grain for next year."

"Let me have, Sheng-pao, let me have. . . ." Some were too embarrassed to ask for a specific amount.

"*Aiya,* don't push, everyone, please." Sheng-pao was so crushed he could hardly breathe. "We don't have much and

everybody wants some. Let's talk over how we ought to divide it."

"Right. That's a good idea," shouted those who had been unable to elbow their way forward from the rear of the crowd.

Before Sheng-pao had left for Kuohsien County he had approached every village deputy and every mutual-aid team leader and said he would buy new seed for anyone who wanted to try it, but he had to have the money in advance. A number of peasants really couldn't raise the cash, but many were simply unwilling to risk laying out one yuan on seed they weren't sure of. Others were doubtful about Sheng-pao's ability to manage; they were afraid he would waste their money.

Now these people were all attracted by the early ripening quality of the new seed. This was a great encouragement to Sheng-pao. It proved that the peasants generally, whether progressive or backward, intelligent or stupid, sincere or crafty, all wanted to produce more grain and increase their income. That meant there was hope for co-operative farming. Why, it was probably on this basis that the Party was promoting mutual-aid teams and farming co-ops. As this realization dawned on the young Communist, he grew quite excited. His spirits soared.

The strong hand of a man who worked hard grasped Sheng-pao's shoulder from behind. Sheng-pao turned his head. It was the prosperous middle peasant Shih-fu. Sheng-pao had seen him enter the compound, dressed in a clean black padded jacket, scoop up a handful of Hundred Day Ripener, crack open the husk and carefully examine the big kernels. From time to time he had gazed up thoughtfully at the sky.

Now he placed his mouth, adorned by a neatly trimmed moustache, close to Sheng-pao's ear.

"How much seed have you got left?" he asked in an intimate whisper.

"Two or three *tou*," Sheng-pao replied loudly.

"How much per *tou* are you charging?"

"Two yuan sixty cents."

"Let me have a *tou*. I'll give you five. All right?"

Huan-hsi, standing beside Sheng-pao, heard Shih-fu's offer. He wrinkled up his nose as if he smelled something foul.

"This isn't the grain market, Your Honour," he warned. He hadn't forgotten how Shih-fu had pressed for Jen the Fourth's debt that night they were discussing low-interest grain loans.

"And I'm no grain pedlar," said Sheng-pao with a sarcastic smile.

The crowd began to stir ominously.

"Master Shih-fu. If you've anything to say, speak a little louder."

"Nothing, nothing at all," the well-to-do farmer asserted hastily. Sensing a bad turn in the wind, he left the compound quickly, with his eyes downcast. He could handle those poor peasants, dealing with them one by one. But they were too tough for him when they all stood together.

Sheng-pao proposed to the waiting peasants that the Frog Flat mutual-aid teams take not more than two measures of seed each. He would give Iron Man five measures, because Iron Man's team was the most important one in the upstream section, and further because Iron Man had loaned him three yuan when he was starting out on his trip. Everyone agreed to this.

"I really ought to give you more," Sheng-pao said to Iron Man affectionately, "but so many people want to try the seed."

"That's all right," said Iron Man sturdily. He was a different kind of well-to-do middle peasant than Shih-fu.

And so with Huan-hsi keeping accounts, Sheng-pao began distributing the remaining seed grain. The people crowding around him made such a racket that Sheng-pao became dizzy.

At last he was alone in the courtyard. He looked at the handful of seed that was left and clucked his tongue regretfully and swore.

"What's wrong?" his mother called from inside the house.

"I didn't leave enough for us."

His mother was stitching cloth shoes on the *kang* in the thatched cottage. Speaking to Sheng-pao through the open window, she reproved him gently.

"You're always so rash. I told you to take out our share right away, but you insisted on serving the others first. Now see what's happened. We don't have enough ourselves."

"Forget it. We'll just mix in some of our old seed," Sheng-pao said cheerfully. He was happy that he had been of use to the community.

Liang the Third, grinding corn meal in the mill shed, heard what had occurred. He had made up his mind to ignore "the great man," to hear nothing and ask nothing. But his brain seethed when Sheng-pao revealed that he had given away too much seed. Liang stamped out of the mill shed and stood in the courtyard, his hair, eyebrows and beard white with corn flour. Meal adhering to his sleeve and bony hand, he pointed at Sheng-pao and said gloomily:

"You're too capable for your own good. Why did you have to praise the new seed to everyone so? The result is that we're short of seed. Very clever. Very clever."

Sheng-pao burst into laughter. So those were his step-father's standards — selfishness meant you were clever, falseness proved you were capable, but if you worked for the public good you were stupid.

When the family gathered for their meal that evening, old Liang filled his bowl with rice and sat down on a small stool beside a short-legged square little table.

"Well, you're back now, Little Treasure," he began tentatively.

"Yes, pa, what's on your mind?"

"I was wondering when we ought to dig up our water chestnuts."

"Right away. We need money to repay what we borrowed for the seed. And our team's going into the mountains very soon."

"I don't care whether you go into the mountains or not. But you'll have to give me part of that water chestnut money."

"How much do you want?"

"Ten yuan."

Sheng-pao laughed. His mother could see that trouble was brewing. The old man's face had darkened and his voice was low and angry.

"What do you want so much money for?" she asked, taking Sheng-pao's side.

"Never mind. I need it."

"What are you going to do with it?"

"My shirt's so torn it looks like a horse's halter."

"The hens have started laying. I'm planning to use the egg money to make shirts for both of you," the old woman said soothingly.

"No." Liang was stubborn. "Don't sell the eggs."

"Why not?"

"I'm going to eat them."

"Can you eat all the eggs five hens lay every day?" The old woman couldn't help laughing.

"I'll eat 'em coddled in the morning, scrambled at noon, and boiled at night."

His daughter Hsiu-lan giggled, her head down. Not wanting to be so disrespectful as to choke over her food in the old man's presence, she turned her face aside.

How could he say such extravagant things with a straight face? It was really hilarious when you thought the frugal way he spent every minute of his day. While collecting manure on the road, he invariably also picked up bits of kindling wood and torn cloth, and turned them over to Little Treasure's ma. All the tid-bit vendors in Hsiapao Village knew how tight-fisted he was. They used to twit him:

"If everyone was like you, we'd soon starve to death."

"Have you the heart to waste so much money on food, pa?" chuckled Sheng-pao. He wasn't taking the old man seriously.

Liang gazed at him sternly. "Why not? Why should you be the only one in the family to waste money?"

"Even if you don't mind throwing money around, you don't need ten yuan for just one shirt." The old woman was annoyed by her husband's provocative attitude.

"Don't make me mad now," Liang countered. "Would I give ten yuan for a shirt? I'm not that stupid. No, I'm going to a restaurant in Huangpao for a good feed."

At that, his son and daughter exploded with mirth. His wife laughed too.

"What's so funny?" he demanded irritably. "Why shouldn't I eat? Are we going to build up the family fortunes? Not a chance. I might just as well help you ruin everything."

"So you're still thinking of the family fortunes," his wife chided him.

The old man turned on her angrily. "Who wants to be like Jen the Fourth — never knowing where your next meal is coming from?"

Sheng-pao could see that if they kept on like this, they would quarrel. He knew that his parents had clashed bitterly when he went on his seed-buying trip. He had to help the old man to understand. With a serious mien, he told Liang what he had learned in his studies during the Party rectification campaign. He spoke of China's future development, stressing particularly the difference between the two alternatives — prosperity for all, or the spontaneous development of each for himself.

"Do you know what spontaneous development is, pa?" Sheng-pao asked. "Let me give you an example and you'll see. Under the land reform we got ten *mou,* right? Let's say I didn't bother with the mutual-aid team. Let's say you and I worked as hard on these ten *mou* of ours as we did on the eighteen we rented from the landlord in the old days. Every year we'd use our surplus grain to buy more land. Isn't that what you'd want? But the Jen family doesn't have many people who can work, and they've got a lot of kids. They can't produce much without the help of the mutual-aid team. Every year they'd have to sell us a piece of their fields. That would be natural, wouldn't it? All right, in eight or ten years they'd be back to where they were before land reform. All their land would be in our name. We'd be rich. They'd have to work for us. Right?"

The old man couldn't conceal his joy at this prospect. His whiskered mouth split in a broad grin.

"Just look at him," his wife exclaimed. "What are you so happy about? The tune pleases you, does it? You like what Little Treasure's been telling you?"

As proof of his good heart and to show that he was opposed to exploitation, Liang explained: "We wouldn't take on hired hands or lend out grain at high interest. We'd only try to become prosperous so that our sons and grandsons would have some decent property to inherit and not be as wretched as we were."

"You wouldn't be able to control it," said Sheng-pao. "It's very strange. The more land and money a peasant gets, the less he feels like working. The carrying pole and hauling rope begin hurting his shoulder, they're uncomfortable. When you get to that stage, you want to let others do the labour for you. Pa, what kind of mind can a man have who doesn't like to work? He's nothing to do all day but think up schemes that are bad for other people and profitable to himself."

The whiskered mouth pursed thoughtfully as the old man pondered over this startling philosophy.

Sheng-pao's mother and sister, fascinated by his arguments, gazed at him in pleased surprise. When had their Sheng-pao — standing before them with his head bound in a towel cloth, his old rice bowl in his hand — when had he become so intelligent and eloquent? Why, he was almost as good as Chairman Chen-shan.

Sheng-pao sat down on one of the stools opposite Liang and continued to press his point.

"The only way we can get prosperous and have property to leave to our sons and grandsons is to make the whole community prosperous. That's what Chairman Mao says, and he's absolutely right. Some day, there won't be a single wretched peasant in all China. Today, we've started the mutual-aid teams. Later, we'll have farming co-ops. We'll plant with machines, have trucks to cart the manure and carry the crops."

Old Liang had been rather moved by Sheng-pao's remarks about exploitation. But now, hearing what he considered wild flights of imagination, he lost interest in the whole discussion. He laughed scoffingly, the wrinkles around his old eyes deepening.

"When will that be? When will we start planting with machines? Next year? The year after?"

Sheng-pao couldn't say exactly. There had been no discussion of the specific details of the Party's long-range plan in the study programme he had attended during the rectification campaign. An honest fellow, Sheng-pao wouldn't invent anything. Smiling he replied:

"The members of the Party Central Committee probably know how long it will take."

"Don't give me that. Even Secretary Wang of the Huang-pao District doesn't know," the old man shouted triumphantly. He was confused about many things. To him, the secretary of the district Party committee was more important than a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. Secretary Wang was someone concrete; a member of the Central Committee to Liang was just an abstraction. He only believed what he could see.

Though he made Sheng-pao and Hsiu-lan laugh, he didn't mind. The old man felt he had scored, and he quickly seized the initiative.

"Look at Chen-shan," he said. "He's in the Party too. Why isn't he always floating around like you? After land reform was finished, he stepped back and buried himself in his own affairs. But you're still chasing after your socialism. The way you divided the seed today, you'll lose your pants long before you ever get there. That's as true as I've eyes in my head."

Sheng-pao merely smiled. He didn't want to discuss the shortcomings of another Communist in the old man's presence. It would only make matters worse. As long as they didn't have a complete split, he was confident he could gradually talk

his step-father around. Besides, he was in a hurry. He finished his meal quickly and set out for his friend Yu-wan's place.

As he was going through the gate, his sister Hsiu-lan caught up with him in the moonlight. She told him how Kai-hsia had been inquiring about him.



8

Everyone has a love of beauty. To pursue beauty is one of mankind's instincts.

But Sheng-pao had two contradictory ideas. At times he thought: Kai-hsia is lovely, and she has a fine character. He definitely wanted to marry her. From the way she behaved towards him and judging by the light in her eye, he was pretty sure she would agree. The greatest obstacle was the stubbornness of Kai-hsia's mother, but even that wouldn't be too much of a problem if the young people really insisted.

At other times, he said to himself: "Forget it. Kai-hsia's already a third-year student. She's probably got more ambitious ideas. I'm just a plain peasant. I ought to ask someone to make a match for me with some village girl, marry her and be done with it."

That would be more practical, he thought. He had enough to do trying to build up a high-yield mutual-aid team. He didn't have the time for a lot of chit-chat about love. Sheng-pao had been tending to feel this way recently because that day by the Lu River Bridge Kai-hsia had struck him as being somewhat cooler than before. The way she scuffed pebbles with her toe — probably she was having some second thoughts. She looked undecided. . . . Nobody is more sensitive than a young man in love. He is conscious of the slightest flicker of a change in his beloved.

Yet Sheng-pao couldn't put Kai-hsia's beautiful fair face and large expressive eyes out of his mind. Her graceful small hand

had once rested on his hard palm, leaving a warm and tender impression. It kept cropping up in his memory and returning to his hand, making it tingle with a longing to reach out and snatch her heart.

Sheng-pao wished there was someone he could talk to about his conflict, someone who could help him make up his mind. But who? Who could help him with that kind of a decision? Once he was about to pour out his troubles to District Party Secretary Wang. The words were in his throat, his lips and tongue were ready to shape the sounds, but his purposeful intellect forced the words down and drove them back into his heart.

"Go to the organization with this?" Sheng-pao laughed at himself. He felt he should be striving for the general good of the community, not all tied up over some purely personal problem.

After dark the day he distributed the seed, Sheng-pao walked south along the same road Chairman Chen-shan and Kai-hsia had followed the evening they talked about her entering a factory. Sheng-pao was looking for Yu-wan. First, he wanted to criticize him for losing his temper with bald-headed Liang the Eldest and walking out on his weighing job. You had to be patient if you were going to see agricultural co-operation through. He also wanted to talk to Yu-wan about Kai-hsia, and get his advice.

He couldn't put it off any longer. Now that he had bought the seed, he had to get ready to take the team to Mount Chungnan. They'd be leaving shortly after the spring Clear and Bright Day. The marriage problem was distracting him from his duties. If he could make up his mind to propose to Kai-hsia, maybe he could get her consent before the team left for the hills. He ought to speak up and take his chances.

Smoke from the stoves that had cooked the evening meal still floated above the barley growing in the paddy fields. Strolling along the ox-cart road through the darkness, puffing his short pipe, Sheng-pao was pleased over his success with the seed.

How would Kai-hsia feel about what he had done, Sheng-pao wondered.

Ah, you tender grass by the roadside, you water flowing in the ditches, you barley in the paddy fields, why don't you tell this young lover what Chairman Chen-shan said in your presence to Kai-hsia?

At the fork in the road, Sheng-pao halted. A dark figure was approaching on a raised path through the paddy fields to the east. Although Sheng-pao couldn't see him clearly or recognize the sound of his footsteps, he knew because the path led only to Yu-wan's thatched cottage that he had found the person he was seeking.

"Where are you heading, Yu-wan?" Sheng-pao called in the moonlight.

"What about you?" the militia captain countered.

These questions were really unnecessary. Both knew they were looking for each other. Ever since the mutual-aid team movement for bumper rice harvests began, these two young fellows were together a great deal of the time, drawn by their enthusiasm for a common cause. The only reason Sheng-pao hadn't told Yu-wan about Kai-hsia yet was because Yu-wan was too brash. He was afraid the bluff young militia captain might suddenly decide to kid him in the presence of others and reveal his secret.

"Come on, Sheng-pao. Let's go to your place." Yu-wan, in a black cap, took the arm of Sheng-pao, whose head was covered by a white towel cloth. "A bachelor's room is a good place to talk. I wanted to jaw with you last night, but I thought you must be tired from your trip and needed a night's sleep. But tonight I've already told my missus I won't be home until morning."

Sheng-pao made no move. Smiling, he scanned his friend's round face in the moonlight.

"Didn't she ask where you're going?"

"She knows I'll be sleeping at your place. Don't worry, she trusts me. She knows I've never looked at another woman since we married."

"Doesn't Golden Sister mind your always staying over at my place?"

"I've told her it's about our mutual-aid team; she hasn't said a word. I'm not bragging. Before we married I told the go-between plainly: Neither my wife nor my mother-in-law is to hold me back in my work in any way. If they do, I'll drop them."

"Oho! So you take as firm a stand as all that?"

"Of course. A man without a standpoint is like a tree without roots. You'll see. Sooner or later I'm going to be just like you."

"What for? You mean they're going to drive you out and you'll become a bachelor again?"

"Not on your life. I'll be the same as you—and join the Party."

"With that hot temper you showed when we were giving out the seed today? When Secretary Wang was helping us draw up a production plan what did he tell you? If you want to convince the peasants to go for mutual aid and co-operation, you've got to be patient. Have you forgotten? The way you're behaving, how can we get everyone pulling together by the time the busy season starts in April?"

"That temper of mine is a devil. Once it starts up, I can't hold it," Yu-wan said regretfully. "I was sorry the minute I left your compound. I said to myself: 'What are you doing? No control at all. See how steady Sheng-pao is.' But I didn't have the face to go back. I was just on my way to your place to criticize myself. Come on, we can talk in your room."

Young Yu-wan was built like an ox, and he dragged Sheng-pao by the arm down the road. These two were probably the best farmers in Frog Flat. Except for Iron Man, there was no one who could compare with them for work in the rice fields. They had learned their skill during long years as hired hands. Yu-wan was better than Sheng-pao in that he had amazing strength. When transporting lumber from Mount Chungnan, he could carry eight logs to a normal man's four. What made him inferior to Sheng-pao was his explosive temper. Whenever



Feng Yu-wan

anyone said or did anything that displeased him, he acted as if his heart were being boiled in oil. But he always realized that he had been foolish after he cooled down.

Sheng-pao understood him best. He knew that Yu-wan's character had been formed in childhood and that it would be difficult for him to change all at once. Don't people say that the three unhappiest events in a man's life are to lose a father as a child, to lose a wife in middle age, and in old age to lose a son? Well, Yu-wan and Sheng-pao were both fatherless since early childhood. The difference was that while Sheng-pao had found the protection of a step-father when his mother remarried, Yu-wan had soon lost his mother as well. Before Yu-wan was old enough to work for a living, he roamed the streets of Hsia-pao as a homeless beggar child.

Yu-wan's family name originally was Kao; he was related to poor peasant Kao Tseng-fu. Two years before, a widow had given her only child, Golden Sister, to him in marriage on condition that he become a member of their family. Yu-wan had adopted their name — Feng.

As a child, before he learned to think clearly, Yu-wan only knew how to hate. He hated the people he saw eating when he was hungry, he hated those he saw warmly dressed when he was cold. And when he thought of his ma, he hated the children he saw walking with their mothers. When he grew up a bit and had more sense, this hatred which had already become part of his being was converted into a violent disposition. Yu-wan knew he was wrong to be like that but in a tense moment he could barely control himself. He often felt like clouting a man to pound some backward peasant trait right out of him.

In spite of Yu-wan's shortcomings, Sheng-pao was very fond of him. For Yu-wan's bitter childhood not only gave him certain failings, it also gave him determination and a sense of justice. A person who has been through the school of hard knocks as a child is worth ten who were spoiled and pampered. Yu-wan's absolute fairness, his abhorrence of evil, the way he immediately stepped forward when public interests were involved — these made Sheng-pao very happy to have him on his

mutual-aid team and increased his confidence that the team would bring in a bumper harvest.

The two friends sprawled comfortably on Sheng-pao's *kang*. They blew out the lamp and began to talk.

Several things had happened in Frog Flat while Sheng-pao was away buying seed, said Yu-wan. First, the two Li brothers had another fight over the boundary between their fields. Second, after Pai Chan-kuei, former corporal in the Kuomintang army, left for Sian, his sexy wife Blue Moth got busy. Every two or three days she was seen going into Huangpao Town. She probably was playing around with someone again. Finally, Yu-wan told Sheng-pao how poor peasant Tseng-fu had come to him with the report that rich peasant Yao was shipping out his grain. Yu-wan said that Chen-shan was not taking the lead in developing the mutual-aid teams, that the peasants of Kuan Creek Hamlet were downcast and divided among themselves, that Tseng-fu seemed very depressed.

The conduct of Chen-shan, a Communist, was an internal Party question. As usual, Sheng-pao was careful not to indicate how he felt about such matters to this impetuous young man. It wasn't until he told Yu-wan that he wanted to marry Kai-hsia that their conversation became lively.

"*Aiya,* wonderful! Why didn't you tell me before?" Yu-wan prodded Sheng-pao, lying opposite, in considerable dissatisfaction. But a moment later he laughed and asked, "When did you first get the idea?"

Sheng-pao said it was after Kai-hsia had broken off the engagement that had been arranged for her.

"I don't believe it," cried Yu-wan. "I'll bet during land reform that you two—"

"Not so loud," Sheng-pao cautioned him with a push. "My ma and Hsiu-lan are in that cottage opposite. Do you want them to hear you?"

Yu-wan lowered his voice.

"When you two were working together on land reform you must have. . . . Come on now, confess."

"We were together a lot," Sheng-pao admitted, "but I swear nothing happened. Because my child-bride was always so sickly, some people made a lot of wild guesses. But they were all wrong. You know I'm not the sort who messes around."

"Didn't you do any hugging?" Yu-wan demanded crudely.

"No."

"No kissing either?"

"No! Aren't you ashamed to talk like that?"

Unabashed, Yu-wan laughed. "How else do a boy and girl get to like each other?"

Gripped by a deep emotion, Sheng-pao for the first time revealed how he and Kai-hsia had fallen in love.

They had gone to attend a conference of young activists in the county seat. The meetings had lasted for several days. Every evening the young delegates strolled along the town streets. Kai-hsia had suggested to Sheng-pao that they take a walk in the outskirts. They went out the east gate and wandered along the Lu River which encircled the town wall. This was their only private talk. Kai-hsia poured out her dissatisfaction with the engagement which had been arranged without her consent, and asked him how she could break it off. He recommended that she get the chairman of the village deputies, whose prestige was high, to win over her mother.

Kai-hsia expressed her sympathy over his unfortunate marriage, attacking it as one of the innumerable crimes of the old society. He could see in her eyes her tenderness towards him. At that moment, he admitted to Yu-wan, if he had put his arms around her, she probably wouldn't have pushed him away. But he didn't do it. He was sure that later she loved and respected him all the more because of his decent attitude towards women. He could see it.

"You're a lucky devil," Yu-wan, who had been listening entranced, exclaimed. "But you'd better move fast. What you're telling me happened two years ago. Kai-hsia has plenty of suitors after her now."

"I'm not afraid of them."

"Don't be so sure! Even a clay idol can be moved by a slick talker, to say nothing of a young girl. They're all educated fellows."

"You mean Shih-fu's son Yung-mao?"

"He's one. And I hear there's also a school teacher and a district government man. Can a muddy-legged peasant win out over fellows like that? They've got good clothes, they're clean and scrubbed, they smell of soap."

"I'm not afraid of them," Sheng-pao repeated. "It doesn't matter how many are after her. What counts is Kai-hsia herself. If her heart's changed, and she's fallen for some fellow who's been to school, I won't compete. If her thinking's changed, that means she's not one of us any more. Right? We've decided to take the road to mutual aid and co-operation. If she doesn't want that too, I wouldn't have her even if she were one of the Heavenly Beauties."

"Right. You're absolutely right." Yu-wan admired Sheng-pao's practical attitude. "You ought to have a talk with her. Yes or no, once and for all."

"That's my idea exactly."

Of course Sheng-pao hoped she hadn't changed. What lovelorn young man won't spend a little time analysing the state of his beloved's affection? And quite rightly too, for it can greatly influence his life. Only if he saw some concrete proof that Kai-hsia had changed, would Sheng-pao be willing to eradicate her from his heart. He was very anxious to talk with her.

But it was hard to see her without attracting attention. The slack winter season was over; there were no more social activities in the countryside at which they could "accidentally" meet. After Kai-hsia started school, her Youth League affiliation was transferred to the school branch, so he couldn't even see her at meetings. At night, Sheng-pao dared to enter her persimmon-tree compound. Although the wall around it was only as high as a man and a person could look over it by standing on tiptoe, to the ethical Sheng-pao it was a barrier as high as the sky. What could he do?

Lying on the *kang* in the thatched cottage, the two friends conferred in low tones, trying to think of how the lovers could meet unobtrusively.

Frog Flat's paddy fields basked in the warmth of the morning sun. Liang the Third and Sheng-pao were digging water chestnuts about three hundred paces south of their compound. The stems, which had been exposed to wind, frost, rain and snow all winter, were beginning to rot. Father and son pulled them up and heaped them in a pile. Then with his spade Sheng-pao turned over clods of earth while the old man picked out the water chestnuts and put them into his bamboo basket. After Hsiu-lan, who was home from school, had finished breakfast and gone off, her mother came to the field with a sieve and helped.

A few score paces away, on a small terrace by a creek, a number of little grave mounds were covered with golden spring flowers. Beneath one of the newer mounds slept a thin young girl who in life had been Sheng-pao's pitiful child-bride. Only last year, she and the old couple had gathered water chestnuts here together. Now she had left this world. It was no longer necessary for Sheng-pao to call a doctor for her, or go into Huangpao Town to buy herbal medicines. A warm bright sun, a lovely spring day in the fields, today these meant nothing to her. The girl had been only eleven years old when she came to them as a child-bride, and old Liang had loved her like a daughter. The sight of her grave pained him. Wiping a few tears from his eyes with his fingers, he faced north as he picked the water chestnuts so that he wouldn't have to see it.

The sun grew hotter and Sheng-pao began to sweat. Removing his padded jacket, he placed it on an embankment, spat on his hands, and again plied his spade. He was dressed in only a white sleeveless undershirt and his strong arms were bare.

"You'll catch cold," his mother warned.

"He's all right." Liang gave Sheng-pao an expert's glance. "It's time for tillers to remove their padded tunics. He can't put any energy into his work with that thing on." Liang was just talking to take his mind off his dead daughter-in-law.

Theirs was the last patch of undug water chestnuts on the banks of the Tang Stream. From this bit of land they should get about six hundred catties, which at the prevailing market price would bring in over forty yuan. Both the land and the return from the sale of the water chestnuts had been included in the mutual-aid team's production plan. The land was to be combined with a water chestnut plot belonging to Sheng-lu and converted to a seed bed for rice. The money was to be used as an advance to tide the team members over while they were in the mountains cutting bamboo. Sheng-pao had delayed digging up the water chestnuts because he was afraid some family need might arise and he'd have to spend the money before it could be loaned to the others.

Old Liang felt none of the pleasure a peasant usually enjoys while harvesting. He wasn't a bit enthusiastic about this job. In fact, it left him cold. He didn't object to the team members raising rice seedlings on the plot. The fertilizer they would spread would enrich the soil. He'd be able to get more rice out of the autumn crop. But to give the water-chestnut money to the team as an advance — that was like a lump in his chest; it made him uncomfortable.

"Little Treasure." An old straw hat on his head, Liang began to argue in spite of himself. Squinting in the sun, he demanded, "That money we're lending everyone — when are they going to return it?"

"As soon as we come back from the mountains," Sheng-pao replied as he dug. "We'll have time enough to buy our fertilizer."

"I'm not so sure."

"There you go again. They'll make money, cutting bamboo. What are you afraid of?" the old woman put in.

"I'm not so sure," Liang repeated. "Take a middle-aged man like Jen the Fourth with a house full of kids. Their

mouths are bottomless pits; you can never fill 'em. He'll promise to pay back when he borrows, but when the time comes he won't have the money. In this society what can you do about it? My idea is that we get each team member to pay a little interest. No peasant likes to be saddled with interest payments. He'll go without food to get rid of his debt."

"Ha, ha, ha!" Holding the spade handle, one foot on the blade, Sheng-pao threw back his towel-covered head and laughed up at the blue sky.

"What's so funny? We wouldn't be doing it to earn interest," the old man explained, "but only to prod them into repaying quicker."

"That's a great brain you've got, pa. Didn't you say last night that you were against exploitation? Have you changed your mind? Our mutual-aid team's on the road to socialism, but you want us to use the old capitalist ways. Why don't you come right out and say it: 'Jen the Fourth, you're finished. I'm going to walk off with your cooking pot.' That's what it amounts to. That's really what it means. Aren't you ashamed, pa?"

"He's not a bit ashamed." Sheng-pao's ma gave her husband a dissatisfied glance. She searched for water chestnuts in the overturned clods of earth, her muddy hands moving rapidly, as if she were racing. She warmly approved of what Sheng-pao was trying to do, but not because she was prejudiced in favour of her son as the old man claimed. It was due rather to her faith in the district Party secretary who had lived with them a few days while helping to draw up the team's production plan — or, to put it more accurately, it was due to her faith, via Secretary Wang, in the Communist Party.

Old Liang gave an embarrassed laugh. For the time being, he was silenced. Inching his small stool forward, he plunged his muddy hands into the overturned clods. As he probed for water chestnuts, head down, there was a shamed expression on his seamed face. He had lost the first round of the argument. But a few minutes later, Liang's expression changed — to a wounded look of angry dissatisfaction. He started round two.

"Your cousin Sheng-lu had a *mou* of water chestnuts. Why didn't he lend the money he got for them to the mutual-aid team, instead of buying land?"

"Did he really do that?" Sheng-pao asked his mother.

"Yes, he did," she replied. "Those few days you were away in Kuohsien County, Sheng-lu bought a *mou* and more from Limpy Li on the other side of the stream."

"By which creek?"

"The one near Sheng-lu's gate – right by his threshing field," old Liang inserted enviously. "Very near his place, it is. Practically right under his feet."

"Hoho!" Sheng-pao understood. No wonder Sheng-lu wouldn't lend him even a single yuan when he was setting out on his seed buying expedition. Sheng-lu had already secretly decided to purchase more land.

Sheng-pao stopped digging and looked to the west. A hundred paces away, an axe tucked in his belt, Sheng-lu was climbing the big white poplar that soared into the sky from the western part of his courtyard. Liang the Eldest, his bald pate gleaming in the sun, stood below, catching branches as his son cut them off. The year before father and son had frequent disagreements. This year they seemed to be completely in harmony.

Sheng-pao begged his step-father not to compare him with his cousin. Sheng-lu had a lot of land, and plenty of draught animals and farm implements. He was already on a different level – not up to Shih-fu perhaps, but nearly the equal of Iron Man. He was burning with ambition to build up the family fortunes.

"How can you compare me to him?" Sheng-pao asked disdainfully. "I'm a Communist."

"So's Chen-shan," cried the old man, more sure of himself.

Sheng-pao had no answer to this. Spitting on his hands, he again took up his spade.

"You're the only sap." Thinking that Sheng-pao was retreating, Liang attacked with greater vigour. "He gains something from being a Communist. You just lose out."

As he dug, Sheng-pao pressed his lips together to keep from laughing aloud at his step-father. But then he remembered what Yu-wan had told him the night before – that the people of Kuan Creek Hamlet were without leadership because Chen-shan wasn't keen on mutual aid and co-operation – and his face darkened. It was true, the thinking of the chairman of the village deputies had taken a dangerous turn recently. Chen-shan was moving further and further away from what the Party demanded. During the land reform he had relied on the poor peasants. Today his emotional ties with them were growing steadily weaker. His thoughts and feelings were all concentrated on his thatched cottage compound, his yellow ox, his fields. Sheng-pao hated to think what the result would be if Chen-shan kept on in this manner. While he was sorry that Chen-shan's prestige should have faded so quickly, he was even more concerned about the effect Chen-shan's behaviour would have on the work in Fifth Village. The damage wouldn't be restricted to Chen-shan alone. It was the Party and the people who would suffer first of all.

Sheng-pao recalled what had happened when the land was being divided.

"Let's give the chairman a better piece of land." Blabbermouth Sun had been one of the liveliest and most active people at the meeting. "We've all seen how Chen-shan has run around, neglecting his own work, going without food and sleep – just for us," said Blabbermouth. "Who unearthed Miser Lu's deeds? The village cadres? No. It was our Chairman Chen-shan of Frog Flat. And who was it who stood up before thousands of people at the big struggle meeting and shook his finger under the nose of Tenant-skinner Yang and talked him down? Who but Chairman Chen-shan? He did these things not for himself but for all of us. Therefore I say, if he was so good to us, we must show our gratitude. Give him land a bit better than the ordinary peasants', but the same amount, and the land reform team won't have any objections. That's my idea. What do the rest of you say?"

The rest of them — the members of the peasants' association committee and the leaders of the various small groups — couldn't very well refuse in Chen-shan's presence. "Right," said some. Others echoed them, although actually they were opposed.

"No, no," said Chen-shan. "You can't do that. I wouldn't want anything that's not open and above board."

But when he was allotted a plot of land that was all first-rate paddy fields, he took it. He merely thanked everyone for their sympathy and kindness.

Some individual poor peasants and hired hands may be stingy, but when they act collectively, they're very generous.

At the time Sheng-pao, who was then both a member of the peasants' association committee and captain of the people's militia, for better or worse had said nothing. The sense of accuracy which he had acquired in the Youth League told him that Blabbermouth was exaggerating. Credit for the land reform in Frog Flat didn't belong to Chen-shan alone.

In the winter of 1952, during the Party rectification campaign, the village branch held a big meeting which non-Party activists were invited to attend. This was at the time of the check-up on the way the land reform had been carried out. Several Communists wanted to know why Chen-shan had been given the best grade of land. Someone reported how Blabbermouth had urged this, repeating his speech word for word. The audience was absolutely sickened. District Secretary Wang, who was also at the meeting, turned pale with rage.

"Comrade Chen-shan," he thundered. "If everyone had to be rewarded like you, what would the Chinese people have to do to show their gratitude to Chairman Mao? Blabbermouth wasn't decorating your face with gold, he was smearing it with dog dung. Not only didn't you mind, you even recommended him for membership in the Party. Don't you realize what dangers ideas like yours can lead to?"

Squatting on his heels in a corner, Chen-shan hung his head. His bristly cheeks were as red as pig's liver. He had introduced two candidates for Party membership — Blabbermouth and

Sheng-pao. Blabbermouth had been rejected. Everyone said his motives for joining weren't pure.

Sheng-pao's young mind had been severely shocked at that rectification meeting. Later when he was being sworn into the Party in the council room of the Hsiapao township government, he took his vow before the red flag and the picture of the Party leader which were hanging on the wall. After the ceremony, he stared at the picture of the man he now felt closer to than ever and said in a deeply stirred voice:

"Chairman Mao, I began life as a beggar child. My ma and I came to Frog Flat as refugees in the dead of winter when I didn't even have a pair of pants to cover my backside. When I grew up, I worked like mad to build up some family property. But all that's past. Today I'm joining your glorious Party — I want nothing else. When all poor peasants are able to get along, I'll be all right too. I'll never sully the Party's name."

He spoke solemnly, with tears in his eyes. All the new and old Hsiapao Township Communists present were moved.

From then on, Sheng-pao frequently recalled Chen-shan's taking the best land as a warning to himself. His step-father couldn't understand his feeling. The old man kept comparing him with this one or that. Sheng-pao could give him a clear explanation regarding Sheng-lu, but what could he say about Chen-shan? It was a question within the Party. He hadn't uttered a word of his dissatisfaction with Chen-shan even to his ma or Hsiu-lan.

The sun moved from above Huangpao Town to the sky over Frog Flat. Sheng-pao had already turned over the sod of half the water-chestnut field. The old couple would have enough to do for a while. Sheng-pao sat down on the pile of rotting stems and lit his pipe. After his smoke, his mouth was rather dry, so he washed a few water chestnuts in the nearby creek and ate them. Then he resumed his digging.

"Hey! There's a rugged young fellow for you," cried the heavy voice of Chen-shan. "Neatly done. You're sure to be named a model worker soon."

Sheng-pao paused and looked up. The bristly-cheeked chairman of the village deputies, a roll of papers in his hand, stood on the cart road on the other side of a field of pale green barley. He spoke in the superior tone of a pompous official or a member of the older generation. Sheng-pao had the feeling that Chen-shan was being sarcastic, and he was rather annoyed. But he joined his mother and step-father in inviting the chairman to have some water chestnuts.

"Come on over." The old man was the warmest of them all. He respected no one more in Frog Flat than this "clever fellow."

"The longer water chestnuts stay in the ground, the sweeter they are," he called. "Come on over."

But Chen-shan remained where he was.

"Been at a meeting in the township all morning. Still haven't had my meal." With the air of one so wrapped up in his work that he never gave a thought to himself, Chen-shan said, "Comrade Sheng-pao, could you come here a minute? I've something to tell you."

Sheng-pao dropped his spade and strode across the chestnut field. His step-father, after washing the mud from some water chestnuts in the creek, also went up to Chen-shan. A fawning smile on his face, the old man insisted on forcing them into the chairman's hands. Chen-shan couldn't refuse. He squatted down and put the chestnuts into his round felt skullcap. Holding the cap in one hand, he said to Sheng-pao:

"Public meeting tonight. At noon, tell all the family heads in your election ward."

"What's it for?"

"To push low-interest grain loans."

"Oh."

"What's the matter?" Chen-shan asked, surprised. "Didn't Huan-hsi tell you? Don't get so involved in production that you forget about politics." He gazed at Sheng-pao compellingly as if he, Chen-shan, were the only one with a communist ideology.

Sheng-pao remembered what Secretary Wang had said — that the most important political objective in the countryside today was mutual aid and co-operation in farming. But Sheng-pao couldn't bring himself to speak out. Blinking a bit, he scrutinized Chen-shan's serious face. "You only open your mouth to criticize others, is that it?" he thought, sorry for Chen-shan's sake.

"The loans aren't going to be easy to arrange this year," said the chairman. "After you beat the meeting gong, you'd better go from door to door to make sure people come."

"Right."

Chen-shan walked away a few steps then turned and called: "Sheng-pao."

"Eh?"

"I hear the rice seed you bought is very good."

"It's not bad. It's a high-producing strain."

"They say you've given it to a lot of people."

"I don't have any more."

"Didn't you leave a couple of measures for me?"

"I don't even leave enough for my own family. If you'd come yesterday I could have given you some."

"I was out cutting grass for the ox with Chen-hai. I was sure you wouldn't forget me. Never mind, forget it." Chen-shan sounded a trifle hurt.

But Sheng-pao could only be faithful to the Party and the people, not to an individual Chen-shan. Returning to his spade, he spat on his hands and rubbed them together, then gazed after Chen-shan's big frame as the chairman walked off towards Kuan Creek Hamlet.

"Chen-shan, Chen-shan," he murmured regretfully. "Am I supposed to give you some kind of return because you introduced me into the Party? It looks like the lesson you got during the Party rectification discussions didn't teach you much."

The more he thought about the political work in Fifth Village, the more worried he became. When an able leader starts going downhill, words can hardly describe the misery in the hearts of honest comrades under his leadership.

9

As the clash of the gong announcing the meeting faded away in the twilight, the paddy fields and Kuan Creek Hamlet resounded with shouted calls and responses, the banging of gates and the barking of dogs, and the voices of people walking towards the schoolhouse. The moon had not yet risen.

By the time the smoke from the fires of the evening meal had been blown from the rice fields, the village had quieted down. Those who wanted to attend the meeting were already at the primary school. Those who didn't want to go had already barred their compound gates and snuggled into their bedding. They wouldn't have answered even if you called them.

The night was very dark. The peaks and gorges of Mount Chungnan were no longer clear to the naked eye, nor could you distinguish the bluffs and cedars on the plain north of Hsiapao. Walking along the paths through the paddy fields, the peasants could see to the north and south only undulating lines touching a dark blue sky that was densely sprinkled with stars.

In the Frog Flat school, where only the first two grades were taught, Blabbermouth Sun, who had been the crier, put down his gong and lit a pressure lamp. After pumping it up, he hung the hissing lamp on a rafter. Its glare lit up every corner of the room. The blackboard on the whitewashed wall, the coloured slogans and maps, the picture of Chairman Mao, the rows of desks and benches lined up on the brick floor, could be seen as plainly as in daylight.

Not more than twenty or so peasants were seated around the classroom. Although they lived on the plain, they were as tattered as the poorest mountain dwellers. Some were smoking raw tobacco, others were leaning on the desks deep in gloomy thought. Their faces were sharply illuminated by the glaring

pressure lamp which had been bought, at Chen-shan's suggestion, with part of the funds confiscated from landlords during the land reform. These unhappy people were worrying about how to get through the coming idle months of spring.

Although in a crowd of a hundred peasants perhaps you wouldn't particularly notice these twenty, you needn't be surprised that they were gathered here. Just a few years before, landlords and the old Kuomintang government were squeezing the marrow from their bones. True, the people's government had given them land and loans to buy draught animals and encouraged them to organize teams and farm together, but there was no magic which could suddenly transform them from poor into rich. It wasn't necessary to explain this to them. They understood it quite well.

They knew there was no hope of low-interest grain loans this year. Neither the rich peasant Yao nor the leading prosperous middle peasant Shih-fu had come to the meeting. Other middle peasants with surplus grain were watching from the nearby peach orchard, or peeking over grass-grown mud walls.

These men, seeing that Yao and Shih-fu, the two most prosperous peasants, were not there, thought — what can small peasants like us do? In previous springs we were only able to lend out a few measures of grain each. If you don't chop down the big trees, you can't get much firewood. What's the use of just twigs and bits of grass? Let's go home and sleep.

And as they were getting into bed, they said to their wives: "If our deputy comes calling for me at the gate again, you answer. Say that I left for the meeting long ago."

It was the most depressing mass meeting held in Frog Flat since liberation.

The better-off peasants, after joining forces with the hard-up peasants to wipe out the landlord class — which had seriously threatened the middle peasants as well as cruelly exploiting the poor — again began breaking away. Farmers like Yao and Shih-fu, who were economically strong, exerted secret pressure to hasten this split. The twenty or so poor peasants seated in

the Frog Flat classroom couldn't have put it into words, but they instinctively knew that this was the situation.

Many of the slightly better-off peasants, seeing that there was no likelihood of the meeting being held, gradually slipped away. But the twenty or so really hard-up peasants stayed where they were. They would stick with the Communist Party and the people's government. They wanted nothing else.

Of course had a needy peasant been willing to write down a description of a section of the plot he received during land reform — its name, size, location, boundaries — on a loan contract, and secretly placed in the hands of a well-to-do peasant with a surplus, he could have got grain. But what a bleak merciless prospect that offered! Even to a hard-up peasant doing such a thing would seem a bit abnormal somehow, a bit irritating, a bit out of step with the way this society was going — like a man walking backwards, with his spine ahead of his chest.

So they remained in the classroom, determined to rely on the Communist Party and the people's government. For with all the strength and ardour of the hearts beating beneath their tattered garments they supported that Party and the government it led.

Chen-shan and Lu, the township Party secretary, were standing in the darkness in a field of alfalfa east of the school, talking heatedly. They were surely trying to find a solution. Were they fixing a new date for the meeting? Or were they talking of arranging loans to tide the peasants over? In any event they wouldn't leave without first telling everyone what measures would be taken.

What's more, Sheng-pao had grabbed the only middle peasant who had come — the timid, earnest Iron Man, and hauled him off to the peach orchard west of the school, where militia captain Yu-wan had joined them. The three squatted beneath a peach tree that was ready to burst into bloom. Sheng-pao and Yu-wan, one on each side, talked in low tones, working hard to persuade Iron Man to accept some proposal.

Why shouldn't the hard-up peasants wait when both of the Communists in Frog Flat were striving to help them? Their

main hope was reposed in Chen-shan, the Communist who was also chairman of the village deputies. He would think of something. His mind was very keen. Compared to him, Yao and Shih-fu were nothing at all.

This confidence in Chen-shan was a concrete manifestation of the needy peasants' faith in the Communist Party. Extremely practical, they were not accustomed to thinking in terms of abstract principles.

Those who stayed away from the meeting were mostly people with twenty or thirty *mou* of land, a good draught ox, and two or three able-bodied adults in the family. They thought they could get along on their own, be masters of their own fate. Some of them even said lightly that the Communist Party wasn't so bad — the Communists spoke reasonably, they didn't swear at people or beat them up, they imposed no harsh taxes, and they didn't extort. Bosh! What these well-off peasants really wanted was for history to remain for ever where it was — at the New Democratic stage. The word "struggle" frightened them, and they didn't care much for this queer-sounding term "socialism".

But the peasants gathered in the small schoolroom were men who formerly had been ground down to the lowest level. They longed for socialism to arrive quickly — tomorrow morning. If history halted at the point where they received land, if they made no further progress from now on, they would soon revert to the same unhappy state they had been in prior to Liberation in 1949.

Of course the Communist Party would never permit that. Chairman Mao had led the way brilliantly: Land reform had been carried out, the Party had gone through a rectification campaign and was ready to push on. The hard-up peasants were determined to go forward with the Party. They could no longer be satisfied with a few *mou* of land, with their bellies perpetually being only half full, with wearing one padded jacket for ten years, with having their shoulders swollen by heavy carrying poles. No. Only a fool would accept that.

Chairman Mao Tse-tung had the answer. They would follow him.

They sat very quietly in the glare of the pressure lamp, their stillness a manifestation of their inner calm — for they were neither impatient nor upset. Although the blood they had inherited from their parents and their childhood environments made them differ in temperament and character, poverty had given them common ideas, emotions and mannerisms. The twenty-odd needy peasants sat there like one man, a unity of ideas in their minds, a unity of feelings in their hearts.

Thin, grave, determined Tseng-fu, cotton hanging from the torn sleeves of his old padded jacket, holding his sleeping little boy in his arms, sat on a bench behind the first row of school desks, hating his crafty next-door neighbour. He had pounded on Yao's black-painted compound gate until his hand ached. Only then did Yao's wife call from somewhere deep inside to say that Yao had gone to Huangpao Town. Twaddle! Tseng-fu had seen him at dusk.

But what could Tseng-fu do? The black compound gate was shut tight without even a crack to peek through. Besides, he was dealing with a woman. He hated himself for being a people's deputy who couldn't serve the people properly. If he weren't so tied down with cooking and looking after his motherless child, rich peasant Yao wouldn't have escaped him even if he'd sprouted wings. Tseng-fu would have arrived in his courtyard before dark and taken him to the meeting as soon as Yao had finished his meal. Once he got him there, Tseng-fu would have spoken up.

"Why can't you help the needy peasants get through spring?" he would have demanded. "You have no surplus grain? What's happened to it? You've been sneaking it into Huangpao Town and lending it out at high interest, haven't you? Let's have the truth. The land reform has only just finished and you're right back at exploiting again."

But what could Tseng-fu say now? Yao and his wife were already asleep on their fancy *kang* with its lacquered railings.

A despondent expression shadowed Tseng-fu's unsymmetrical thin face. He didn't know how he and his boy were going to eat until summer, nor where he was going to get the money for fertilizer. His prospects for the coming two months were as black as the night outside.

Still, he wouldn't let his troubles get him down. Like the other former poor peasants and hired hands sitting with him in the classroom, he believed in the people's government which had given him land and a loan to buy a draught animal. Although he had to live half like a man and half like a woman in his struggle to maintain his household, strengthened by this belief he was very active in his duties as people's deputy in the township government.

To bow-backed Jen the Fourth, squatting in front of the first row of school desks, he said: "You live pretty far, and you've got a house full of kids. You ought to start back early. There isn't going to be any meeting tonight, can't you see?"

Jen shook his head. He had come to the meeting as a manifestation of his support of the Party and the government. Taking a bronze-tipped pipe stem out of his mouth he said, "I'm waiting for my team leader. I'll go back with him."

"Oh, you're waiting for Sheng-pao. With a mutual-aid team like his, you don't have to worry," Tseng-fu said enviously.

"We're not worrying," Jen admitted with a laugh. "Though we haven't much ability, we've a good neighbour to rely on. 'A relative far away isn't as helpful as a neighbour close by,' as the saying goes. It's the truth. If Sheng-pao's broad shoulders weren't carrying all the problems of our year-round mutual-aid team, I'd have more worries than any of you. It's the truth. But we're getting along. After the spring Clear and Bright Day, our team's going to Mount Chungnan."

Jen's words and his air of satisfaction aroused the interest of the other tattered peasants. They moved gradually from the rear desks to the front of the room, as if drawn by a ray of hope.

But as they crowded round Jen and asked about Sheng-pao's plan to take his mutual-aid team into the mountains, they could

only admire in vain. Their thatched homes were scattered in every corner of Kuan Creek Hamlet and all along the stream. Their neighbours were people who originally farmed rented land or had a bit of land of their own, to which more was added as a result of the land reform, so that they now owned as much land as middle peasants before Liberation. They resembled the old middle peasants in their ideas too. Today they were sweating mightily to improve their family property. With their poverty-stricken neighbours they formed only temporary mutual-aid teams at certain seasons of the year. They weren't like Sheng-pao — willing to go all out for the general good.

Now the twenty or so former hired hands and odd-jobs men moved closer together.

"Why don't we form a mutual-aid team ourselves?" a tall thin peasant suggested, his eyes shining. "Tseng-fu can be our leader."

"Where would we get the draught animals?" a short fat man demanded. "We can't plunge into this blindly."

"If we have no animals, why can't we pull the ploughs ourselves?" cried a third enthusiastically.

A stern ruddy-faced peasant didn't like all this wild talk. "Rot," he said sharply. "Two men might pull a plough on dry land, but not through a flooded paddy field."

"Then what are we going to do?" several peasants exclaimed in a disappointed chorus.

"It's going to be a tough spring," Tseng-fu said with a heavy sigh. "Let's wait and see what our Party people say."

"Anyhow Chairman Mao won't let a single person starve," a voice cried airily from the rear.

The needy peasants turned around to look. It wasn't one of them. The speaker was Pai, formerly a corporal in the Kuomintang transport company which had been stationed in Huangpao Town at the beginning of the War of Resistance Against Japan. When had he arrived?

As a matter of fact when they were discussing forming their own mutual-aid team, there were two other people in the room.

One was Blabbermouth Sun, sitting at a desk near the wall, hastily filling in a form which he wanted to ask Secretary Lu to take back to the township government office. Pai was at the desk nearest the door, smoking a cheap cigarette. There was a flippant expression on his long thin face.

Holding the sleeping Tsai-tsai in his arms, Tseng-fu turned to confront him.

"When did you get back, Pai?" he asked.

"Yesterday." Pai puffed on his cigarette.

"Where've you been?"

"Sian."

"On business?"

"Collecting junk, as always."

"That was during the day. Where'd you stay at night?"

"With a friend."

"Which friend?"

"A second-hand odds and ends pedlar. Would I know anybody richer?"

"This friend of yours — what street does he live on?"

"Minloyuan," said Pai. His carefree manner had vanished. Gripping his cigarette between his fingers, he demanded angrily: "What are you driving at? Why are you asking so many questions? You're not the security section chief, and you're not the captain of the militia."

"I'm a people's deputy," Tseng-fu retorted evenly. His thin face was very serious.

"Well, you don't represent our upstream section. You've got no say over me."

"I'm a people's deputy of all Hsiapao Township."

Two pairs of eyes exchanged stares. Tseng-fu's icy gaze was fixed on Pai's long ashen face. "Forget it," the other peasants urged him. "Why get angry over nothing?" But the loyal people's deputy wasn't so sure that this was "nothing". He didn't want this fellow with the unsavoury background to keep worming himself in among the needy peasants.

Prior to liberation when peasants bought substitutes to serve for sons about to be conscripted into the Kuomintang army,

Pai sold himself five times. And each time, as the new troops were setting forth from the "recruitment camp," he managed to escape and return home.

During land reform, after the People's Republic had been established, Pai pretended a fanatic zeal. But he never was given the chance to exercise his "brilliance" and "genius" in the new society. His scheme to get himself an administrative post in the village government did not succeed.

And this is the kind of "peasant" he was: In 1942, when the Kuomintang unit stationed in Huangpao set out for the Chungtiao mountains of Shansi, Blue Moth, who was then his mistress, concealed Corporal Pai until the army was gone. He became an odd-jobs man for various farmers around Frog Flat, though he did his work in a very sloppy manner. A plough share could drop off while he was tilling a field and he wouldn't know it. When he finally discovered the loss, he would have to go back and dig with his hands through the turned-up earth to search for the missing implement. Towards the end of the anti-Japanese war he quit farming altogether and specialized in "selling" himself.

After Liberation, he received a few *mou* of paddy during the land reform. The soy beans he planted on the embankments between the fields he harvested by pulling up vines and all. These he hung on a tree before his thatched cottage and when the wanton Blue Moth, whom he had by then married, wanted to prepare soy beans for dinner, she would knock off as much as she needed with a stick. The couple had no children, and on market days in Huangpao they would go into town and eat boiled mutton in a restaurant as equals, like a properly enlightened couple.

The previous winter, when a team came to check on the way land reform had been carried out, it was this same Pai who borrowed a megaphone from Blabbermouth Sun, the civil affairs committeeman, and went running through village streets bawling: "We're having a second land reform. No one's to leave for the mountains." Not only did he stop the needy peasants who, having finished their autumn harvest and planting, were about to go into the hills to burn charcoal and fell lumber – he tried to arouse the whole of Frog Flat to reclassify rich peasant Yao and well-to-do middle peasant Shih-fu as landlords, saying that compared to the "skinny" landlords these two had much more "fat". Only after Chairman Chen-shan hotly berated him did Pai behave himself a bit.

Although Pai and Blue Moth had received a total of four *mou* during the land reform, it seemed to Tseng-fu that they bore no resemblance to genuine peasants. The cheeks of Blue Moth's face were almost as chubby as those of her backside.

Good must triumph over evil. Under Tseng-fu's stare, Pai was forced to drop his wicked triangular eyes. With a contemptuous laugh, he turned his head away.

Tseng-fu pressed his advantage.

"As a township people's deputy, why can't I question you? You went to Sian to collect junk, you say. It's not planting time and we're not harvesting. What made you come back?"

"Is that any of your business?" Bridling again, Pai glared at him with beady eyes.

"Maybe not," said Tseng-fu. "I'm only asking. Can't I ask?"

Bow-backed old Jen the Fourth stood up, removed the pipe from his whiskery mouth and said with a smile: "That's easy. I'll bet I can guess the answer to that. Pai, you came back from Sian because you heard that our village was arranging low-interest grain loans. Right?"

Pai bared his tobacco-stained teeth in a grin.

"Well, this year we can't swing it," said Jen. "So you've made a trip home for nothing."

"Even if we could, we wouldn't give you any loan, Pai," Tseng-fu said coldly. "We gave you one last year and the year before, but we were wrong. What kind of needy peasant are you? The only reason you go to market is to stuff yourself in some restaurant."

The ex-corporal couldn't bear any more. He leaped to his feet with a quick move of his agile, well-trained body. Everyone thought he was going to lunge at Tseng-fu. Instead, he rushed

out of the classroom door. They could hear him cursing in the courtyard:

"Any dirty beggar can become a cadre these days. A fine people's deputy." The slam of the compound gate cut off the rest of Pai's remarks.

Tseng-fu's eyes blazed. Obviously the dog was swearing at him. Tseng-fu wanted to go after him, but little Tsai-tsai was still sleeping in his arms. The other peasants urged him not to soil his hands on the likes of Pai. Besides, they said, although Pai wasn't a village cadre, in several campaigns he had followed the lead of the activists. It was true that he was an insolent fellow, but he could be very enthusiastic at times and work hard.

Tseng-fu didn't agree. "That bird is no good," he exclaimed. "Two years ago when we gave him a low-interest grain loan, what did he say? 'In the land reform, we ate off the landlords. With the low-interest loans, we're eating off the rich and middle peasants.' So you see, when he borrows grain, he has no intention of returning it. We can't let him creep into our ranks, pretending to be a needy peasant. He's not a village cadre, you say? If that rascal ever became a village cadre, I'd quit."

Everyone was impressed by Tseng-fu's responsible attitude. No matter how difficult a time he might be having, spiritually he was always like a white poplar by the side of the Tang Stream — straight and clean, taller than the surrounding elms and willows and thorny locust trees, the tips of its highest branches gently touching the white clouds in the blue sky. By unspoken consent, he had become the spokesman of these hard-up peasants. Their eyes were all upon him, watching to see how he intended to tide over the idle spring months. Everyone wanted to go along with him.

The twenty-odd peasants were quite anxious by now. Secretary Lu and Chen-shan were still talking in the alfalfa field. What could they be saying? Did they want to postpone the meeting? Or were they giving up the idea of low-interest loans

altogether because they were evolving some new way to aid the needy peasants?

No. Except for low-interest grain loans and co-operative farming, the two Communists in the alfalfa field knew no other methods. There were strict rules against diverting funds from the purposes for which they had been allocated. Money intended for deep-cutting ploughs, well windlasses, fertilizer and insecticides, could not be used for low-interest grain loans. Any such unprincipled juggling would be harmful to agricultural production and was quite illegal. The limited funds the government had on hand for relief were distributed only to those old folks who had lost the sole supporters of their families through some unexpected disaster. There were just a few of these relief cases, at most two or three in a village. Since the needy peasants were ten times that number, there obviously wasn't enough relief money to care for the old folks and the needy peasants too. The solution could be found only by increasing production.

Chen-shan's big frame loomed darkly in the alfalfa field. His bristly face tense, he ground his teeth in hatred of Yao and Shih-fu — one at the east end of Kuan Creek Hamlet and one at the west, two strongholds of the go-it-alone forces of spontaneous development. These strongholds menaced not only his prestige, he thought, but all the work that had to be carried out in Hsiapao Township from now on.

"If we could get them to come to a meeting, I could do something," he complained to Secretary Lu. "I've got a mass backing, they have none. I'm not boasting — if I could speak to them, I'd make them cough up some grain. But they're stubborn, those two, and they're slippery as eels. They refuse to come." Chen-shan angrily smacked together his toil-thickened hands.

Standing two feet away, holding a flashlight, a padded jacket over his shoulders, Secretary Lu didn't appear to be much interested in this line of talk. There was nothing spectacular about Lu. He was a solid, four-square Communist who didn't approve of exaggerating your own importance when you did a

piece of work successfully. As to those who boasted even when they failed in their jobs, it seemed to Lu they must be trying to cover up some fault. Lu met many people as secretary of the Party branch in Hsiapao Township. He knew the psychology of persons of that sort.

About the same age as Chen-shan, Lu was shorter, more ordinary-looking; his features were quite unimpressive. Although he wore the high buttoned tunic favoured by Chinese cadres, his clothes didn't change his essentially peasant appearance — big hands and feet, powerful arms and legs, back and shoulders somewhat bent with toil. China has millions, tens of millions, of men like Lu. Whether they wear the cadre's simple tunic or the fine cloth uniform of a general or even a marshal, they're inevitably warm, kindly people, unpretentious and, easily approachable, men who were and are in direct touch with innumerable plain folk.

Secretary Lu smiled quietly. "Don't keep harping on Yao and Shih-fu," he advised. "If everyone were progressive, what use would we Communists be? The first thing in every job is to see whether we're doing our own part well. For instance, we held two meetings in the township to discuss how to handle the low-interest grain loans this year, but when you got back to your village you didn't prepare well. You're still careless, comrade. You don't pay enough attention to the township's ideas. If you had gone around, as you were supposed to, and talked to a number of ordinary middle peasants who have a few extra measures of grain they could lend, you wouldn't be in the fix you are today. You rely too much on 'crash' tactics. They won't do, Chen-shan. From now on, you've got to be more painstaking in your work."

Chen-shan expelled a long breath through his hairy nostrils.

"*Ay*! No one can clap with just one hand, old friend," he protested. "We've only two Communists in all of Frog Flat. Our Comrade Sheng-pao has buried himself in production. He's not interested in the political side. The first time I called a meeting, he was in Kuohsien County buying rice seed. His team had to send young Huan-hsi. Now Sheng-pao is back, but he's

never got in touch with me. That young fellow's become a little proud since he joined the Party."

Secretary Lu couldn't stand any more of this. To Chen-shan, whom he knew well enough for direct talk, he said bluntly:

"Your brain's getting mildewed. After that whole Party rectification campaign, you still can say mutual aid and co-operative farming have nothing to do with politics. Have you forgotten what Secretary Wang told us last winter at the meeting of our Hsiapao Party branch? If all you do is urge peasants to pay their grain taxes, hand out the agricultural loans, fill in statistical forms, write complaints for people going to court and certify applicants for marriage licences — do you call that politics? The Party wants us Communists not just to stick to administrative work, but to get out and organize the people, to lead their production. There's a difference between production through mutual aid and going it alone; you'd better get that straight. Since you claim that Sheng-pao isn't interested in the political side, why should you expect him to get in touch with you? As a matter of fact, it's you who ought to be taking the initiative to help him."

Small drops of perspiration appeared on the bridge of Chen-shan's nose; his bristly face flushed. His group was a mutual-aid team in name only. Actually every man was working for himself. Even in the dark, Lu could see his embarrassment.

For several moments, Chen-shan could think of nothing to say. He rubbed the stubble on his cheeks with his two thick hands, as if hoping in this manner to bring down the burning temperature of his face. Finally — thank heaven — he thought of a reason to explain away his failure.

"I've often felt," he said regretfully, "that our government's putting an end to the land reform was a mistake."

"In what way?"

"As soon as the land reform period was declared over, Yao and Shih-fu raised their heads again. In the average home on seasonal festivals, the peasant worships his family's ancestor tablets. The rest of the time he worships the deed that was issued to him during the land reform. Our job isn't easy."

"What do you think we ought to do, then? Have a land reform every year? End by confiscating the middle peasant's land? Put all peasants on exactly the same footing?"

"Listen to him. Am I that ignorant of policy? What I'm saying is not that we should have a land reform every year, but that we shouldn't declare it ended either."

"And keep everyone permanently in suspense?"

"Just the rich peasants and the well-to-do middle peasants."

"Wouldn't the ordinary middle peasants be held in suspense too?"

"Maybe. But it wouldn't affect production."

"What about the vast majority of poor peasants? Wouldn't they also be unsettled, unable to concentrate on going forward?"

The glib talker Chen-shan again had no answer.

Controlling his anger, Lu warned him in a tone that was displeased yet friendly: "Instead of picking faults with the Central Committee's line, comrade, you ought to be examining your own work to see whether you've done it properly. Or maybe there's something wrong with your thinking? You travelled a lot in the old days when you were peddling crockery, you've seen much more than the average peasant. But compared with our comrades on the Central Committee we — you and me both — well, we're pretty ignorant. We've seen many pictures of Marx and Lenin; their faces are quite familiar to us. But what, actually, did they say? Do you know? If you don't, you'd better make a real honest examination of yourself. I hear you've been getting very pally with that kiln owner outside the north gate of Huangpao. You shouldn't forget who you are."

"Who told you I've been getting pally with him?" Chen-shan demanded hotly.

"If you haven't, there's no need to get excited," Lu said patiently. "Now go into the schoolhouse and tell the needy peasants to go home. Explain to them that after all the villages in the township have held meetings and discussed this thing, we'll figure out how to solve it. Hurry up and go in. I've got a padded jacket on, but you haven't. Be careful you don't catch cold."

"Who said I was pally with that kiln owner?" Chen-shan persisted, unconcerned with the chilliness of the spring night.

"We'll talk about that some other time. Don't keep the needy peasants waiting."

"No. I must know who's inventing stories about me."

"Keep your shirt on. Our Party branch will get to the bottom of the matter. You go in and cancel the meeting." Turning on his flashlight, Secretary Lu, his padded jacket over his shoulders, walked brusquely away along a small path through the field of alfalfa.

The peasants were surprised and disappointed by Chen-shan's announcement. They had pinned so much hope on him. He had run up to the door of the classroom, proclaimed that the meeting couldn't be held, then dashed after Lu, not even pausing to pick up the form which Blabbermouth had filled in. Chen-shan was determined to find out who had been talking about him to the secretary.

After Blabbermouth had departed with his pressure lamp, the needy peasants gathered around Sheng-pao in the dark schoolyard. Several of them asked that Sheng-pao's mutual-aid team be expanded to include them. Taken by surprise, Sheng-pao stood amid the tattered peasants, one hand rubbing the back of his neck, a wry smile on his face.

"My team has only just got on its feet, neighbours," he said awkwardly, "and this is only my first year as team leader. Let me get another year's experience under my belt and next year, if everyone thinks I manage all right, next year we'll see. I'm young, I haven't much ability. I'm afraid I'd make a mess of things for you."

"We've got eyes. Buying that new rice seed — you handled it very well," said one.

"You shouldn't only be taking care of your nearest neighbours," the tall thin peasant said with a laugh.

"We live a bit far from you, but our paddy fields are right next to yours," the solemn ruddy-faced peasant said.

Sheng-pao was upset. He liked these people almost as much as the members of his own family. If he accepted them into

the team, he was afraid it would become too big and unwieldy. What's more, none of them had any draught animals. This would put even more of a strain on the team's already insufficient traction power. No, it simply wouldn't do. He remembered what Wang Tsung-chi, the model team leader, had said at the county meeting: "To build a good mutual-aid team, it's better to start small." He couldn't go plunging ahead without a firm foundation.

Yet Sheng-pao felt very sympathetic to these hard-up peasants who couldn't even plough unless they worked with others. Their neighbours — middle peasants and former tenant-peasants — formed temporary mutual-aid teams with them at certain seasons of the year. The needy peasants had to labour for their better-off neighbours in order to borrow their draught animals in exchange. But in the inactive period that followed the planting season, though the hands of hard-up peasants were itching to work, no one helped them organize side occupations.

And so, they perpetually remained "needy peasants," who each year had difficulty getting through the slack months of spring. Their plight aroused not only Sheng-pao's sympathy, but also his sense of responsibility. As a Communist he had to help people in trouble. He felt it would be shameful to evade these ragged peasants and quietly slip away.

"Yu-wan," he shouted.

"Here," the militia captain responded from the darkness in the rear of the crowd.

"Yu-wan, let's have a talk and see if there's any way we can revise our team's plan."

While waiting for the meeting to begin, Sheng-pao and Yu-wan had urged Iron Man to lend two *tan* of grain to the needy peasants of his election ward. This would provide their families with enough to eat while the men were away in the mountains with Sheng-pao's team. Originally these peasants were to carry out the brooms which Sheng-pao and his mates would make from the bamboo they felled. Now Sheng-pao's idea was to switch them to bamboo felling also, and put the needy peasants from all the other wards on to the porters' work. In this way

every needy peasant in the village could be given a gainful employment and part of the problem would be solved.

"But where will we get the food grain for the others?" Yu-wan asked doubtfully.

"We'll find a way," Sheng-pao mused. Then he repeated more positively, "We'll find a way. As soon as they start delivering the bamboo brooms, the supply and marketing co-op will give them an advance. They won't have to turn in all the brooms before getting paid. The co-op is a community project. It won't be too rigid. That will give their families some grain anyhow. Then we'll have time to think of what to do next."

Listening to this conversation, the hard-up peasants were overjoyed. Sheng-pao had removed a heavy burden from their shoulders; they felt greatly relieved. In the light of the newly risen moon, they looked gratefully at Sheng-pao's honest face. What a pure good heart was beating in his breast. They wanted to throw their arms around him. All raised their voices eagerly.

"I'll go."

"Me too."

"You've got to take me along, no matter what."

The school courtyard bubbled with life. Still holding his little boy who had just awakened, Tseng-fu stood quietly among the crowd, urging the peasants to be calm. But although externally he appeared cool, Tseng-fu was inwardly very excited. Like a spirited horse seeing other horses starting to run, he couldn't restrain his desire to race. The way Sheng-pao had gallantly risen to the occasion had stirred Tseng-fu to his loyal depths. Cradling his child in his arms, he nudged Sheng-pao with his elbow and said:

"Turn the organizing of the Kuan Creek Hamlet porters' group over to me. You concentrate on getting the bamboo hewers together."

All the peasants indicated their approval. Sheng-pao asked:

"What about the kid? How can you go into the mountains with him?"

"Never mind," said Tseng-fu. "That's my worry. I'll settle it myself. You just go ahead organizing the bamboo-felling group, and leave the porters to me."

On the road home, Jen the Fourth kept sighing.

"What's the matter, old uncle?" Sheng-pao asked. "Is something bothering you?"

"I'm thinking that you're acting very bold for a young man. This is a big job you're taking on. Are you sure you can handle it?"

Sheng-pao spread his hands, palms up. "What else could I do?" he asked, his face clouded with pain. "Watching these needy peasants starve stabs me to the heart. If a Communist won't help them, who will?"

10

The roan mare tethered outside the high wall that enclosed Yao's handsome compound had started to shed her long winter hair, and the rich peasant was working her over with a currycomb. Squatting, he cocked his head which was covered by a felt skullcap, and watched from underneath the movement in the mare's distended belly. It wasn't a little mule that was twitching in there, but three hundred yuan. Maybe more, certainly not less.

"Soon," Yao said happily to himself. "In half a month at most, she'll foal."

His wife was expecting a baby, his mare was going to produce a mule colt—an increase in his family and an increase in his property. The rich peasant's heart felt warm, joyful, comfortable beyond words.

"Dirty bastard. A fine people's deputy. What a son of a bitch." Who was that, cursing as he came up the lane? Yao turned his head and looked. Oho! Ex-corporal Pai.

"Who's been stirring you up?" Yao wondered contemptuously. He ignored Pai and went on examining the belly of his mare.

During land reform, and the subsequent re-check on the way it had been carried out, Pai's insane zealousness had made Yao quake with terror. He was afraid at the time that if the Communist Party believed this madman and classified him as a landlord, his land and surplus property would be distributed. What's more, he would have to allow several poor peasants to use some of the rooms in his big compound. Yao had been so distracted he couldn't eat or sleep. He wished he could take his pig-sticker and kill Pai. Of course whenever Yao met him on the street, he forced himself to hail the rascal as

if he were a village cadre. "Had your meal yet?" Yao would ask courteously.

Now, humph, now even Chen-shan didn't scare him. Why should he worry about a piss-pot like Pai?

Yao stood up. With one hand he patted the mare's full round flank while with the other he squeezed the animal's teats. He wanted to make a more exact estimate of when she would foal. Staring haughtily at the sky — Yao's right eye had a scarred lid — he assumed a chilly reserve, as if Pai were a complete stranger.

"Who says you can't push people around in the new society? Son of a bitch. He never lets me breathe."

After nearing Tseng-fu's thatched cottage Pai turned and started walking back. On the dirt path along the wall opposite Yao's compound he halted, hitched up his trousers and angrily squatted on his heels.

"Does that stinking bird think he can build a nest in my hair? I'll show him that Pai's a dangerous man to rile."

Yao thought it peculiar. Why should Pai curse a village cadre in his presence? Was it being done deliberately for his benefit? If on the road to the Huangpao market he heard someone damn any of the supporters of the new society, Yao was always interested. He would automatically move closer and listen. It did his heart good.

But why should the fanatic of the land reform period come before him and revile a people's deputy? What for? In spite of himself, Yao left off examining the mare and turned around, rubbing his hands together to remove the dirt that had been transferred to them from the horse's teats.

"What makes you so upset, this early hour of the morning?" he asked with a smile of curiosity.

"What? I'll tell you what. Last night at the school, Tseng-fu pointed his finger at my nose and lectured me. I don't have to take that from him. I've never done anything against him, but he wants to pin a counter-revolutionary label on me."

Aha! So the ex-corporal in the Kuomintang army had come to pick a quarrel with Tseng-fu. But Tseng-fu had gone off

somewhere with his little boy. When Pai saw the lock on his door, he had raved even more wildly, and squatted down in front of the rich peasant.

Yao laughed.

"What are you talking about? How could he call one of the activists of the land reform a counter-revolutionary?"

"Easy there. Who says I was an activist?"

"Didn't you run around like crazy? The only thing was, they didn't make you a village cadre."

"Good Brother Yao. Don't spit in my face." Pai had the air of a man seeking forgiveness.

Yao ridiculed him with increasing boldness.

"I don't know why they didn't — the way you sucked up to them. You yelled 'Long live the Communist Party' so loud the whole world could hear you. But you got nothing for your pains."

Pai tilted his shaven pate, which was covered by a cloth turban. Heaving a long sigh, he begged:

"Don't talk about the past. Let's say that I was blind. Yao, old man, I can't get along on these Tang Stream flats."

"Why not? Isn't this a good place? 'The whole Lu River valley can't compare with a bend in the Tang,' as the saying goes."

Yao gazed at him mockingly. Pai drooped like a blade of grass stricken at the root. The rich peasant couldn't resist the temptation to get back at him. He lectured the scoundrel in a loud voice:

"You needn't think we can have a land reform every year. The land reform team can't come each winter and clean people out, like harvesting a crop. You got a few *mou,* didn't you? You ought to buckle down and learn how to farm."

"*Ai,*" Pai sighed again. "How can I farm? I've got no ox, I've got no donkey. I don't even have any food."

Yao immediately knew that something was amiss. He regretted having paid any attention to this shifty idler. He coughed once and, without a word, picked up his currycomb from

the hitching post and walked quickly towards his compound gate.

Pai hurriedly followed and caught up with him in the entrance way. Grasping the sleeve of Yao's clean black padded jacket, Pai looked at him with a rascally gaze.

"Lend me two measures of white rice."

"What? Where would I get—"

"I'll give you wheat in return as soon as the summer harvest is in."

"Huh. Listen to you. Let go of me. I haven't even got black rice."

"Good Brother Yao. Don't hold a grudge against me. That great tide of two years ago hurt many good neighbours. It made us all enemies."

A moment before, Yao had been considering pushing Pai out into the lane and bolting the gate. But after hearing Pai's frank pleas, Yao had another idea.

"The fellow's a dog," he said to himself. "Throw him a scrap to eat, and he'll wag his tail. Stir him up and he'll attack you. I'll get him to turn his teeth on the village cadres."

As Yao stood thinking, Pai could see that there was hope for him, and he laughed ingratiatingly.

"It was Blue Moth's idea. She told me to ask you for the rice."

Recalling his affair with Blue Moth before liberation, Yao smiled. The memory of Blue Moth's tender backside moved him much more readily than Pai's fawning expression.

"All right. Now let go of my sleeve."

Releasing the rich peasant, Pai revealed his discoloured teeth in a broad grin.

"I have troubles, too," said Yao. "That's why I didn't dare go to the grain loan meeting last night."

"I know. Of course I know."

"We've got to do this quietly. You're not to breathe a word. I don't want people saying I've got a river of grain."

"Don't worry. I'm not a child. Those two measures of rice will take care of Blue Moth while I'm away in Sian. When I come back at barley cutting time—"

"Well, then, bring a sack after dark," Yao said generously.

That night Pai, a sack of grain on his back, bent far forward with his rump up, trotted like a dog out of the gate of the handsome compound. At that moment the harmony—born of mutual understanding and pity—which had prevailed in the rich peasant household during the dangerous years of struggle, ended abruptly.

Yao's mother, a fat old woman in her sixties, simply could not understand her son's foolish conduct. Famed throughout Kuan Creek Hamlet for her "piety", she worshipped idols in her central apartment in the main wing, kowtowing three times a day and burning incense once in the morning and once at night. Her response to any evil word or action was always one simple phrase which included everything—"Buddha preserve us!" She had uttered it innumerable times in recent years during the class struggles that were part of the village mass movements. Ex-corporal Pai who, shouting and ranting, had demanded that her family be classified as landlord, had inspired her to tireless entreaties to the gods that they crush the wicked creature like an insect. Yet today her own son had given him a loan of grain. Buddha preserve us!

She followed Yao to the east wing and then to the west wing. When he went to the stable by the gate house to give his roan mare some hay, she followed him there too. She stood before him, nagging, her flabby lips never resting, demanding to know why he had loaned grain to Pai. It seemed to her that it would have been better to dump it in the trough and feed it to the horse, or scatter it in the courtyard for the chickens, rather than lend it to that man whom the gods were going to punish.

A ladle in one hand, a stick in the other, Yao was mixing a mash of bran and hay. He did his utmost to remain patient and not lose his temper with his religious mother.

"Ma," he said, "it has to do with the new society. You couldn't understand."

"Yes, I would. You tell me. I'll understand."

"What do you understand? Eh? What? When I bought a picture of Chairman Mao during land reform, you wouldn't let me hang it. The true hero doesn't reveal his courage on his face; it's in his heart."

The old woman's flabby countenance registered a recognition of her error.

"If you had told me it was just to fool the village cadres," she said, "would I have stopped you?"

"And then when that relative came visiting at New Year's time, you spilled everything. Luckily he was a rich relative. If he had been a poor one—"

When he thought of what an awful impression the exposure of his hypocrisy would have made upon his neighbours, Yao glared balefully at his mother and banged the stick against the wooden trough.

"Buddha preserve us! Buddha preserve us!" The old woman piously lowered her head at the sight of her son's worldly display of temper. Supporting herself with her hands on the frame as she stepped backwards through the doorway, she hastily fled.

She continued to intone "Buddha preserve us!" as she walked across the flagstone paved courtyard in the darkness and returned to her apartment in the east end of the main wing.

Yao went to his own apartment, which was in the west end of the main wing. His wife, over thirty but still girlishly petulant, sat pouting on the *kang*. With a twist of the hips, she turned the back of her black glossy head to Yao when he came in, refusing to let him see her rosy well-nourished face.

Yao took a paper spill from the drawer of the cupboard to light his water-pipe. He smiled, pleased by the woman's jealousy. Even after two or three years, it took only the shadow of a suspicion to kindle it again.

Wrapping himself in manly dignity, he lit the paper spill in the flame of the oil lamp, then started puffing at his gurgling pipe. He was careful not to look in his wife's direction. Although he felt full of vigour after sending Pai off with the two measures of rice, he had no intention of reviving his affair

with Blue Moth. Yao knew how careful a rich peasant had to be under the new government.

What made him so energetic was the fact that the scabby dog who had been attacking him for two or three years had come now to lick his hand. When the government gave Yao a new land deed and announced that his class status had been finally determined, he had sensed that he was safe. Pai's subservience today was a concrete proof, you might say, that his instinct was correct. Of course, to have a fellow like Pai on your side didn't mean you were travelling in luck. But it was better than having him against you. Pai could make a lot of trouble.

Her pregnant abdomen protruding, Yao's wife began spreading the quilts for the night, flouncing and sulking to demonstrate her indignation. She waited for her husband to say something, but all she heard from him was the sound of his water-pipe. Unable to bear it, in the end she was the first to speak.

"You've only been behaving yourself a couple of years. Are you going to start running wild again?"

"What have I done now?"

"You'd better be careful. That militia captain Yu-wan is a tough young fellow. He's liable to tie you and Blue Moth together and haul you both down to the township government in Hsiapao."

"*Aiya*! What do you take me for? In this society do you think I'd dare go to Blue Moth's hut even in my dreams?"

"Then what are you giving grain to Pai for?"

"Don't worry. He won't be eating it for nothing."

"Give him a *tan* of white rice, why don't you, and see whether he'll eat it for nothing."

"I'll give him two *tan*," Yao snarled with a savage conspiratorial grimace. "I know what I'm doing. Two years ago when you heard him yelling long live the Communist Party, didn't you tremble? If he'd got his teeth into me then, you'd have had to go down to the county jail if you wanted to see me."

The woman understood. Lowering her head, she glanced up at him and burst into giggles.

Yao's grandfather had died towards the end of the Ching dynasty at the turn of the century. In the paddy area today there were only a few old men over sixty who had ever seen him. It was said that he had expired from a peculiar slow disease called "greed consumption."

Nearly everyone in Frog Flat had known Yao's father, whose nickname had been "Iron Claw" because he was so cruel and grasping. Most of the stories about him concerned his winnower. If a poor tenant-peasant wanted to borrow it the answer was—nothing doing. Iron Claw had written on it: "For rent, not for loan." The charge was a measure of grain per day. If you worked far into the night and couldn't return the winnower until the following morning, Iron Claw insisted on two days' rent. His face hardened if you mentioned your difficulties, and he said: "It's a rule. I can't make any exceptions."

That was the kind of blood circulating in Yao's robust body. His lifelong ambition had been to be able to sit down at the table as equals with the big landlords Tenant-skinner Yang and Miser Lu. Being "King of Frog Flat" didn't satisfy him.

But the nation-wide liberation in 1949 shattered his dream. In the land reform that followed in 1950, the fields which he had been letting to tenant-peasants at exorbitant rents were confiscated. Another stroke of the pen wiped out his practice of usury. As to debts still owed him, a stroke of the pen wiped these out also—when the interest already paid equalled the amount of the original loan. At mass meetings, members of the land reform team repeatedly stressed the need to isolate the rich peasants. They urged his neighbours to make a clear class distinction between themselves and him, to guard against the rich peasants' sabotage.

Ay! Before liberation all matters of importance in Frog Flat had been decided by him. When he walked down the road between the paddy fields, the peasants working on both sides had always paused to greet him. Then land reform threw

him down to the lowest level in the village. All of Frog Flat was one family, but Yao was an outcast. This treatment infuriated him. Not only did he hate the Communist Party, he hated every peasant in Frog Flat who supported it.

The morning after Pai borrowed grain, Yao was seated in the main house of his hollow square of buildings, eating breakfast from a large rice bowl. He heard someone give a deprecatory cough in the entrance way.

"Is Brother Yao at home?" the visitor called.

Yao's heart contracted. His mouth full of food, he swore under his breath: "That bastard Pai. Chen-shan must have sent him to spy on me. That son of a bitch. He probably cursed Tseng-fu just to lead me on. And I fell for it. *Ay*! The dirty bastard."

In an instant all the terror of the wrath of the people which had gripped Yao during land reform flooded back. He grew dizzy with fear. He remembered how a great crowd of poor peasants had charged into the compound of Miser Lu in Hsiapao and pinned him against the wall. They had demanded Lu's land deeds and his usury account books, shouting in voices that had caused Yao's hair to stand on end.

Today, Yao was frightened that his opposition to the low-interest grain loans had aroused the fury of the needy peasants, and that, led by his enemy Chen-shan, they would come surging into his compound.

Of course, he might say, "I have no extra grain," but to this they could retort, "Oh, you haven't, eh? Then how could you lend some to Pai?" He would be stumped. Yao very much regretted having loaned any grain to the ex-corporal. He had been hasty, stupid. With the whole crowd yelling at him, he wouldn't be able to explain himself even if he had a thousand mouths.

But strange! Through the bamboo curtain, the person Yao saw entering the flagstoned courtyard was Kao Tseng-jung, his bare feet shod in straw sandals. He didn't seem angry, and there was no hostility in his eyes. What was this all about? Very strange! He looked the way poor peasants used to

before liberation when they came to Yao in desperation to beg for a loan. Tseng-jung stood humbly in the centre of the courtyard, waiting for the master of the house to acknowledge his presence.

Yao couldn't believe his eyes. Hadn't people's deputy Tseng-fu been one of the most vehement in urging the peasants to shun him as a rich peasant? And who was now calling on the rich peasant but Tseng-fu's elder brother Tseng-jung? For more than two years, on his brother's advice, Tseng-jung hadn't set foot in this compound.

Yao rose, set down his bowl and strolled out to the wide brick porch. He didn't invite his shabby visitor to enter the house.

"What do you want?" he asked.

Tseng-jung's sandalled bare feet mounted the brick porch. He sighed feebly.

"Ah! You don't know my troubles. Would I be here to bother you if I could help it? You've probably heard — there won't be any low-interest grain loans this year."

"You still think you can isolate me," Yao crowed mentally to chairman of the village deputies Chen-shan and people's deputy Tseng-fu. Aloud to Tseng-jung, he said lugubriously, "Oh. But you can't blame the administrative men. These past two years have cleaned everybody out."

The clumsy Tseng-jung squatted down on the brick porch and scratched his head. He clucked his tongue and sighed.

"*Ay*. You don't know my troubles. My brother's lining up people to go into the mountains with Sheng-pao's mutual-aid team and carry out bamboo brooms. It's not a bad idea. At least he'll earn enough to eat. But my wife has just given birth to a baby and she can't leave her bed. I can't get away."

"Even Chen-shan doesn't have any magic charm to save the pauper devils, what can a young punk like you do?" Yao silently addressed Sheng-pao with this contemptuous remark. To Tseng-jung he sighed, "We all have troubles. Every man has his own troubles."

The brother of the people's deputy gazed pleadingly at the rich peasant's emotionless face. Haltingly, he asked:

"Do you think . . . you could lend me . . . two measures —"

"*Aiya*! Don't be fooled by my good buildings. Nowadays the good buildings are empty. It's the thatched cottages that have the grain."

"Even if the interest is a little high, it won't matter."

"In our new society, who's looking for high interest? If I had any surplus grain I'd offer it voluntarily, just as I did last year and the year before. I'd ask the village cadres to distribute it. It would be an honour."

"You have a lot of connections. Couldn't you ask a relative, or a friend?"

"I'll make some inquiries for you. But I may not be able to find anyone."

All that morning Yao thought hard: How was he going to answer Tseng-jung? As he squatted on the floor smoking his water-pipe, or carried a bucket from the well, or put some fresh earth down in the stable, two Yaos were battling in the cranium beneath his old felt skullcap with the broken edge. One Yao was opposed to giving Tseng-jung a loan: Tseng-jung's brother was a man Yao hated. But the other Yao approved: Tseng-jung was a fool; he'd lick the hand of anyone who threw him a few crumbs. When the village cadres were able to help him, he made a clear class break with the rich peasants. When the low-interest loans fell through, he turned to a rich peasant to plead.

"That sort of fellow can be useful," Yao told himself. He recalled that Tseng-jung was in Tseng-fu's mutual-aid team. Maybe through the brother of the people's deputy he could strike at the people's deputy himself and ease some of the hatred in his heart.

"Chen-shan," he muttered under his breath, suddenly thinking of his worst enemy. "Your sorcerer's bag is empty. All you've got left is mutual aid and co-operative farming. That's a weak charm. I'm not afraid of it. As long as the government leaves



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it on a voluntary basis, you can't do anything to me. And I think you know it."

From the top of his head to the tips of his toes Yao felt delightfully comfortable. It was as if he had drunk some wonderful elixir. He went about his chores brimming with energy. Even his cough was vigorous, and he spat phlegm like a bullet. Standing on the brick porch, hands on his sturdy hips, Yao was the picture of imperiousness revived.

In spite of the fact that most of the other hard-up peasants had banded together to go into the mountains with Sheng-pao's team as porters of the bamboo brooms, after lunch another muddle-head needy peasant — seeing that there was no hope for a low-interest grain loan, and that Chairman Chen-shan apparently didn't have any ideas — wandered into the handsome compound at the western end of Kuan Creek Hamlet.

The rich peasant grew bold. He felt competitive. Yao decided to lure as many men off the bamboo broom porter work as possible. He would pretend to be eager to assist the needy peasants, to be sympathetic and helpful. His doubts were gone. It was no longer necessary to beat about the bush. This was not only trying, it consumed too much time — Yao had to go out and find a maid to look after his wife during her approaching confinement period. Putting on a jovial smile, he came directly to the point with his caller.

"I suppose you want to borrow some food grain?"

"Why, you can read my mind."

"How much do you need to last you till barley harvest?"

"Three measures would be about enough."

"It's a pity. I don't have any grain. But tomorrow I'm going to market in Huangpao. I'll ask one of my relatives whether he has any. If he does, of course you may have to travel a little distance, but you can run into town and carry it back."

"I'll never be able to thank you enough —"

"Ho! In this difficult society, can I stand by and see my dear neighbours suffer? There's only one condition — don't tell anyone I told you, or you're liable to stir up a tempest."

"I'm not a child —"

"Just say you found the man yourself."

"Right. I understand."

Yao was extremely pleased with his phrase "this difficult society". Originally he had been thinking of saying "these difficult times", but the words changed in his mouth. A man's psychology is a subtle thing. How true it is that "words are echoes of the heart." Yao had watched the spineless poor peasant intently as he mentioned "this difficult society," but the man's face had not registered any particular disagreement. Yao became bolder, more joyous.

In the afternoon, instead of going out to look for a temporary maid for his expectant wife, he remained at home and worked on his vegetable garden in the rear-courtyard, hoping that other needy peasants would call. The worried expressions of people short of grain gave him pleasure. He enjoyed nothing more than speaking to loan-seekers. The Communists not only had deprived him of this happiness, but ever since their coming he had lived with an uneasy sense of criminal guilt constantly hanging over his head.

Now he had thrown off his depression. The clouds in the sky, the breezes of the sunny spring day, seemed particularly invigorating. In the old days, spring with its food shortage was always his best time of the year. Could those times be coming back? Was his isolation as a member of the rich peasant class ending? Could he straighten his spine, raise his head?

He still had his handsome compound, his front building was full of grain. Yao felt he was in a much stronger position than Chen-shan. Although just because he was a Communist Chen-shan might shout and bluster, Yao considered himself superior. "Whoever has grain is king of the village." That was the truth. The past two springs, when the low-interest loans were made, the needy peasants had eaten the grain of Yao and Shih-fu, but gave their gratitude to Chen-shan. That was finished now. The men with the grain at last had their new land deeds securely in their hands.

Yao was a hard worker. He quickly prepared plots for eggplant and peppers, loosened the soil around the scallions with a

small hoe, and watered two grape vines. After working a while he squatted on the well platform and smoked his water-pipe and calculated how many market days it would take to dispose of the grain he had shipped to Huangpao. Yao planned to go to the town every market day and lend the grain out at high interest. He would say that it belonged to someone else.

"Son," his mother called. Her lips were thick and rubbery. "Aren't you going to see about that maid?"

"Soon."

"Your wife's big and clumsy. She ought to start resting."

"I know."

The old woman scrutinized her son with a pleased gaze. His distress was her distress; his joy was her joy. She knew now why her son had loaned grain to ex-corporal Pai. From his forceful cough and renewed verve, she could see that his spirits had risen. She was swept along and encouraged by his mood. Unable to restrain herself, she asked, her thick lips trembling.

"Are you going to make deals with both of them?"

"What sort of deals?"

"Have we got enough grain?"

"Now ma, don't bother with things that don't concern you."

"Don't try to fool me, son. I never leave the courtyard; I won't spill a thing. But you'd better be careful of our neighbour." The old woman pointed with her fat flabby chin in the direction of Tseng-fu's thatched cottage.

"He doesn't worry me."

"Buddha preserve us!" intoned the old woman piously. "Watch out for him, I say." She waddled off to the front courtyard.

Yao remained squatting on the well platform. Holding the brass bottle of the water-pipe, he haughtily addressed himself to the bucket:

"So, Tseng-fu. What good has playing up to the Communists done you? Are you still so eager? Maybe you're thinking of asking the Party to issue you a wife?"

Tseng-fu's misfortune gave Yao the utmost satisfaction. It was Tseng-fu who had submitted the evidence of Yao's usury

to the land reform team. It was Tseng-fu who continually reminded his neighbours to keep their distance from the rich peasant class. Yao believed that the death of Tseng-fu's wife was a retribution that heaven had inflicted on his behalf.

"You may have plucked a few fuzzy hairs from my body, but you're a widower today," Yao thought with satisfaction. He had nothing but contempt for his former hired hand. Now that he felt strong again, Yao had an unquenchable desire for revenge.

He went out and walked along the streets of Kuan Creek Hamlet. Not only was his ebullience reflected in his face, the grain in his front building was reflected in the straightness of his back and the briskness of his walk. He had thirty-odd *mou* of paddy, a roan mare, a hollow square of fine buildings that stood out like temples among the thatched cottages of Frog Flat. During land reform the possession of these things had made him tremble with fear. Now, they bolstered his spirit, as of old.

He was very pleased with his "far-sightedness". Long ago he had steadied himself with the advice: "Stick it out. The real hero is the man who knows when to squat down quietly as well as when to stand up straight. Only a clod refuses to bend his knees. The world is bound to settle down; things can't always be so tense. Squat. You'll be able to stand up, later. If you don't get down now, people are liable to knock you down."

Yao had squatted for two years during the land reform period. Today, he could once more rise to his feet.

It seemed to Yao that the people he met on the street looked at him differently than before. The light in their eyes appeared less hostile. Although Yao was a trifle disappointed that only two peasants out of the hundred residents of Frog Flat had appealed to him for a loan, on the whole he was satisfied with the change.

At the eastern end of the hamlet, he saw Shih-fu walking towards him. While they were still quite far apart, Yao hailed him cordially:

"Shih-fu. Where are you going?"

"To Hsiapao Village." Shih-fu noted Yao's gay manner and slightly narrowed his eyes. "What about you?"

"My wife will be starting her confinement soon. I'm going down to the paddy area to see if I can find a maid. Let's go together."

"Come on," Shih-fu agreed.

Glancing at the old man, Yao had to laugh. During the check-up on the implementation of the land reform and before the new deeds were issued, this prosperous middle peasant, if he hadn't been able to avoid Yao in the first place, would have invented some excuse to shake him off. Now that Yao was in the lending business again, he was as confident as a landlord with many tenants, as a warlord with many soldiers. He couldn't resist twitting the crafty old fox.

"Uncle Shih-fu," he said with a grin, "aren't you afraid to be seen walking down the same street with a fellow like me?"

Shih-fu gave an unnatural laugh.

"You'd better be careful," Yao teased him. "If you say one word to me, you're liable to be classified as a rich peasant yourself. Ha-ha-ha! These past two years you cut me deader than any poor peasant or hired hand."

This remark hit Shih-fu where it hurt. The old man's wrinkled face was serious as he explained:

"It's not that I didn't want to be friendly, but the times were wrong. Now that the mass struggle meetings are over, you see I don't avoid you any more." Shih-fu tried a placating smile.

When he thought of how this fellow, who had always come to him for advice before liberation, played up to his enemy Chen-shan after Liberation, Yao was strongly tempted to give him a few more nasty digs and make him squirm. But of course he knew that Shih-fu's flattery of Chen-shan was pure hypocrisy, and that while the prosperous middle peasant had pretended to be far removed from him, Yao, in fact they were very much akin. Yao decided to adopt a different line. Why not? Now that Shih-fu had received a land deed confirming his holdings he was quite cool to Chen-shan. On the low-

interest grain loans he had openly taken the same position as Yao. Since the man was once again making up to him, why say anything to hurt his feelings?

The owners of the only tile-roofed compounds in Frog Flat walked in single file along a narrow grassy path between the paddy fields. The sun, already on the western side of the spring sky, threw their shadows closely together on the green barley sprouts.

"There's nothing doing on the low-interest loans," Shih-fu reported with relish.

"Naturally not," Yao, walking ahead of him, commented smugly.

"I'm thinking of going over to the villages on the other side of the stream to see whether they've raised any loans there."

"You needn't bother. Of course they haven't. The past two years people were afraid. They were afraid of mass struggle meetings against them. Tell the truth now — were you really willing to let the village cadres lend out so much of your grain? Were you some simpleton who couldn't count?"

Shih-fu laughed bitterly, indicating that he hadn't been willing but was unable to prevent it.

Yao, who had turned his head to note Shih-fu's reaction, was encouraged to go on more boldly with his discourse.

"Just think. When that gang of paupers divided up the land of the rich, they yelled long live the Communist Party. When they borrow our grain, they also yell long live the Communist Party. Is that fair, I ask you?" Yao demanded aggrievedly.

Shih-fu's head, bare of its felt skullcap now that spring was here, swivelled hastily from left to right to see whether anyone was nearby in the paddy fields or outside the thatched cottages. Although the tumultuous land reform was over and the village had settled down, this Yao was a dangerous fellow. His wild words made Shih-fu's heart flutter.

Only a few children were in sight, pulling weeds on the paddy field embankments, gathering brushwood and grazing cows along the banks of the stream. They could not hear

what the men were saying, nor did they pay any attention to the unusual sight of these two walking together.

"Forget it," Shih-fu urged. "What's past is past. We ought to be thankful that we brothers weren't 'struggled' against."

Shih-fu, a people's deputy himself, had been fond of saying "we brothers" when talking to Chen-shan, the chairman of the village deputies. Now he was using this same intimate term in his chat with the local rich peasant. It warmed Yao's heart. He couldn't resist turning his head and giving Shih-fu a smile.

Feeling more and more triumphant, he asked the prosperous middle peasant about his enemy Chen-shan.

"He's weakening." Shih-fu hurried two steps to catch up. Walking side by side with rich peasant Yao, he repeated happily in a low voice, "He's weakening. They say that after Secretary Lu criticized him, he didn't come out of his door for two days."

"Why did Lu criticize him?" Yao asked curiously.

"That's kept inside the Party. I don't know," Shih-fu replied softly. "It looks as though Lu suspects he's not very keen on mutual aid. That boy of Liang the Third, Sheng-pao — he's the great favourite now."

"Bah. What does he amount to? Bones and all, he's still a light-weight."

"You mustn't underestimate him," Shih-fu warned. "He doesn't bluster like our friend Chen-shan, but he's got a will of iron. He's taken the problems of all the poor peasants of Frog Flat on to his own shoulders."

Shih-fu told Yao about the Hundred Day Ripener. The plan of Sheng-pao's team to plant rice and wheat alternately in the same fields fascinated this prosperous middle peasant who all his life had been trying to get more out of his land. To sow wheat after the rice was in had been his aim for dozens of years, he confessed to Yao in a dreamy voice. He had never expected that a youngster would make the attempt ahead of him.

Shih-fu said that to earn the money needed for enough fertilizer to raise a double crop, Sheng-pao's team was going into the Chinling Mountains to cut bamboo. The prosperous middle peasant had only to sell a little grain in the Huangpao market and he could bring the fertilizer back on his rubber-tired cart. It hurt him to watch Sheng-pao pushing on towards the experiment, regardless of difficulties, while he himself could have done the same thing with so little effort. Shih-fu told how he had hung around Sheng-pao's cottage when the seed grain was being distributed and had offered to give a high price for just a few measures, but had been turned down. The rebuff still rankled.

"If I weren't building that three-room house this spring," said Shih-fu, "I'd go to Kuohsien County and buy some Hundred Day Ripener myself."

Yao halted and faced him.

"Is that strain of seed really good?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Is the soil here all right for it?"

"Why not? The soil's the same all along the foothills of the Chinling Mountains."

"Then go to it." A revitalized Yao, the craving for vengeance burning in his breast, cried with a mad fervour: "Go to it. You take a trip to Kuohsien County. We'll split the travel expenses in the same proportion we share the seed. The two of us have more paddy fields than all of Sheng-pao's broken-down mutual-aid team put together. We can't let that young punk be the only one to succeed. He'd go bragging all over the village."

"Right. My idea exactly," Shih-fu's whiskery mouth exclaimed vehemently.

11

It was the winter of 1950. Poor little Tsai-tsai was then only two years old and his mother was still alive. They stayed all day in their thatched cottage west of rich peasant Yao's handsome compound. Tseng-fu, leader of the peasants' association group in west Kuan Creek Hamlet, was hardly ever at home. Once the land reform movement started to roll, Tseng-fu was so busy that he had time for only two meals a day. At night, if he came home at all, it was always well past midnight.

One morning after a heavy snowfall, the peasants of the hamlet arose and swept the snow from their courtyards. Instead of setting out on his activities as usual at the crack of dawn, Tseng-fu also swept his courtyard and remained at home. While waiting for his wife to make breakfast he stood in the middle of the room and, with the bottles, dishes and plates in the cupboard as his audience, practised his accusation speech.

The oppression and exploitation which he and his father before him had endured for years as hired hands had been selected by the comrades of the land reform team as points to be stressed. They wanted him to speak before a mass meeting of all the people of Hsiapao Township.

But somehow Tseng-fu couldn't string his talk together. Whenever he practised, this time he would forget this, that time he would forget that. He was very worried about it, and had already suggested to the land reform team comrades that maybe it would be better if he didn't speak at the meeting. Their answer was simply: "Have more of the spirit of the new masters of society. Don't you want to sharpen the political awareness of the average peasant?" Tseng-fu's class self-respect immediately overcame his doubts about himself as a

public speaker, and he began to practise whenever he had a free moment.

"Neighbours. Even if I talked for three days and three nights I couldn't finish telling you what my family suffered for five generations as hired hands."

While Tseng-fu was rehearsing, the door of his thatched cottage swung open. Turning his head, he saw entering none other than his wealthy next-door neighbour Yao, breathing icy vapour from his nose and mouth.

"Ah, Brother Tseng-fu, so you're home?" Yao said with a flattering smile.

"H'm," Tseng-fu retorted coldly. He gazed at his former employer with a superiority it was only right for a leader of a peasants' association group to feel towards a rich peasant.

Yao smiled servilely.

"You've been so busy since the movement began, you're seldom home, Brother Tseng-fu. I've been longing to have a chat with you, but I never can find you. Luckily it snowed this morning and you haven't gone out. I've come to invite you over to my place for a little talk." Yao took the group leader by the arm and tried to pull him towards the door.

"No, no." Tseng-fu jerked the sleeve of his padded jacket from the rich peasant's grasp and said stiffly, "If you've anything to say, say it here."

Inwardly, he was cursing his former boss: "Dirty swine. Why weren't you so friendly in the old days? The land reform has just reached the stage of deciding everyone's class status, so you come sucking around, do you? If you think you can bribe me, you're blind — you can't see who you're dealing with?"

Indeed, Yao's eyes couldn't see that the group leader was swearing at him in his heart.

"Good Brother Tseng-fu —" Again he grasped the sleeve and hung on persistently. "For the sake of our friendship after years of working together, do me this honour. You needn't worry. I guarantee that coming to my place won't in any way hurt your job at the peasants' association. I know where I

stand. I've had a little schooling, I can read the newspaper, I know a bit about the policy today. They won't classify me as a landlord — I work in my own fields all year round. The only thing is, alas, in the old society, a man was often narrow, greedy. I had more land than the average peasant and more grain than I could eat. People were always borrowing from me, and I took a tiny bit of interest. Of course that was wrong, absolutely wrong. Today, my ideas have changed greatly."

"You've got a slick tongue." Tseng-fu, who was afraid he couldn't express himself at the accusation meeting, unceremoniously cut Yao short. "You blame having a lot of land on the old society; you took interest from people only because they insisted on borrowing your grain. And I suppose you sweated me as a hired hand because I wanted to be a hired hand? Who likes not having any land? Who likes going hungry? Does anyone enjoy being a hired hand? Does he? Let go of my arm."

Having received his class education in the ranks of the poor peasants and hired hands, it wasn't at all difficult for Tseng-fu to reduce his ex-boss to silence.

Yao was as numb as if he had been suddenly stricken. Docilely he dropped Tseng-fu's sleeve. He obviously had underestimated the new development of his former hired hand. A trifle panic-stricken, Yao didn't know what to do.

"It seems to me your ideas haven't changed at all." In keeping with the spirit of the people's democratic dictatorship, Tseng-fu bluntly criticized this man whose feudal tail still needed amputating.

"They've changed," Yao said with a shame-faced smile. "Let me finish, brother."

"Tell me how you've changed."

"There's been a big change in my ideas. I've said to myself: 'I'm one of Chairman Mao's citizens now. I want to live together with the poor peasants and hired hands. Mine isn't some lone family out by itself in the paddy fields; we're right here in Kuan Creek Hamlet. I can't be cut off from my neighbours for ever.' That's exactly what I've been thinking. If one word isn't true then I'm a four-legged animal. I wish I could rip my heart

out so that you could see for yourself what's in it. Today you're the person who runs things in west Kuan Creek Hamlet. I beg you for enlightenment — how can I live together with the rest of the community? The land reform law doesn't allow donations of land. I'm really worrying myself sick. What do you think I should do, brother?"

"Just be a good law-abiding rich peasant, and no one will touch a hair of your head."

"Law-abiding? Of course I'm law-abiding," Yao retorted fervently. "*Tien*! Would I dare to go against the law? What I'm afraid of is this 'isolation'. Help me think of something. Isn't there some little gift I could make to the poor peasants and hired hands of Kuan Creek Hamlet so that they wouldn't isolate me any more?" Yao gazed hopefully at the thoughtful face of the leader of the peasants' association group.

"*Aiya*," Tseng-fu thought to himself in surprise. "The little man has big ambitions. He wants to use me to buy over all the poor peasants and hired hands of Kuan Creek Hamlet. All right, I'll pretend to play along with him and find out what exactly he has in mind."

"What is this gift you want to make?" Tseng-fu asked, assuming a more flexible attitude.

The thoughtfulness and change in attitude of the group leader raised the rich peasant's hopes. Again taking Tseng-fu by the arm, Yao urged in an affectionate tone:

"Come on, brother. We'll go to my place and talk this over."

"We can talk here. Tsai-tsai's ma keeps her mouth shut."

"You're an administrative cadre now. Someone's liable to come looking for you here. Come on, let's go."

"All right, we'll go then. But let go of me. You don't have to pull."

Although the paths had been swept that morning, they were covered again by a fresh snowfall as the two men walked across white-blanketed ground to Yao's big compound. *Tien*! The rich peasant's whole family, young and old, had come out and were standing in the flagstone-paved courtyard to receive their former hired hand like an honoured guest. The superstitious old mother, Yao's wife, his young married sister — now living in another village — several children. . . . All waited with obsequious, flattering and flirtatious smiles. The younger sister, dark brows arched over large eyes, was quite attractive. She hurried up to Tseng-fu and after brushing the snow from his torn padded jacket with her ringed hand, pressed close to him as they walked across the courtyard towards the house. Her full elastic breasts jounced under her padded black tunic with every step she took, the one nearer Tseng-fu rubbing against his arm.

"Are you very busy these days, brother?" she simpered.

"Mm, busy," Tseng-fu muttered. To himself he said angrily, "What do they think they're doing — catching a sparrow in a snare?"

Doubling his vigilance, the leader of the peasants' association group was swept into the parlour by the family of his former boss. For an instant he was dumbfounded. In the centre of the room was a square red-lacquered table surrounded by armchairs. On the table were four dishes of expensive tid-bits, a pot of wine, wine cups and chopsticks. When Yao's alluring younger sister had bumped his arm with her plump breast, Tseng-fu had only felt uncomfortable and prickly all over. But now the sight of the table made him want to vomit. Yao rated him too low — the sheer simplicity of the trick was insulting. This place was a trap. He couldn't stay here another minute.

"Sit yourself down. We'll have a chat." Fawningly courteous, bustling about, Yao turned and instructed his wife and sister, "Start the food. Cook us some hot dishes. We brothers will drink as we talk. Tseng-fu is busy. He hasn't much time."

Staring blankly, Tseng-fu remained standing on the tile floor. "But if I leave now," he thought, "I won't find out what this bird is up to."

"Sit down, sit down." Yao pushed Tseng-fu towards a chair. "How can I entertain a guest who remains standing? You see, the whole family is having to stand too. If you sit down, we'll all be able to do what we're supposed to."

Tseng-fu was very upset. He couldn't sit down here. The rich peasant's food and drink were scraps for a cur. How could an honest hired hand who was preparing to attack feudal oppression and exploitation before a mass meeting of the entire Hsiapao Township play the dog to a rich peasant? He scornfully ignored the delicacies on the table. Just seeing them made him sick. Although he was a man whose stomach knew mostly corn-meal gruel and muffins of coarse grain, he felt he was far superior to this rich peasant spiritually. Yet if he didn't sit down, he wouldn't be able to discover what Yao was scheming. He knew that Yao wanted to give a bribe, but he had no other details.

"Sit down. What are you afraid of?" Yao naturally couldn't understand Tseng-fu's nobility of spirit, but guessing that some conflict was going on inside his former hired hand's mind, he increased the vehemence of his urging. "Don't worry, brother. None of our neighbours will know we're drinking together. Not one of them has set foot in my courtyard since land reform."

By then, Tseng-fu had a new idea. Again adopting a flexible attitude, he said:

"I'm not afraid of people knowing. It's just that I'm busy. I've had my breakfast and I have to go to a meeting. I understand your good intentions. After the land reform is over, some evening when I've nothing to do, I'll come and drink with you. Now, suppose you tell me what's on your mind."

"All right. There's something in what you say, brother. Once the campaign is over, we'll have a quiet little drinking session." Yao stared at Tseng-fu's long thin face, trying to estimate his sincerity. The rich peasant hesitated.

Tseng-fu prodded him. "If you've nothing to say, I must be going."

Yao hastily grabbed him. "Don't go yet."

"Then hurry up and speak."

"I will." Yao was still staring at Tseng-fu's face, still unable to make up his mind. "I'll speak. If it's all right, we'll do it. If it's not all right, then we'll pretend I never said it. Right?"

"Go ahead."

"Don't forget — if it's not all right, we'll pretend I never said it."

"Just listen to you. Are you going to speak or not?"

"I'll speak. I'll speak."

"Then hurry up."

"Have we finished determining everyone's class status in our hamlet yet?"

"Not yet."

"Soon?"

"Soon."

"Look after me, can you?"

"What do you mean?"

Yao made a great effort, and said tensely, "Tell me how much grain is needed and I'll deliver it — as a present to our hamlet's poor peasants and hired hands."

"Go on. You haven't finished."

"I can't stand being isolated. I want to become progressive. All peasants under the sky are one family. All Kuan Creek Hamlet is one family — except for me. I'm excluded. I can't bear it."

"Go on. Finish what you have to say."

"Classify me as a middle peasant. If you and the other poor peasants and hired hands of the hamlet say I'm a middle peasant, the land reform team will go along. It'll follow the mass-line."

"Pah!" Tseng-fu spat on the floor and stalked angrily from the room.

That same morning Tseng-fu told the comrades of the land reform team and Chen-shan, chairman of the peasants' association, what had happened in detail. A special mass meeting was called to criticize rich peasant Yao for attempting to corrupt a cadre, bribe the masses, and sabotage the land reform. Chen-shan's stentorian voice made the walls of the buildings tremble as he shook his finger under the nose of the man who had fought with him in the old society. He castigated Yao till the rich peasant didn't dare to lift his head.

From that day on, Yao was much more cautious in his words and actions. But you could see from his expression that he thoroughly hated Tseng-fu and Chen-shan.

Yao behaved himself for the period that immediately followed the land reform. But once the land was measured, the productivity of the various plots estimated, and the new deeds issued in the winter of 1952, Yao raised his head again. Tseng-fu, who had been watching his rich neighbour carefully every day, observed that Yao was again cherishing the family property which he once had feared would lead him to disaster. He had resumed too his rich peasant's conceited air. Before, no matter how he hated Tseng-fu, he tried not to show it, and greeted him first whenever they met. Now, Yao seemed to feel that it was no longer necessary to pretend. If Tseng-fu didn't hail him on the street, Yao walked haughtily by without a word. His manner said plainly: "I dare you to get tough with me again." That much, at least, was obvious to Tseng-fu.

Tseng-fu was extremely unhappy. When the land reform period was proclaimed over and the land reform law terminated and the ownership of the various plots of land confirmed, the strictures against the sale of the land and the private lending of grain were also removed. On market days in Huangpao Town, you met them all along the road — rich peasants and well-to-do middle peasants from both banks of the Tang Stream, heads high, full of jolly talk and laughter. It worried the poor peasants and hired hands. Obviously the prosperous peasants were getting out of control. Unless some new law were passed to check them, who knew what might happen? In another few years, nine out of ten poor peasants and hired hands would be right back to the poverty they had suffered before land reform.

Today, Tseng-fu had no wife. He had been forced to sell the ox which he had bought with the government loan. The people's deputy was very worried. Was the road ahead bright or dark? If he lost his land again, if he had to go back to being a hired hand, how could he bring up little Tsai-tsai? Lately, he had often sighed to the small boy sleeping in his

arms: "Tsai-tsai, oh Tsai-tsai. Why couldn't you have been born into another family? Why did you have to be born in this thatched cottage?"

Although he had endured more bitter hardship than could be told in three days and three nights, Tseng-fu wasn't afraid of difficulties. Whenever you saw him, his thin face was taut and his jaw was set firm. There was courage in his heart. He was ready to meet whatever tests life put him to. But one thing he had never expected: The low-interest grain loans recommended by the government, instead of helping the needy peasants get through the idle months of spring, gave the tricky and dangerous rich peasant a chance to strike back at him.

When Tseng-fu learned that his brother Tseng-jung had gone to Yao to borrow grain, he stamped with exasperation. He went immediately to look for him. But Tseng-jung was out gathering brushwood in Mount Chungnan Gap; he didn't return until dusk, a large bundle of brush tied to his back. Again Tseng-fu hurried to his home. As soon as Tseng-fu entered the gateless compound with the earthen wall, he berated his brother:

"How could you be so stupid?"

"What do you mean?" Tseng-jung asked, surprised. Sweat was still running down his dust-covered face as he untied the bundle of brush.

"How could you throw yourself into the arms of a rich peasant? Why did you —"

"Ah." Tseng-jung understood. He smiled apologetically. "We have no grain to eat. Is it against the law to borrow grain from a rich peasant?"

"But your class standpoint?"

"My dear brother. If you have a firm stand but no food, you're still hungry, aren't you?"

"Hah. You —" Tseng-fu was ready to burst with rage at his brother's craven words. "Bowing your head to that rich peasant —you're a disgrace to our dead father's bones. This is straight from the shoulder: To die of hunger is a small thing compared to betraying your loyalty. Haven't I told you? Right

after Clear and Bright Day, all the needy peasants are going into the mountains with Sheng-pao's team to transport bamboo brooms. We'll have money to buy grain. We won't let you starve."

"I can't go, my knees hurt," Tseng-jung whined. "You know I caught rheumatism working for the landlord in the wet paddy fields in the old days."

"If you can't go, let me leave Tsai-tsai here and I'll go."

Tseng-jung could make no reply.

His wife, who had recently given birth and was still resting, put in a word from inside the cottage.

"Dear brother," she called weakly through the window. "It's better if each of our families tends to itself. It's hard enough for you to look after yourself and your son. How can you look after us too? Besides, I'm not out of bed yet. How could I take care of your little boy?"

Everything was clear to Tseng-fu. There was no point in his saying any more. What was there to say? He knew that his brother's wife ruled the roost. She made all the decisions. Actually, she wasn't Tseng-jung's legal wife. After her first husband died, leaving her with a child, she had taken Tseng-jung into her house. He did what she told him, and her orders were work, work, work. She must have got him to suck up to the rich peasant.

"I'd rather be a bachelor for a hundred thousand plus eight generations than live with a woman like that," Tseng-fu said to himself.

Angrily, he stalked out. At the gap in the compound wall he ran into Yao, who had been listening outside. The two enemies did not greet each other. Tseng-fu walked on, and Yao entered the courtyard.

"Tseng-jung, that grain you wanted to borrow — I've found out where you can get all you want," Yao said cordially, speaking loudly to make sure that Tseng-fu would hear and be enraged.

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Dark red circles marked his broad lined forehead where the cautery cups had been, breaths hot as flame came from his big hairy nostrils. His lips were dry and cracked, there were blisters in the corners of his bristly mouth. His large flashing eyes had lost their brilliance, his thunderous voice had been reduced to a hoarse whisper. For the past two days our friend Chen-shan had been lying on the small *kang* in his thatched cottage.

An ordinary cold or flu never could have felled this brawny peasant. A powerful fellow, in the past whenever he ran a fever, instead of taking medicine or lying down, he went out and worked like blazes. Invariably, the next day he was cured. But this time his illness was serious. He neither ate nor drank. He only covered his head with the quilt and slept heavily.

The mother of the village deputies' chairman kept tiptoeing up to his bed and asking:

"Chen-shan, how about some fine noodles?"

"Don't want any," the chairman muttered nasally from beneath the bedding.

"How about a couple of eggs?"

"Can't eat a thing."

"*Ai*! Chen-shan," the old woman cried with a worried frown. "You're the one who's always teaching others. You ought to know — man is iron, food is steel. When a person is ill even if he doesn't feel like eating, he ought to force himself to take a little. You're the one who's always teaching others."

"Go away, go away." The voice in the bedding was impatient.

But no mother in the world can be angry with her son for long. After a little while, the old woman again tiptoed to the bed.

"Chen-shan, how do you feel now?"

"Mm." He didn't want to talk.

"Chen-shan," his mother said anxiously, "this illness of yours doesn't look so good. Hadn't I better send Chen-hai into Huangpao to get a doctor at the health centre?"

"Don't need any."

"Then how about Dr. Kao in Hsiapao?"

"Please, ma."

"What is it?"

"Just let me sleep here quietly." The nasal voice inside the quilt trailed away.

Ancient superstition convinced the old woman that her son's ailment was not merely due to the chill he had caught while talking too long with Secretary Lu on the bank of the stream, the night of the low-interest grain loan meeting. She suspected that during the course of their conversation some demon had taken possession of Chen-shan's body. After privately consulting with his wife and the wife of his younger brother Chen-hai, she and the two wives, unknown to the sick Communist, went to the path along the stream bank to "send off" the demon. The old woman knelt on the path, heaped together a pile of earth, inserted a couple of incense sticks and burned simulated paper money. Kowtowing, she pleaded with the demon to wait at a crossroad for another victim.

But the next day the chairman of the village deputies was still unable to raise himself from his bed, although his forehead felt cooler to his mother's touch.

Wrapped in his quilt, Chen-shan was miserable. When a man is down on his luck, he thought, he'll tumble even on a perfectly level road. Last winter, just as he was about to buy two *mou* of paddy, Sheng-pao had found out and told the Party branch. Chen-shan had to criticize himself three times at Party rectification meetings. Recently, he took the grain he had originally set aside for the purchase of the land and invested it in the private brick and tile kiln outside Huangpao's north gate — to "aid national construction". Who would have thought that Secretary Lu would hear about it so quickly? That

night he had followed the secretary to the stream and jawed with him for a long time, but Lu had refused to drop even a hint of who had informed him. Chen-shan had staunchly denied that he had done any such thing. "If it's not true," Lu had retorted, "what do you care who told me?"

Chen-shan had repeated that he hadn't invested in the kiln. He suggested tentatively that even if he had, you couldn't compare it with buying land or with shameful acts of exploitation like practising usury. It would merely be a form of supporting national construction.

"Hah, comrade," Secretary Lu had said. "You're a smart talker. If you're so eager to support national construction, why don't you do the same as Comrade Sheng-pao? — Wholeheartedly organize a mutual-aid team and help the poor peasants increase output. You call investing your grain in a private kiln 'supporting national construction'? Comrade, you're in business. You needn't think that you're so clever and everyone else is stupid. You've got seventy-two holes in your heart; others can see right through you — even though they may not say so."

Chen-shan had flushed. What could he say? The secretary hadn't left him a leg to stand on.

Muffled in his bedding, he thought hard: How did Secretary Lu know? When and where had the news leaked out? Chen-shan had kept it secret even from his mother, his wife, his brother and his sister-in-law. When they asked him why he was giving grain to the kiln owner, he had cautioned them: "Not a word. It's the food grain we've saved. I'm having him make some bricks and tiles for us over a period of time. If you want a tile-roofed house, keep your mouths shut."

The whole family was very thankful to the head of the house for his long-range planning, and they knew he had been "rectified" during the Party rectification meetings the previous winter. They would never betray him.

As to the kiln owner, he had needed the grain badly to pay his workmen. He had nearly prostrated himself when he pleaded with Chen-shan to invest. "Don't worry about a thing,

chairman," he had assured Chen-shan. "I know that you Communists aren't allowed to buy land, or lend money, or hire farm hands, or do business. This is a secret between you and me and the earth and the sky. If I leak a single word, you can spit in my face. You can call me a baby and make me wear split pants." Of the few sharpers in the Huangpao market the kiln owner was one of the sharpest. Would he do anything to hurt his own interests?

Ah! Chen-shan finally dug it out of his memory. He seemed to recall that on two of the occasions when he and the kiln owner had met and talked in the Huangpao market, Sheng-pao had seen them.

"Him again," Chen-shan fretted beneath his quilt. "Him again. He's got a keen eye and a sensitive nose for this kind of business."

Unhappily he remembered that time in the first lunar month when District Party Secretary Wang came to Frog Flat to help strengthen the mutual-aid teams. He, Chen-shan, had felt pretty uncomfortable then. Knowing that he was in the wrong, he had kept his voice very low. Even his body had seemed too large — a big target attracts attention. What's more, Secretary Wang and Sheng-pao had been so friendly. At night, they had shared the same *kang*. It had made Chen-shan feel even worse. His heart had warned him: "Be careful. He's liable to whisper a lot of nasty things about you in Secretary Wang's ear. You'd better be careful." Now, in his sweat-smelly bedding, Chen-shan angrily muttered:

"Use your own ability to climb, Comrade Sheng-pao. Don't raise yourself by dirtying my name before our leader."

He wouldn't give Sheng-pao any credit. How much ability did that young fellow have after all?

"If I were the same as you — no wife, no kids — my mutual-aid team would be ten times better than yours. And I'm not bragging," Chen-shan thought truculently inside his quilt.

Now that his imagination was heated, he wondered why he shouldn't work to build up the country's enterprises instead of his own family fortunes. He'd show Sheng-pao how a mutual-aid team could flourish. But as he rolled over in the bedding, Chen-shan again changed his mind: You couldn't toss away your personal livelihood just to let off steam. Socialism was something people were only now beginning to talk about. Everywhere folk were concernedly asking: When will we have socialism in our China? But no one could say exactly. Obviously the road lying ahead of the peasants was a long one and vague. Maybe this generation wouldn't reach socialism, maybe the journey would have to be finished by the next.

Thanks to land reform, Chen-shan was lucky enough to get a solid basis for building up his family fortunes. He and his brother Chen-hai had strength that would make an ox die of envy. The way they worked, there was no doubt they'd overtake the well-to-do Shih-fu. This wasn't even counting the income they'd get from their youngest brother, Chen-chiang, whom Chen-shan had sent to Sian the first time the city put out a call to the countryside for workers. He was working as an apprentice in a power plant. When he became a regular worker, he'd be able to send money home.

1953, the first year of our country's First Five-Year Plan, was the third year of Chen-shan's first five-year plan to build up his family fortunes. He had started in 1951. The goal of his first five-year plan was: to catch up with Shih-fu on average land ownership per family member. That was as far as he wanted to go, not a step further. He absolutely wouldn't permit his family holdings to approach the size of those of his enemy, the rich peasant Yao. That would be as incompatible with his "political nature" as fire is to water.

Rafter by rafter and beam by beam, he stealthily prepared the materials for his tile-roofed house, to be built during his second five-year plan — beginning in 1956. First, he would erect the main building. Then, in the third year of the plan — 1958, he would build the east and west wings. In the fifth year — 1960, he would put up the front building. He wouldn't move too fast. It wouldn't look right for a Communist.

Even so, the Party time and again prevented him from carrying out his plans. His first five-year plan had already been

ruined. During the Party rectification campaign, it was already denounced as a breach of Party discipline for a Communist to buy land. Chen-shan had no choice but to advance the date of his second five-year plan. But who would have thought that the minute he poked his head out he'd be spotted by the secretary of the Party branch.

At a Party rectification meeting the previous winter, Chen-shan had made a fervid speech:

"A truer word was never spoken. When the men of the Red Army were crossing the snow mountains and slogging over the swampy grasslands, they didn't know how long it would be before the whole country was liberated. But though their feet were torn and bleeding they marched on, and in a little over a decade they smashed old Chiang Kai-shek. Who can say? We may even reach socialism in another ten or twenty years."

As Chen-shan, together with other Communists, came out of the large gateway of the Hsiapao Township government, his mind was filled with lofty socialist ideals. Walking along a path through the paddy fields, after crossing a single plank footbridge over the Tang Stream, he had an intimate chat with Sheng-pao. They discussed how to strengthen the mutual-aid teams of Frog Flat, how to help the needy members who were having difficulty in their work and in their daily life, so that they wouldn't fall back into the old mire.

But as he lay on his *kang* that night, amid his wife and children, and listened to the mighty snores of his brother Chen-hai in the west wing, and heard the ox crunching chopped corn stalks in the shed adjoining the east wing, and the cat which guarded their grain growling as it pounced on a rat on the shed's roof, Chen-shan at once came back to reality. His public duties were occupying too much of his time. Chen-hai was always threatening to take his own share of the farm and pull out. If Chen-shan wanted to go at mutual aid in real earnest, Chen-hai would never agree. Chen-hai had only a couple of kids, but Chen-shan had a large brood and he wasn't as powerful a worker as his brother. Chen-shan couldn't allow a break.

It was out of the question. As the old saying goes: "The only thing a good property fears is to be split up." Separated from Chen-hai, Chen-shan and his family would be hard pressed. Together, the brothers had a substantial bit of land and their labour power was strong.

"I'll be a plain ordinary Communist. I'll do a good job of my village administrative work and that's all," Chen-shan thought. "Glory — I haven't the conditions to win glory."

And so, the man who had made such a name for himself in Hsiapao Township during land reform came to a final decision — he would look after his own household, he wouldn't bother with the poor peasants and hired hands. But he never dreamed Secretary Lu would keep such a close check on him. Nor had he ever expected that the village administrative work would become so difficult that he couldn't get by with only going through the motions.

His mother brought in a bowl of hot noodles. Very colourful, it had red peppers, green garlic sprouts and golden drops of bean oil floating on the surface. It made your mouth water just to look at it. Carrying it over to her son, the old woman stirred the noodles a bit with a pair of chopsticks and said:

"See, Chen-shan, your wife cooked this for you. You must try to eat a bowl or two."

Chen-shan pushed aside the quilt, struggled to a sitting position and accepted the bowl. As he gazed at it, his brows knit in a worried frown and he thought:

"What shall I do? The village administrative work is so hard, being a Communist is so hard. What shall I do?" This extremely grave question was giving him a splitting headache.

"You're the one who's always teaching others," his mother grumbled. "Show a little sense."

"Outside the house he's so clever, but at home he's all muddled," Chen-shan's wife said irritably. She was suckling a baby. "Ma, leave him alone. He can eat or not — it's up to him."

With an effort, Chen-shan raised some noodles with the chopsticks and put them in his mouth. He didn't even have

a desire to chew. He fretted inwardly: "A Communist. A Communist. Why is it so hard to be a Communist?"

The question was tormenting him. And Secretary Lu had looked at him with such displeasure in his eyes. Suppose he left the Party? He'd get along.

He forced down the first mouthful of noodles, and picked up a second. Again he was unable to chew. Suddenly all the blood in his body seemed to rush to his brain. He could neither move nor think.

It seemed to Chen-shan that he wasn't on the small *kang* inside his thatched cottage, but on a boat on the Wei River. He was dizzy, he couldn't sit firm. His head heavy, his throat choked, a bitter taste in his mouth, he wanted to vomit. Horrible. The entire cottage was moving, the bamboo basket hanging from a rafter was swinging, the cupboard against the wall was swaying.

Somewhere outside the compound there seemed to be a huge explosion. Chen-shan's ears began to ring, his bowl fell on the quilt, and he lost consciousness.

When he awakened, he was lying in bed with tears running down his bristly cheeks. Ashamed and unhappy, he assured the rest of the family that he was all right. He ordered them to leave and go about their business.

Chen-shan. Chen-shan. The failing that was a peasant characteristic for thousands of years has been welded so firmly into your big powerful frame that it's difficult to pry it loose. You're crammed with ideas from the old society. Secretary Lu has already criticized you. Have you the strength to rip out your own deficiencies? Who is going to win the battle for your spiritual self — Chen-shan the Communist, or Chen-shan the peasant?

After the others had left, he lay alone beneath his quilt, his body drenched in cold sweat. What a pity. Instead of examining himself ideologically, Chen-shan the Communist merely scolded Chen-shan the peasant-cum-earthenware basin pedlar:

"What crazy idea has possessed you? Do you really want to take the road to the edge of the cliff? Wake up. Open your

eyes. How can you think of leaving the Party? You must stay in the Party, you must. If you leave the Party the peasants of Frog Flat will stab you to death with their eyes. Your enemy Yao will spit in your face."

In that instant Chen-shan, the peasant who was working so hard to build up his family fortunes, could see it fairly clearly: The Party had great and limitless strength. It was effectively guiding the development of China's history. Its policies were influencing the life of every Chinese — the Party enabled those who had been starving to eat their fill; it made the extravagant frugal, brought honour to the labouring people, made the lazy diligent, forced tyrants to bend the knee, gave courage to the weak, brought stability to society and prosperity to the Huangpao market fairs.

And what about Chen-shan himself? He had been an ordinary peasant. It was only after he began carrying out Party policies that people attached any importance to him. If he quit the Party, all he'd have left would be a big body which could support a load of two hundred catties and the petty shrewdness of a peasant living from day to day.

He had always considered being "in the Party" more vital than anything. He never missed a Party meeting. If the Tang Stream rose, he walked far along the bank to a small bridge. If that had been washed away by the mountain torrent, he went all the way to the big Huangpao Bridge. Was he going to let his desire to build up his family fortunes make him leave the Party? Nonsense.

Blabbermouth Sun called on the chairman of the village deputies, and brought him some news from the hamlet: Blue Moth, wife of ex-corporal Pai, had revealed that rich peasant Yao had loaned them two measures of white rice. After depositing the rice at home, Pai had gone off to Sian to buy old junk. In fact two needy peasants in Kuan Creek Hamlet had secretly borrowed grain from Yao. Tseng-fu's brother Tseng-jung had also gone to the rich peasant's handsome tile-roofed compound. Tseng-fu was so furious, he had stamped with

rage. Many peasants upstream were going into the mountains with Sheng-pao's mutual-aid team to cut bamboo. Sheng-pao and Yu-wan had talked Iron Man into lending grain to the families of the needy peasants from his ward who were going into the mountains. Tseng-fu was organizing porters in Kuan Creek Hamlet to carry out the bamboo brooms.

Chen-shan listened, depressed. The chairman of the village deputies had lost his power to control the affairs of Frog Flat. Matters in the hamlet were developing quite independently of his influence. The rich peasants evidently no longer feared him, the poor peasants weren't looking to him for anything any more. Sheng-pao and Yu-wan had not asked him what they should beware of when they were up in the hills.

Blabbermouth's account ran on and on. As Chen-shan listened, one thing became clear: by his go-it-alone approach to farming, he had removed himself from the ranks of the fighters in Frog Flat. He had placed himself outside the revolution. No wonder Secretary Lu had looked at him with displeasure.

"Enough. Enough," Chen-shan pleaded softly. "Don't say any more. I've got a headache. If you've something else to do, just run along. We can talk again some other time." Chen-shan once more covered his head with the quilt.

Blinking, Blabbermouth gazed at him in surprise. Disappointed, he left the cottage. He had been intending to try and enlist the chairman's help in his quest for Kai-hsia after reporting the news. He hadn't realized that Chen-shan was so ill. *Ai*!

As for Kai-hsia herself, her thoughts were as healthy as her rosy cheeks, her heart was as spotless as her sky-blue tunic. Like a bee seeking nectar, she diligently sought knowledge. She strove for progress and longed to win honour by contributing greater spiritual strength to society. To the twenty-one-year-old member of the Youth League branch committee, honour was everything. She simply could not understand how a person could live other than honourably in this great new society. An important reason for her disdain of Blabbermouth, aside

from the fact that he gazed at her lustfully, was his failure to be accepted into the Communist Party after the chairman had recommended him. "Humph! What kind of a youth is he?" she thought. "Can't even get into the Party."

Land, houses, carts, draught animals, clothing, farm implements, and other such items of private property in Kai-hsia's eyes had no more significance than the stones and gravel and grass on the banks of the Tang Stream. If, when the time came, she applied to join the Party and were refused, she wouldn't know how to face people. To be a Communist, to add one's own strength to the great collective strength of the Party — this, it seemed to Kai-hsia, was the very minimum requirement of an honourable existence.

But, lacking sufficient knowledge and experience, she saw only the glory of being a Communist. She did not realize that the inner thoughts and secret conduct of certain individuals bearing this honourable name made them unworthy of it. Pure and honourable herself, with no selfish desires, she was accustomed to viewing people she respected in the best possible light, and assuming the worst about people she disliked. When she heard that rich peasant Yao and well-to-do middle peasant Shih-fu had the temerity to openly oppose the low-interest grain loans, she was so enraged she wanted to pinch them, to spit in their faces.

At the same time she sympathized from the bottom of her heart with Chairman Chen-shan, who was responsible for this work. Her relations with him ever since liberation gave her no reason to doubt his good intentions. She forgave his lack of enthusiasm for his mutual-aid team because he had a large family. "Of course," honest Kai-hsia thought to herself. "Sheng-pao's situation is much simpler."

And so that day when she returned home from the Hsiapao primary school and heard from her mother that the chairman of the village deputies was ill, she threw down her school bag and hurried over to the cottage across the way.

Chen-shan acted quite differently from the way he behaved when Blabbermouth visited him. Pushing aside the quilt, he

squatted on the sleeping mat, his feet bare, and chatted with the girl standing at the foot of the *kang*.

When she saw how ill he looked — this man who had always been so concerned about her progress and future — Kai-hsia was shocked. It was only a few days since she had last seen him on the village streets, but he had changed enormously. Because Chen-shan had been sleeping too long with his head under the covers, his broad face had become pasty and swollen. Its lines had deepened into wrinkles. His bristly cheeks were even more unkempt looking. Squatting on the *kang* in a shadowy corner, Chen-shan had the appearance of a doddering old failure.

After asking a few questions about his illness, Kai-hsia inquired with concern why he hadn't called the doctor from the health centre in Hsiapao?

"Ah, forget it." Chen-shan's voice was still rather hoarse. "Forget it. I'm much better today."

Indeed, his mother and wife could testify — this important member of their family obviously was gradually recovering. He had regained a bit of spirit. Chen-shan now wore a smile when he talked with Kai-hsia. They were sure that a smile and anxiety couldn't exist at the same time, nor could a forced smile mask any worry in his heart.

Chen-shan had fought his way out of a dangerous state of mind. He was struggling to take a broader view, to look towards the light. He warned himself: As long as he and Yao were living in the same administrative village, he could never leave the Party. The hatred between himself and Yao could never be dispelled as long as they both were on this earth. Land reform had given Chen-shan a bit of solace, but it had made Yao hate him all the more. The sole reason why Yao hadn't dared to bare his fangs at them was because Chen-shan's position had been just. For Chen-shan to quit the Party now would simply be looking for trouble. How could he stand up against Yao man to man?

Chen-shan came to a decision. He would accept Secretary Lu's criticism. The rice which he had invested in the private



Kuo Chen-shan

kiln would become the purchase price of bricks and tiles. Then no one could say he was "in business". As to his mutual-aid team, he would simply bear up under Secretary Lu's criticism and Secretary Wang's coldness. He'd wait and see how Sheng-pao made out with his team, then he'd act. He couldn't risk the livelihood of a dozen or more people on this mutual-aid gamble. And since he was unwilling to respond positively to the Party's call, of course he couldn't expect to be commended as he had been during the land reform. Well, Chen-shan thought, he'd just plug away at earning a living.

Now that he had convinced himself, Chen-shan's health improved considerably. He didn't have to wrap himself in the quilt any longer. His wife and mother saw only that he was feeling better. How could they know what a severe struggle he had been through? And innocent Kai-hsia. Never in her dreams could she imagine such complicated ideas. She could only see him squatting barefoot on the bed. How could she tell what he was thinking? In fact she even said to herself: *Aiya.* Look what worrying over our village's needy peasants has done to our chairman. He must be very angry with Yao and Shih-fu. . . . And for this, she respected Chen-shan even more.

In her plaid cloth shoes, the member of the Youth League branch committee stood on the earthen floor of Chen-shan's thatched cottage. To manifest her sympathy for the chairman, she angrily attacked Yao and Shih-fu for their opposition to the low-interest grain loans.

After his internal struggle, Chen-shan now appeared calm and reasonable, and full of self-critical spirit.

"I have shortcomings," he admitted. "I have shortcomings. If, in the first lunar month, my family hadn't insisted that I take our small store of surplus grain and order bricks and tiles with it, would Yao and Shih-fu dare to act so bold today? If I had used that grain to help the needy peasants, I'd be in a position to talk firmly to those two. As it is — *Ai.* I was wrong. Wrong. I shouldn't have listened to my family. 'A family has many tongues but only one master.' We've been living in

thatched cottages for generations. Why should we be in such a hurry to build a tile-roofed house?"

His pained and self-critical manner touched Kai-hsia's simple heart. Self-criticism to any degree is always welcomed. It is in no way demeaning; on the contrary, it arouses people's respect.

"*Ai.* Good Kai-hsia," Chen-shan continued dejectedly. "My family said: Every year we have to repair the thatch. On this wild flat if the wind blew the roof away some dark night, we couldn't even get up in time to chase it. I thought to myself: It's true. Rather than no one being able to sleep whenever there was a wind . . . but who knew —" The chairman was simply too miserable for words.

Kai-hsia believed he was sorry. She knew that selfish family demands could be a pit for any Communist or Youth Leaguer. If you were the least bit careless, you could fall right in. As she stood rolling the edge of her blue cloth tunic, she wondered whether there was anything intelligent she could say to comfort the chairman.

"You've come just at the right time," Chen-shan went on. "I've been meaning to tell you. I want you to ask your ma whether she's willing to join my mutual-aid team."

Kai-hsia was very surprised. "Haven't you already teamed up with Old Chin and his brother?"

"That's right. But Old Chin and his brother both have draught animals. The team isn't carrying along a family which has none. That's my fault too."

"I'm afraid Old Chin wouldn't agree," Kai-hsia said doubtfully. "We've got no men in our family, and no ox. We're a burden. No mutual-aid team wants us."

"Don't worry. If he isn't willing, I'll talk to him."

Kai-hsia was delighted. Joy makes young people excited, and Kai-hsia said excitedly:

"You don't have to ask my ma. I guarantee she'll agree with all her heart. You live right across the lane from us. You know how we manage. Every year we have to borrow a draught animal from our relatives to till our field."

The innocent Kai-hsia felt closer to Chen-shan than ever. Here was a man who recognized his mistakes and corrected them. Kai-hsia had lost her father and had no brothers. She considered herself very fortunate to have this older man, this Communist, looking after her.

Chen-shan gazed at the girl's happy face, lovely as a newly opened flower. He asked:

"What about going to a factory? Have you made up your mind yet?"

"Not yet," Kai-hsia laughingly replied.

"What's taking you so long?"

Kai-hsia only laughed. She wanted to talk with Sheng-pao, but she still hadn't been able to find the chance. Of course that wasn't entirely true. It would be more accurate to say she was waiting for Sheng-pao to speak up and arrange a meeting. She shouldn't have to go after him. That would be too embarrassing. She wouldn't be able to open her mouth.

But how could a girl tell this sort of thing to a third person? Again Chen-shan pressed her:

"What's taking you so long?"

Kai-hsia smiled and said, "You'd better lie down and get some rest, chairman. I must be leaving."

13

Sheng-pao squatted on the dirt floor of Yu-wan's thatched cottage. In one hand he held a short pipe that had already gone out. With the thick forefinger of his other hand he scratched figures on the floor in the light of an oil lamp, his lips moving.

"Five ones are five, five sixes are thirty."

"How is it?" Yu-wan asked. He was quickly shovelling rice into his mouth from a large bowl with a pair of chopsticks. He craned his neck to look at Sheng-pao's calculations. "Will we have enough to give each man fifteen yuan?"

"Yes," said Sheng-pao. He continued figuring. "Five sevens are thirty-five."

On his person were two hundred and fifty yuan in crisp new bills. Think of it! When had the pocket of Sheng-pao's old padded jacket ever contained so much cash? Never. The district supply and marketing co-op in Huangpao had advanced him a third of the price when he signed the contract for the bamboo brooms. This joyous event had given his spirits an enormous boost. As he walked to the branch of the People's Bank to cash the check, there was a spring in his step. Smiling, he thought: Ha, with the leadership of the Party, and a contract with the supply and marketing co-op, and the People's Bank acting as backstage manager, what have we got to worry about?

He put the bills the bank gave him very carefully into his pocket. The money was like a flame, warming his entire body, making him deliciously comfortable. After Chen-shan had shown himself to be useless, Sheng-pao had come forward to try and straighten out the situation in Frog Flat. But it had only been out of a sense of responsibility as a Communist and sympathy for the needy peasants that night in the schoolhouse

that he had agreed to take them into the mountains. He hadn't felt very confident.

He had plenty of confidence now. Sheng-pao was calculating how much money he should give to each man. Everyone should have enough to buy grain for his family and cloth for their spring clothes, as well as the things he'd need in the mountains — a sickle, hemp sandals, leg-wrappings. Huan-hsi was at that very moment in the paddy flats, going from one thatched cottage to another, notifying the peasants of a meeting in Feng Yu-yi's cottage, which was centrally located. Sheng-pao and Yu-wan were going there together as soon as Yu-wan finished eating.

"What do you say, Sheng-pao?" Yu-wan burst out excitedly. "Let's not borrow any money from Iron Man. Let's show those middle peasants that we paupers can get along without them."

"*Aiya.*" Sheng-pao was surprised. "How can you be so dumb? We may be young, but we can't behave like a bunch of kids. It's true that some middle peasants aren't so hot on mutual aid and co-operation, and some of them look down on us poor peasants. But Party policy is for us to unite with the middle peasants, not to get huffy with them."

Yu-wan smiled apologetically and went back to finishing his meal. When it came to questions of Party policy, he couldn't argue.

Lighting his pipe, Sheng-pao continued: "If you really want to join the Party, you've got to quit always doing things any way the mood strikes you. Everything has to be done according to Party policy. Don't you remember what Secretary Wang told us? We're not just private individuals banding together in a mutual-aid team. We represent socialism."

Yu-wan's mother-in-law, who was seated on the *kang*, and Yu-wan's wife Golden Sister, who was standing by the table, were happy to hear Sheng-pao criticize him. The wild young fellow who had married into their household was like a lump of crude iron. Maybe Sheng-pao's lectures would file off some of his rough edges. The women had never been able to convince him of anything.

Gazing at Sheng-pao affectionately, the kindly old woman plainly had something on her mind. She looked and looked. Finally she couldn't resist asking curiously:

"Sheng-pao, you're twenty-what this year?"

"Twenty-five. Why do you ask, Aunt Feng?"

"Why? You run around so for all of us — don't you ever think of getting married?"

Yu-wan's wife, Golden Sister, gave Sheng-pao a thin smile. Feeling very uncomfortable, he said:

"There's no hurry about it."

"What do you mean, no hurry!" the old woman retorted. "When you pass thirty, no girl in this new society will have you. If you're interested, I know a fine girl in another village."

"Must you interfere?" Yu-wan, still eating, rudely interrupted his mother-in-law. "He's had a girl for a long time already."

"Oh? He has? Where does she live?"

"I haven't. I haven't." Embarrassed, Sheng-pao firmly denied it. He glared at Yu-wan. From the wink Golden Sister cast at her mother, it was obvious that Yu-wan had revealed the secret of Sheng-pao and Kai-hsia to his wife. That blundering hulk. He had been afraid Yu-wan couldn't keep his mouth shut, the useless clod.

Sheng-pao felt badly about this failing of the young militia captain. Sometimes he couldn't help worrying. It was dangerous having to carry out the important task the Party had given him, working together with this young hothead. Not only was he unsteady, but his attitude was bad. Look at how he treated his mother-in-law. If the old widow and her daughter weren't so taken with the working ability of this chunk of crude iron, would they let him get away with treating the old woman so disrespectfully?

After the militia captain had finished his rice and the two young men were walking through the murky night to Feng's place, Sheng-pao criticized Yu-wan. He said Yu-wan shouldn't have told Golden Sister anything he wasn't sure of.

"You can stuff your belly with a whole tub of rice. Couldn't you hold down just a few little words? Were you so bloated you had to pop them out?"

"What do you mean?" Yu-wan asked, a trifle shamefaced. "Haven't you hooked up with Kai-hsia yet?"

"Where would I get the time? As old saw says: You can't do two things at one time."

"Just to say a couple of words – how long does that take?"

"You've got to find the right chance. When nobody else can see you."

"Ho! I never thought you'd be such a softy about this sort of thing!" Yu-wan had to laugh. "Why do you have to 'find' a chance? If you wait for that, you may have to wait till next year."

"What do you think I should do?"

"As long as you love her and she loves you, arrange a meeting the next time you see her."

"How do I do that?"

"The next time you see her, say: 'Kai-hsia, tonight go to such-and-such a place. I'll be there, waiting. There's something I have to tell you.' "

"A bold shameless advisor you are. How can you give me such a crude plan?"

"What's crude about it?" Yu-wan laughed. He wasn't angry in the least. "All right then, just wait. The next time Kai-hsia sees you she'll say: 'Sheng-pao, meet me tonight at such-and-such a place. I've something to tell you.' That girl's got more nerve than you. She's not ashamed to speak up! The husband of a child-bride and still so shy when it comes to girls. These last few nights I was sure you were out in the peach orchard, kissing Kai-hsia. I purposely kept away so as not to disturb you."

Sheng-pao closed his big hand into a fist and punched Yu-wan hard on his thick shoulder. "Shameless dog."

But to himself, Sheng-pao had to admit there was something in what his "advisor" said. He was too shy. In a thing like this, it probably was better to be a little crude, like Yu-wan.

The past few days Sheng-pao had met Kai-hsia a few times, on the paths in the fields. Each time, when they were still a distance apart, he had gathered his courage, preparing to talk with her, to find out what her real feelings were. But the moment they came face to face, except for a simple greeting, he hadn't been able to say a word. And he had grown quite flurried, sure that all the people outside their thatched cottages in the paddy fields were watching them. He was worried that being seen together would affect his standing in the village, which wasn't high enough yet. In order to do a good job of the task the Party had given him, Sheng-pao felt he had to raise his prestige among the people, so that they would go along with him without any reservations.

Feng's thatched cottage was a bit more spacious than most. Besides a small inner room with a *kang* and a cooking stove, it also had a somewhat larger room where the mutual-aid team made soy beancurd during the slack months of the year. Now, a dozen or more peasants squatted on the large room's damp earthen floor. When Huan-hsi had told them that the supply and marketing co-op had given an advance, they came rushing to the meeting. Aha. So it was the Communist Party and the people's government that were the most dependable after all.

An oil lamp was placed on the millstone where the soy bean was ground. Sheng-pao stood before the peasants and reported on the contract the Huangpao co-op had made for the bamboo brooms. The peasants would deliver fifteen hundred brooms weighing seven catties each. At fifty cents per broom, the total contract price amounted to seven hundred and fifty yuan. The co-op had already advanced one third, and would pay the remaining five hundred yuan in a lump sum when all the brooms were delivered.

"Good," Old Jen the Fourth shouted approvingly, removing his pipe from his mouth. "The people's government is really fine. We had no land, so it gave us land. We had no draught animals, so it loaned us money to buy them. Now, even before

we go into the mountains to cut bamboo, it advances us money. If I'd known that before —"

"Uncle." His nephew Huan-hsi uneasily cut him short. "Save the idle chatter till after the team leader finishes talking."

"Who says it's idle chatter?" Old Jen wasn't taking any nonsense from a seventeen-year-old boy, even if he was a primary-school graduate. He asked the assembled peasants: "Is it idle chatter? If you all say it's idle chatter, I'll stop talking."

The others couldn't very well make him lose face. They only smiled awkwardly. But Yu-wan didn't stand on ceremony.

"If it isn't idle chatter, what is it? Are we meeting here to discuss whether the government is good or bad?"

"Don't pull any of those old Kuomintang ways on me," Jen said stubbornly. "In our new society, nobody can play the bureaucrat — and that includes the captain of the militia."

"What? If I don't let you chatter, then I'm using Kuomintang ways?" Yu-wan demanded in astonishment.

"Chatter? You call this chatter? Secretary Wang likes to listen to my 'chatter' I can tell you."

"Then why not make your speech to the Huangpao district Party committee?" Yu-wan mocked him.

The others couldn't restrain their laughter. Sheng-pao, also laughing, said to Yu-wan: "You're always arguing with him. When he thinks of something, he feels awful if he can't speak it right out. The more you argue with him, the longer it takes him to say it."

"All right. All right. I won't argue. Let him talk." With a forced smile, Yu-wan fell silent.

Having been given the team leader's support, old Jen became even more righteous. He stepped to the middle of the room and formally began his address.

"It's not that I'm gabby. But we poor people like everything our government does, and our words come pouring out."

"All right. Hurry up and pour," the cheerful Iron-Lock Wang laughed from a dark corner of the room.

"Our government has been better to me than my pa," old Jen proclaimed, unruffled. "When my pa died, he didn't leave me and my brothers a bit of property. All he left us was a lot of debts. When others split up a family inheritance, they divide the buildings and divide the land. When my brothers and I split up our inheritance, we divided the debts."

"Must you go into all that again?" asked Huan-hsi in agitation. "You've told us that story a thousand times."

"That's just the introduction. Don't interrupt. I'm coming to the main point," old Jen retorted seriously. He plainly was getting himself worked up, and he said with considerable feeling: "If I had known about the co-op before, I wouldn't have borrowed any of Shih-fu's stinking grain last year even if he came to my door and kowtowed. Why? Because there's not one line of mountain work that old Jen's not an expert in. If I can go to Huangpao and make a contract with the supply and marketing co-op, and they give me a one-third advance so that my family has food to eat and clothes to wear, why should I have to owe Shih-fu anything?"

Yu-wan simply couldn't stand any more. The old man's nonsense was wasting time. Huan-hsi was ashamed of his uncle's utterly impractical though honestly impassioned speech. The sensitive young fellow had noticed that several people were laughing at the old man.

"You make it sound so easy," said Yu-wan, both amused and angry. "Think you can do it?"

"Why not? Aren't I one of the Communist Party's basic masses?" Jen observed that everyone was looking at him in a funny way, and he became a little confused. "I figure if Sheng-pao can make a contract, there's no reason why I can't too."

Sheng-pao explained to the old man: It wasn't just anybody who could enter into a contract with the supply and marketing co-operative, only a representative of a mutual-aid team bearing a letter of introduction from the township government. As to private individuals, the co-op might buy a few brooms from them, but not until they had brought the brooms out of the mountains and put them on display in the Huangpao market.

"We have what's called a tie-in contract. It means that the supply and marketing co-op ties in with the mutual-aid teams," said Sheng-pao.

Old Jen opened his whiskery mouth. "Oh. Why didn't you make that clear before?"

"You were talking so much, no one else could get a word in edgewise." Huan-hsi gave his uncle a disapproving look. Old Jen laughed in embarrassment, went back to his place by the wall and squatted down.

Yu-wan urged Sheng-pao to distribute the money, but Sheng-pao wanted to take this opportunity to tell his mutual-aid team and the peasants from Iron Man's ward some exciting news first.

When he had gone to Huangpao to sign the contract, he had met a cadre from the county office of the supply and marketing co-op. The comrade said that in Tawang Village in the Lu River Valley, all of the mutual-aid teams, with Wang Tsung-chi's agricultural producers' co-op as their mainstay, had made a contract with the Toupao District supply and marketing co-op for ten thousand bamboo brooms. Sixty able-bodied men of the village were going into the mountains. In a little over a month they would earn five thousand yuan. Not only was there no question about food grain and cloth for spring clothes for the entire village, but the Tawang peasants had already ordered all the fertilizer they would need for the coming season. County, district and township cadres, whenever they stopped in Tawang, didn't see a single person in ragged clothes or anyone who looked worried about making a living. The whole village was at work — men and women, young and old.

"I asked the comrade from the county office of the supply and marketing co-op: With all those people from Tawang Village going into the mountains, does that mean the middle peasants will be out cutting bamboo also? 'Why shouldn't they?' he said. 'You think a middle peasant can only go into the mountains to dig medicinal herbs, but not to cut bamboo? Use your head. If the poor peasants and hired hands stick together and take the mutual-aid and co-operation road, the middle peasants

have to follow.' You see how strong their mutual aid and co-operation is over there," Sheng-pao concluded encouragingly.

As the poor peasants and hired hands squatting on the floor of the beancurd-making room listened, they grew more and more animated. At first, they only stared in surprise. Then pleased smiles appeared on their faces and they looked at one another, their spirits visibly rising. The enthusiasm with which Sheng-pao had been infused now fired the peasants before him.

What he was trying to convey to them was that they shouldn't merely be impressed with the fifteen yuan each had received as an advance for the bamboo brooms they were about to cut in the mountains. He wanted them to see the strength of poor peasants and hired hands once they were united, and not to feel inferior to middle peasants simply because of the difficulties they were having in production or in their daily lives.

His words had their effect, and many peasants began speaking at once:

"We'll do it, Sheng-pao. Just give us the lead," said a tall thin man.

"We'll stay hot on the heels of Tawang Village," a solemn, ruddy-faced peasant asserted.

"We're all the same men under the sun. If Tawang can do it, why not Frog Flat?" demanded the cheerful Iron-Lock Wang.

But Jen the Fourth, usually so fond of expressing his opinion, this time was silent. As he squatted leaning against the wall, hands hooked behind his neck, his pipe between his teeth, he was thinking very hard. When he heard Sheng-pao's report, his first reaction was — how considerate the government is of the poor peasants and hired hands. He hadn't realized that the thing depended on the poor peasants and hired hands themselves. In other words, their unity was the Party's strength. At last, in a very moved voice, old Jen spoke:

"Sheng-pao, you're the one with the good head after all. If the poor peasants and hired hands don't organize and the government has to help them one by one, how can it look after so many? While it's propping this one up, that one will fall.

Take Tseng-fu in our village, for example. Did the government lend him money to buy a draught animal? It did. But he had to sell his ox. And he couldn't repay when the loan came due. What's the government supposed to do – make him another loan? Organize, that's the answer. We've all got to organize."

"Now you're talking sense." Yu-wan grinned. Again he urged Sheng-pao: "All right. Hand out the money."

With great satisfaction, Sheng-pao pulled a packet wrapped in red cloth from a pocket inside his tunic. All eyes were fixed on the movement of his thick fingers as they opened the packet and counted the bills. He had counted the money once in the bank, and then again at home. But this was the first time since he had begun managing things that such a large sum had come into his hands. He didn't want there to be the slightest mistake. On the road home from Huangpao he had been rather keyed up. Even though the pocket containing the money was fastened with a safety pin, he kept feeling it from the outside, as if afraid that the small red cloth packet would run away. He knew how much toil his beloved neighbours would have to put into earning that money, how they would have to sweat.

How the peasants' eyes watched his moving fingers. What concentration. And the brains behind those eyes – what were they thinking? How precious the money was to the needy peasants in this difficult season. In previous springs, they had also gone into the mountains – once, maybe twice, scraping together just enough so that the wife and kids wouldn't starve till the barley came in. Some wanted to go more often, but it wasn't easy to find partners. The mountain wilderness was covered with deep forests where tigers, panthers and bears roamed. A peasant who could find any other way to earn something always preferred it to risking a mountain expedition with a small band of two or three.

Now everything was all right – they were sixteen strong. And a month of bamboo cutting on Mount Chungnan would bring them a few score yuan each.

Sheng-pao counted out the shares of fifteen yuan and Yu-wan distributed them, while Huan-hsi kept a record.

After the peasants had received their advance, Sheng-pao told them what to prepare. It was agreed that they would go into the mountains right after Clear and Bright Day.

As the meeting was breaking up, the door of the compound gate squeaked. Who was that walking across the courtyard? All eyes turned to the open door of the thatched cottage. A shadowy figure approached. He was carrying some object. With a despondent tread, the man crossed the threshold.

"Ah! It's you," the peasants cried.

"I groped through the dark to your house first, and they said you had gone to Yu-wan's. Again I groped through the dark, but at Yu-wan's place they said you two had come here," Tseng-fu declared to Sheng-pao. Holding the sleeping Tsai-tsai in his arms, he had brought in a bit of the spring night chill.

"What's wrong?" asked Sheng-pao, seeing Tseng-fu's dejected manner. "Having trouble organizing the porters?"

"No. That's all arranged."

"Then what's so important that it brings you out with a sleeping child to look for me in the middle of the night?"

For the moment, Tseng-fu was unable to speak. Everyone could see that the thirty-year-old peasant was holding back his tears only with the greatest effort. Could this unlucky man have suffered another mishap, wondered Sheng-pao? With no woman in the house and no draught animal to till the land, father and son led a bleak and lonely existence. Could fate hurt them any worse than it had already?

Everyone knew that Kuan Creek Hamlet had a lot of middle peasants, with a big well-to-do middle peasant at the east end, and at the west end a family who had been rich peasants for generations. Although Tseng-fu was a people's delegate, after the new land deeds were distributed, he started being isolated in his own election ward. But who could have believed that some new misfortune would fall upon his head?

One of the peasants handed forward a stool and urged him to sit down – he was carrying the little boy. Tseng-fu said he wasn't tired, he was used to it; his arms had grown quite strong. Everyone laughed wryly. They waited for him to speak. He shifted Tsai-tsai in his arms, swallowed, and said:

"My mutual-aid team's collapsed. My brother – he's hitched up with the rich peasant. The other two men on my team say that since my brother's quit, they're quitting too."

"What?" His listeners' jaws dropped in astonishment. "Is this true?"

"It's true. My brother and Yao are working together," Tseng-fu said heavily. Sarcastically he added, "My brother's short of animal power and Yao's short of labour power. Together they make a fine pair. What's more, that son of a bitch Yao had the nerve to insult me. He sent my brother with a message. He says if I'm willing to join him, he'll forget old scores. Is that spitting in my face or isn't it, I ask you?" Tseng-fu ground his teeth in rage.

The faces of the other peasants flushed an angry red. Yu-wan stamped his foot.

"That rich peasant is running wild. What are things coming to when a rich peasant can act like that? Why didn't you tell the chairman?"

Tseng-fu shook his head. He thought to himself: "He's not the same Chen-shan he was two years ago. On the surface he's a Communist, but in his heart he's a well-to-do middle peasant. The land reform has made him fat. He's content with life." But he didn't voice these sentiments aloud. Instead, he said to Yu-wan dully:

"Don't you remember that night when we wanted to stop Yao from moving out his grain? What's the use of telling Chen-shan? I've thought it over. There's no law to stop a rich peasant from teaming up to farm with anyone he likes. What can the chairman do? Forget it. We've only ourselves to blame."

"But what about you?" asked Sheng-pao. He was racking his brains for a way to help this unlucky fellow.

With all the strength in his body Tseng-fu replied: "Let my brother take the line of the rich peasants, I'm sticking with the poor. I've been looking for you to see if you have any ideas."

Sheng-pao thought hard. If you'd stuck him with an awl at that moment, he wouldn't have felt it.

"I knew that's how you'd feel," Sheng-pao said at last. "Don't you worry about a thing. There's no need getting upset. You can take charge of the porters going into the mountains. Leave Tsai-tsai with my ma."

Sheng-pao's generous offer in this time of crisis aroused everyone's admiration. As to Tseng-fu, his misery and worry were at once forgotten, and all his energy surged to his face.

For some time Jen the Fourth said nothing, his loose old eyelids filling with tears of sympathy for Tseng-fu. Then a smile appeared on his wrinkled countenance, and he cautiously reminded Sheng-pao:

"There's no question about your ma. But the old man –"

"There's no question about my pa either. He does three things every day – eats, works and grumbles. Yet for all his grumbling, he has an honest heart. If he's not with us this year, he'll be with us the next. Nobody knows my pa better than me."

Turning to Tseng-fu, Sheng-pao said, "Don't you worry. Leave Tsai-tsai in my place and he'll be treated right."

Tseng-fu didn't know how to thank him. "I'm sure of that one hundred per cent," he said, a faint smile on his thin face.

Then his expression darkened. He told Sheng-pao and the mutual-aid team members the other news he had brought: Shih-fu was also going to Kuohsien County to buy Hundred Day Ripener rice seed; he too was planning to raise both a rice and a wheat crop on the same land. The announcement only stimulated the members of Sheng-pao's team.

"Good," they cried. "We'll have a contest with old Shih-fu."

Young Sheng-pao wasn't the least alarmed by old Shih-fu's challenge. He was more interested in the developments in Tawang Village. As to the activity of the prosperous old mid-

dle peasant with the grey streaked hair — that was only temporary. And the vicious behaviour of the rich peasant with the scar on his right eyelid — that too was only temporary. Both men were sure to knuckle under again.

It seemed to Sheng-pao that the people who truly had the power in Frog Flat, drawn by a new goal were all gathered here; rallying around his mutual-aid team.

Come on then, staunch fellows. Sheng-pao will stand by you through thick and thin.

He understood clearly now the significance of the expedition to Mount Chungnan. It was even more important than he had thought.

14

How interesting. Kai-hsia received a love letter from someone in the county middle school.

Every day, Hsiu-lan went to the Hsiapao post office to see whether there was a letter from her fiance in Korea, and that morning she picked up the letter for Kai-hsia. The honest young girl couldn't conceal her disappointment at what she assumed was a defeat for her dear brother Sheng-pao. She quietly delivered the letter to Kai-hsia and left.

At first Kai-hsia wouldn't believe it. "Nonsense. Who do I know in the county middle school that would write to me?" Then, seeing that it was really addressed to her, the shy girl blushed. But when she discovered that the writer was Yung-mao, son of the prosperous middle peasant Shih-fu, her face darkened.

Kai-hsia didn't like anything about Yung-mao. To prove that she had nothing to conceal, she opened the letter in Hsiu-lan's presence when the girls were on the road home from school. She then pulled Hsiu-lan over to a grassy bank of the Tang Stream so that she could help her read this literary creation. There were many words in the three-page missive that the girls — one in third-year primary school, and one in fourth — didn't know. Only after guessing their meaning from the general context did they get some idea of what the letter was about.

The middle-school student, so proud and aloof whenever he returned to Frog Flat at vacation time, began his letter with a complaint — true or false, no one could prove. Because of Kai-hsia, he said, he slept badly at night, and couldn't concentrate in class or in outside study. His school work had been seriously affected. Only if Kai-hsia would provide a "solution" to his

"love question" would he be able to study in peace. He made it sound as if a failure to agree to this "solution" would be positively inhuman.

Instead of working at his algebra and geometry, the young man had taken great pains to copy a lot of fancy phrases out of some elegant essay. These he used to describe the beauty of Kai-hsia's face, eyes and mouth, to extol her figure, her hair and the way she walked. Unfortunately, this display of erudition only added to the difficulties of the primary-school girls — their reading ability was very limited. Oh, oh. He praised Kai-hsia's firm character and her vivacity, but regretted that she didn't recognize her own "worth," that she "wasted her youth" in various community activities during the school vacation periods.

"Take the measuring of the land and calculating its output last winter," Yung-mao wrote in blue-black ink on the red-lined letter paper. "Why did you have to take part in the measuring? There are many people in the village who could have done it. If you spent your winter and summer vacations studying at home, you could complete the six years of primary school in five and take your entrance exam for middle school a year earlier. Wouldn't that be fine? I would like very much to help you with your preparations. It really pained me to see you running all over the fields with those ignorant village cadres."

"Pah." Kai-hsia spat contemptuously. "What a stinking attitude. Everyone else is ignorant. Only you've got any brains!"

Honest Hsiu-lan gazed at her searchingly, trying to guess what was in her heart.

"Yung-mao doesn't seem like a youth of New China," she agreed. "He treats our village campaigns as if they were nothing but idle chatter. The only thing that matters is his studies. But he's not studying for the sake of the country. He just wants to get himself a good job and earn plenty of money. Am I right?"

"He doesn't give a hang for the Party's call," Kai-hsia said emphatically.

The girls went on with the letter. Now in an entirely different style, borrowing heavily from newspaper phraseology, Yung-mao wrote:

"Our social transformation has been fundamentally completed and large-scale national construction has commenced. I think since Party policy is to develop industry first, the countryside is not likely to change for the next several decades. My family is fairly well off. If you consent to my plea, my father promises to pay your way through middle school."

"Pah. Disgusting." Kai-hsia was furious. "Who cares if your family has a lot of land and a rubber-tired cart. Shameless dog."

She felt that Yung-mao was insulting her. He acted as if she were some vulgar money-grubber. She had heard all about the national situation from Chairman Chen-shan long ago. Her problem was that although she wanted to take Chen-shan's advice and go to Sian and become a member of the working class, she couldn't bear to part with Sheng-pao. She certainly had never considered turning her back on the road the Party had pointed out, now that the tempestuous land reform period was over, and seeking personal gain by throwing herself into the arms of a wealthy young man.

When the People's Republic was established in 1949, Kai-hsia was a mere girl of seventeen. She grew into young womanhood in the storm of social transformation. Her mother gave her physical life, but her spiritual life was given to her by the Party, you might say. Kai-hsia hated the shallow son of the prosperous middle peasant for his narrow vision. He saw only her exterior, but he couldn't see what was in her heart. Kai-hsia's even white teeth bit her glistening red lip. She wanted to tear the shameless missive to bits and throw it into the green waters of the Tang Stream. But suddenly she had another idea. She said to Hsiu-lan:

"I'll give it to the chairman. How about it? That pig insulted our village cadres. And he tried to get me to give up my Youth League activities."

"Right." Hsiu-lan heartily agreed. "Where does he come off writing love letters to anyone he feels like and saying nothing but bad things? The dirty dog."

The girls crossed a single plank bridge to the sandy green bank on the other side of the stream. After walking a while through the tender budding branches of a screen of elm and willow trees, they saw Chen-shan and his brother Chen-hai. The men were levelling some ground beside Liberation Creek to convert it into a paddy field.

Shading their eyes with their hands from the red rays of the setting sun, the girls saw the chairman bent over, digging, his large rump raised high, while his brother pushed a wheelbarrow. The men were stripped to the waist, the sweat on their powerful arms, backs, and thick chests glistening in the light of the sinking sun, now balanced on the horizon of the western plain.

Hsiu-lan went home. Kai-hsia, carrying her school bag, left her accustomed path. Trampling the new grass on top of the ridges, she angrily walked straight through the paddy fields to Chairman Chen-shan.

In the winter of 1951 Chen-shan had bought a two-*mou* peach orchard from a shoemaker who lived in Hsiapao. For this he had been ticked off so severely at the Party rectification meetings that he couldn't raise his head. And when he criticized himself at a meeting of all the Communists of Hsiapao Township, the bristly cheeks of his broad face had burned like fire.

But on the way home immediately after, Chen-shan had gazed at the two *mou* and felt wonderfully eased. He used to tell people: "It would have been a waste to leave this land in the shoemaker's hands, a real pity. First of all it's on the opposite side of the stream from him; secondly it's too far from where he lives; thirdly he hasn't anybody to work it. He had been figuring on selling a crop of fresh peaches every year. Then the trees went bad and he planted wheat. But about as much came up as the hairs on Liang the Eldest's bald head. The place is practically barren. This is completely against the government's

call to increase production. Now that I've got it — ho! — with a couple of good workers like my brother and me, we'll be able to make something out of it. Maybe a Communist shouldn't buy land, maybe it gives people a bad impression, but it will mean more output, which is what the government wants."

At the Party branch meetings, one member after another rose to criticize him for his glib cloaking of his real intentions. They showed that he was using fine words to conceal his selfish desire for more property.

Kai-hsia wasn't present at these meetings. Youth Leaguers took part in ordinary meetings of the rectification campaign, but they were not asked to attend when the ideology of members of the Communist Party branch committee was examined. All she knew was that Chen-shan had been criticized somewhat during the Party rectification, but she didn't know the details.

She had wondered, at the time, why such a competent Communist should be eager to build up his family property — like any ordinary peasant. But when she saw how hard he worked, she was inclined to forgive him. After the chairman bought the orchard, he and his brother had pulled out the peach trees. They tilled it as dry land for one year, now they were converting it to paddy. They wanted to put in rice sprouts.

Today, the Chen-shan working in the field beside Liberation Creek looked very different from the man Kai-hsia had seen sick in bed two days before. His physical illness and mental distress had faded with the red cupping marks on his forehead; all were completely gone. He had felt very badly that day because he had not been able to arrange any low-interest grain loans; his painful self-criticism had aroused Kai-hsia's sympathy and respect.

Shortly after Kai-hsia had left, Blabbermouth Sun had hurriedly arrived and reported that not a single rich peasant or well-to-do middle peasant in any of the township's five administrative villages would agree to make such a loan. Only a few ordinary middle peasants here and there were willing to lend a few measures. Blabbermouth had begged the chair-

man not to worry. Chen-shan's failure in Fifth Village wasn't anything to get upset about.

At this, the chairman's spirits had at once revived. He leaped from the bed, his illness and depression gone. "Let's see Secretary Lu criticize me now," he thought. "You can't say what happens in other villages is my fault. Why weren't they able to raise any loans?" That was the way the tide was going in the villages now that the new deeds had been distributed. Why blame Chairman Chen-shan?

The big peasant ate two catties of steamed bread and drank a large bowl of corn-meal gruel, then belched loudly and said to his brother:

"Chen-hai, get our mattocks, shovel and wheelbarrow ready. We're going out to level that field."

That night, while Sheng-pao and his team were meeting in the beancurd-making room of Feng's thatched cottage to discuss their expedition into the mountains, a big strapping peasant, avoiding the main road like a petty thief, cut stealthily across the barley fields and made his way to the private kiln outside Huangpao's north gate. Softly, he called the kiln owner out and led him to a dark deserted place.

There had been a leak about his investment in the kiln, Chen-shan said. Secretary Lu had already questioned him. Because he wanted to remain "in the Party," Chen-shan declared, he would have to withdraw his investment. If the kiln owner had no money or grain on hand to repay him, he could consider Chen-shan's investment as a payment for bricks and tiles. Chen-shan would call for them after Clear and Bright Day.

The kiln owner was very reluctant to give up the investment, but this was an important matter involving someone's remaining "in the Party." Squatting down on his heels, he supported his drooping head with his hands, the picture of dejection. After a while, his mouth reeking of water-pipe tobacco, he said:

"Since there's been a leak, I can give you some bricks and tiles to satisfy prying eyes. But chairman, you can't pull out altogether."

Chen-shan thought a moment. "I must," he said. "After Clear and Bright, I'm definitely coming for those materials. Of course I'm pulling out completely. I'm not a child. I know what I'm doing."

His peasant ideas of private expansion were fundamentally different from those of the crooked kiln owner. Chen-shan felt instinctively that he couldn't let the sneaky businessman draw him any deeper into the mire. For his own sake, for the sake of his wife and kids, Chen-shan had to remain in the Communist Party.

At the time he was returning to Frog Flat, Sheng-pao and his team were still conferring in Feng's thatched cottage. Chen-shan didn't meet anyone who knew him either while going to Huangpao or coming back. Quietly, secretly, he had plastered over the dangerous crack in his affairs. And he had handled it very well. If Sheng-pao had even a tenth of his brains, he'd be lucky.

Today, Chen-shan didn't have a worry in the world as he levelled the field by Liberation Creek. His energy increased as he worked. He dug with his mattock, then shovelled earth into the wheelbarrow. One man doing the work of two. Chen-hai, inspired by his brother's vigorous efforts to improve their family property, ran so swiftly with the barrow, it fairly flew. When Chen-hai returned with the empty barrow, instead of resting while Chen-shan filled it, he also grabbed a shovel and pitched in. Both men were dripping sweat.

Work. Off with your shirts and work. They went at it so hard they drew the attention of all Frog Flat. Some people envied Chen-shan. They quoted the old saw, "When the whole family pulls together, ordinary earth can be turned into gold." Others were displeased, saying he was only interested in his own property; he never did anything for the needy peasants of Kuan Creek Hamlet. But envy or complaints, Chen-shan knew nothing of them. To tell the truth there were few in Frog Flat who dared to berate Chen-shan to his face. When his expression darkened, he could look as nasty as they come.

But in the eyes of the innocent Kai-hsia, the chairman was basically honest and correct. And it was he who had recommended her dear Sheng-pao for membership in the Communist Party. She heard that when Chen-shan had been criticized during the rectification campaign, everyone had first said a few words about his good work in the land reform and only then, regretfully, pointed out that he wasn't keen enough on mutual aid and co-operation.

Trampling the new grass on top of the ridges as she hurried towards the chairman, Kai-hsia would never have dreamed that he was the kind of man who would steal through the night to see the boss of a private kiln. If anyone had told her, she would have thought he was deliberately inventing the story to injure a Communist's prestige. For she believed that Chen-shan's inner self was part of the same entity as his enthusiastic phrases, his powerful frame and his respectable exterior.

Even the fact that he had to criticize himself in the Party rectification meetings for the selfish mentality that led him to take advantage during land reform and to purchase land afterwards did not spoil the excellent impression Kai-hsia had of him all during the land reform period. *Tien*! In Hsiapao Township there were only two people's deputies to the county government—Secretary Lu and Chairman Chen-shan. If Kai-hsia were to suspect a man like that, who in the world could she believe in? It seemed to her that Chen-shan was entirely reliable. He was the Party leader in Frog Flat. Sheng-pao was a green sprout, just emerging. It would take time for him to prove his worth. What's more, the chairman had always shown a selfless interest in Kai-hsia's future.

Now, very angry about Yung-mao, she charged up to Chen-shan. He was bent over, digging with his mattock. Kai-hsia halted before him and held out the letter.

Chen-shan stopped working and straightened up. Stripped to the waist, mattock in hand, he gazed at the girl with brotherly concern. She was breathing hard, her face darkly angry. Chen-shan took the letter and asked with a laugh:

"What's happened to put you into such a state?"

"That shameless Yung-mao sent me this thing." Furious and ashamed, Kai-hsia was blushing hotly, her eyes shooting sparks. Grinding her teeth, she hissed: "He's written all sorts of trash. Trying to lure me with an offer to put me through middle school. Trying to provoke me into leaving the Youth League. I can't let him insult me like this."

Rather stunned, Chen-shan was still considering what to say when Kai-hsia turned and walked away. Chen-hai was coming back with an empty barrow and she was too embarrassed to remain. Chen-shan, always quick to sense things, smiled and let her go.

When Kai-hsia got back to her thatched cottage in the persimmon-tree compound, her mother saw that she was upset and asked her what was wrong. The girl had to tell the whole story again, and again she burned with rage. Her mother comforted her.

At dusk, when mother and daughter were eating their evening meal, a big peasant, carrying a large rice bowl in one hand and a small vegetable dish in the other, with the towel-cloth that peasants use at meal time hanging on one arm, strolled in through the compound gate. It was their neighbour from across the lane. Dropping in with his food and eating with them had become his habit. By now, the tacit acknowledgement of each other's presence was more affectionate than any greeting voiced aloud would have been.

Although he had been working hard all day, Chen-shan showed no sign of fatigue. He put his dish of vegetables on the ground outside the door of the cottage and squatted down beside it. As he ate, he smilingly addressed Kai-hsia. She was seated on the doorstep, also eating.

"Why should you get so mad? Did you expect the son of a well-to-do middle peasant to think as clearly as a Youth Leaguer or a Communist? If you don't like him, just ignore him. You're in the same village and living in the same lane. It's not worth fussing over a little thing like this. People would only laugh at you."

"Right," Kai-hsia's mother chimed in. "That's just what I've been telling her."

Kai-hsia said nothing. She was too angry.

The chairman took a sip of corn-meal gruel, picked up a piece of salted vegetable with his chopsticks and put it into his bristly mouth. In a friendly earnest tone he advised Kai-hsia:

"Anyhow, you'll be leaving the next time the Sian textile mill asks our county for workers. Why raise a big storm in the village about this love business? Maybe you'd shame Yung-mao, but you'd make it pretty awkward for yourself too, wouldn't you?"

"That's a fact," Kai-hsia's mother agreed.

"If Yung-mao doesn't write you again, then forget it," the chairman continued. "If he does, you just give the letter to me. I'll tell him a thing or two. All right, Kai-hsia?"

Confronted with such an authoritative analysis, what could she say? Kai-hsia consented.

Chen-shan made a generous proposal to the girl's mother:

"Aunt, you're part of my mutual-aid team now. I'll do all your ploughing and harvesting. You won't have to worry about a thing when Kai-hsia goes to work in the factory. *Tien*! They're going to build socialism in the big cities. If we Communists and Youth Leaguers won't go, who will? Here at home, in the fields, she's not such a strong worker. After she joins the factory if you have any trouble, just come to me. You needn't worry in the least."

The widow smiled. "If Kai-hsia's willing, it's up to her."

But Kai-hsia didn't indicate either willingness or unwillingness. She was a girl with a mind of her own. The chairman could get her to think about things, but he couldn't make her decisions for her. She wouldn't commit herself definitely because she hadn't discussed it with Sheng-pao yet. Kai-hsia didn't want to talk too much about a thing she hadn't thought over thoroughly for fear of giving her mother and the chairman the wrong impression.

The following morning, after Kai-hsia had left for school, her mother suddenly remembered something. She ran after the girl and caught up with her outside the compound gate.

"Kai-hsia, when school is over today, go to your big sister in Kuo Village and ask her for a loan of their ox if they can spare it tomorrow. I want to grind some corn and beans."

"All right."

Chen-shan, who was setting out with his brother for their plot by Liberation Creek, overheard.

"Don't bother, Kai-hsia," he said. "We're not using our ox now. He's just standing there. You take him and grind your meal."

Holding her school bag, Kai-hsia halted and looked questioningly at her mother who was in the compound gateway. The widow said to Chen-shan:

"She'd better go to her sister's. We have to use an ox often. It isn't only this once."

"More than ten thousand times a year?" the chairman countered jocularly.

Kai-hsia's mother laughed, honestly and frankly. Chen-shan teased her:

"I dare say in a year you wouldn't want our ox for three hundred and sixty days?"

"Not even for thirty-six days, but—"

"Well then, take our big yellow ox. It won't hurt him a bit to grind a little meal for you two. And since you're now in my mutual-aid team, what do you mean by borrowing an ox from your relative? Are you trying to make me look bad?" Although Chen-shan's words were sharp, there was a smile on his bristly face.

Since the chairman was so earnest, how could the widow and her daughter refuse?

At dusk that evening, after Kai-hsia had returned from the Hsiapao primary school, she went with her mother to Kuan Creek, north of their compound. There, with sieves and strainers they washed some corn and beans.

The next morning, Chen-shan led his big yellow ox, already bridled, into the courtyard with the single persimmon tree. Embarrassed at this kindness, Kai-hsia's mother bustled about, thanking the chairman profusely. Really. You troubled a person enough when you borrowed his ox; how could you let him bring it personally to your door?

"Just tie him to the persimmon tree, Chairman Chen-shan, we'll do the rest. You've got your own work to attend to."

"No hurry," Chen-shan smiled. One big hand holding the lead rope, with the other he proudly patted the animal's sleek golden hide. "Sweep off the mill stone," he said. "I'll help you hitch him up."

Not only did the strapping peasant help the widow hitch the ox to the mill roller, he carried the cleaned grain and all the necessary implements — strainers, the pan — into the mill shed. He was more like a member of the family than a neighbour. Gratefully, the widow kept entreating him to go and attend to his own work. But it wasn't until everything was made ready for the grinding that Chen-shan dusted off his two large hands and departed, his mind at ease.

Chen-shan's extreme solicitude aroused Kai-hsia's mother's suspicion. While grinding the meal she wondered: "Why is the chairman so good to me? I'm only an old widow. What use can I be to him?"

She forced herself to look at the good side. She hadn't the slightest reason to doubt him. He was always trying to teach the villagers to do the right thing. Surely he couldn't be hatching some dark scheme of his own? When she married and came to Frog Flat, Chen-shan was only nine years old. She had seen him grow into a respected man over forty. His attitude towards women had always been courteous, even in the old society, to say nothing of now, when he was both a Communist and the leader of the village. Besides, Chen-shan was twenty years younger than her and twenty years older than her daughter.

Because of their special circumstances, Kai-hsia's mother had always been particularly careful in her dealings with men. To prevent gossip, she hadn't even allowed any of her neighbours to

become too friendly. That was why she wouldn't borrow a neighbour's ox, but preferred to go all the way to one of her two sons-in-law, both living in other villages, to borrow an animal when she ground her grain.

When Kai-hsia came home from school that day, her mother mentioned her suspicions of the chairman. Kai-hsia laughed so hard she bent double, her braids sweeping the ground. Finally she straightened up, still laughing, tears of mirth in her eyes. When she regained control of herself she swung her braids behind her back with a toss of her head, then wiped her tears and said:

"Ma, your mind is smaller than the eye of a needle. You can think of the strangest things."

But how could you expect her to know so much about this new society? She was busy all day with pots and pans, bowls and chopsticks, sieves and strainers. When did she have time to think about the many things that were happening outside her persimmon-tree compound?

The widow stared at her, quite displeased.

"Nasty minx. How dare you laugh at your ma?"

As Kai-hsia dried her eyes, her lovely face grew serious. She told her mother the facts as she knew them:

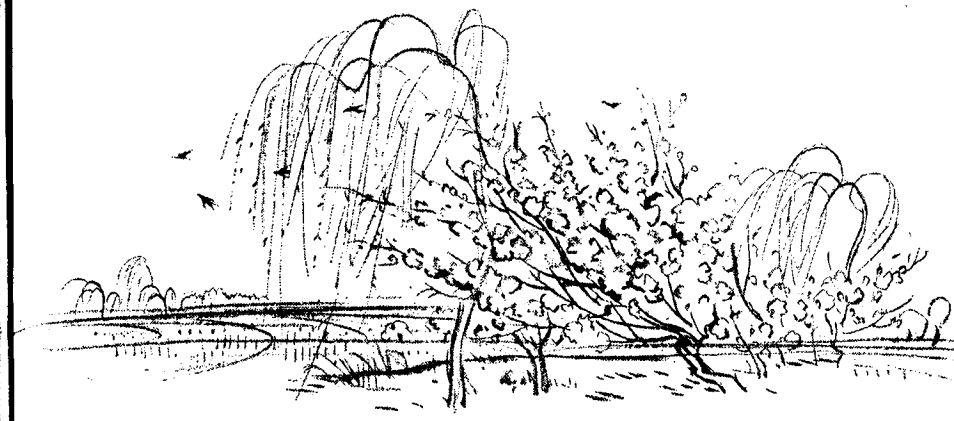
"The chairman has accepted Secretary Lu's criticism and is taking a real interest in his mutual-aid team. He wants to help his needy neighbours, just like Sheng-pao. Ma, this is something inside the Party. Don't breathe a word of it to anybody, whatever you do."

Her mother looked annoyed at the mention of Sheng-pao, and Kai-hsia said no more.

The chairman rose higher in the widow's estimation. She had a better understanding now of what it meant to a peasant to be "in the Party." The Communist Party taught peasants to be more honest, more generous, more farseeing, and that was how the widow liked people to be.

But she was sorry that Sheng-pao was also in the Communist Party. There was nothing between him and Kai-hsia that couldn't be explained — she was convinced of that. But she

wasn't at all sure that there was nothing in their actions that didn't give offence to the eye. Sheng-pao had no right to have any relations with an unmarried girl which weren't entirely open and public – that was what the widow had against him. She disliked everything about Sheng-pao, even the way he walked. The widow preferred to have Kai-hsia leave and work in a factory, rather than let her become Sheng-pao's sweetheart.



15

Although the road of life is long, its most important sections are often covered in only a few steps, especially when a person is young.

No one's road is absolutely straight, without any forks in it. At some of these forks – whether they require a choice on a question of politics, personal career, or private affairs – a step in the wrong direction may affect you only temporarily, or it may influence your entire life. Before liberation, because the social environment was rotten, many young people didn't realize this and wasted their energy. Some were always busy over trivialities without making the slightest contribution to society. After liberation, Youth Leaguer Kai-hsia, although she was only a country girl, came to understand quite early what kind of attitude a person ought to have towards life.

The peasants of Frog Flat saw nothing to indicate that Kai-hsia and Sheng-pao were in love. They neither climbed over walls nor slipped in and out of windows. They had no time to idle along, waiting for each other on country roads. Kai-hsia, a third-year primary-school student, couldn't write enough words to compose a love letter. Indeed, even if she could, Sheng-pao, who still hadn't finished his spare-time course in

elementary literacy, wouldn't have been able to read it. Nor was there any Hung Niang, the loyal maidservant in the traditional opera, to act as their messenger. The young couple found courtship very difficult.

While feudal economic and political concepts had been discarded, it would still be some time before all feudal influences could be eradicated from the peasants' minds. It was better for promising young people in love to be a bit careful.

Yet in spite of all this, the love between Kai-hsia and Sheng-pao was many-sided and modern.

Kai-hsia and her mother slept on the same *kang*. One night, after they had retired, the widow was soon snoring, but Kai-hsia couldn't fall asleep. Oh, short spring night. Why did it seem so long to the lovelorn girl? Oh, spring wind. Rest a while. Must you keep rustling the new leaves on the trees outside the compound wall? Let Kai-hsia slumber.

Kai-hsia's mind wrestled with a problem as she tossed and turned upon her bed. Did she really want to leave this persimmon-tree compound where she had been born and raised? Did she really want to part from the blue-green Mount Chungnan, the pale green Tang Stream? From the paddy fields where the white cranes, the herons, the egrets and the brown wild ducks flew? Did she really want to go to some red-brick factory building in the outskirts of Sian, to a dormitory that was completely new to her, and start a new life, make new friends? And finally, did she really want to fall in love with some new young man — not Sheng-pao — and share with him the same life and fate?

Kai-hsia's heart was heavy. She felt depressed, irritated. She asked herself a question and demanded a definite answer: Are you willing to leave beautiful Frog Flat and go to the city to take part in national industrialization? She certainly was. To a girl who had become an activist during land reform, to a Youth Leaguer longing for the beautiful prospect of socialism, what could be more ideal than going into industry? Many army and local government cadres were being transferred to the factories. Going into industry had become almost a fashion.

The glory of being a member of the working class attracted Kai-hsia. She couldn't dispel this attraction, relying solely on her own analytical powers. In 1951 and 1952, when the Sian factories appealed to the county for new workers, people had to be persuaded; few wanted to go. By 1953 things had changed. Many of the older girls in the Hsiapao primary school were planning to enter the mills. Some eagerly discussed the things schoolmates who had gone two years before had written about in letters: What people in the city ate, what they wore, where and how they lived, what there was to see.

Kai-hsia, member of her Youth League branch committee, pursed her lips and wrinkled her nose. She despised these material-minded daughters of the well-to-do middle peasants. What appealed to them were the high buildings, the electric lights and telephones. That wasn't why Kai-hsia wanted to enter a factory. She had seen photos in a picture magazine of the girl model spinner, Ho Chien-hsiu. Kai-hsia wanted to be like her. New China had given this poor girl the chance to become one of the best textile workers in the country. Kai-hsia had been thrilled by her accomplishments.

That being the case, Kai-hsia should have been happy. Why was she so miserable?

But she was — miserable and annoyed. She wondered whether it would be selfish of her to go off to a textile mill? Would she be acting unfairly to Sheng-pao? She knew from his uneasy manner in her presence, from the way his eyes seemed to be trying to read her heart, that he was still very interested in her. And she herself? If she hadn't fallen in love with him the whole thing would be simple. But she still loved him, and that was what was pressing down in her heart like a stone. The blue-green Mount Chungnan, the pale green Tang Stream, the beautiful paddy fields, the flying cranes, the familiar thatched cottages — Kai-hsia would have been able to give them all up, if a young fellow named Sheng-pao weren't living there.

When his child-bride was still alive and Kai-hsia was constantly running to the township and district governments, trying

to break off her engagement, she often thought: "Wouldn't it be fine if I had someone like Sheng-pao." He was her ideal. She couldn't say what it was about Sheng-pao's face, eyes, eyebrows, nose or mouth that attracted her. As a matter of fact, he was quite ordinary looking. His goodness, decency and courage, blending into an entity with his voice, face and body — these are what won our Kai-hsia's loving girlish heart.

What did she care whose son he was, how much land and how many houses he had, or whether his parents were amiable or crotchety. "No matter if he owns valley land. What matters is whether he'll make a good husband," as the local saying put it. Two years before, if both of them had been unattached as they were today, even the Old Lord of the Sky couldn't have stopped Kai-hsia from going to Sheng-pao's thatched cottage as his bride. Neither her mother, nor public opinion, nor Liang the Third's disapproving stares, would have outweighed the pure love in Kai-hsia's bosom. They didn't bother her a bit. Although she wasn't able to express her feelings very well in words, compared with those middle-school and university students who could define their love with such precision, she was infinitely more ardent, considerate and true.

But today, now that Sheng-pao was single again and she had ended her engagement, society had changed more than she had dreamed possible. The drums and gongs, the shouted slogans that had resounded in Frog Flat during land reform could no longer be heard. No more did you see people marching with red flags down the streets. Except for the occasional lowing of an ox, the bark of a dog, the clucking of a hen, the villages were deathly still. It was dull enough to drive you to distraction. At the same time, the factories springing up in the cities like mushrooms after rain were beckoning to the third-year primary-school student. Kai-hsia was really troubled. She wasn't one of those frivolous girls. How could she toss aside her old love, abandon Sheng-pao, and fly off, with no regard for anyone but herself?

"You've had three years of school. And the men who've proposed are all educated. But that Sheng-pao has only learned a couple of words in the literacy class." That was how Kai-hsia's mother looked at it. The old widow didn't say so, but you could see it in her face. Ha, poor old backward feudal brain. Is your daughter going to school just to raise her status so as to find a better husband? Kai-hsia wasn't that kind of a cheap baggage.

The girl knew what little difference the three years of schooling had actually made in her. Whereas Sheng-pao, even when he was still the captain of the militia, even before he had joined the Communist Party, was plainly a man who was going to do big things. She could tell it from the way he talked and handled his affairs. Kai-hsia remembered many times like this: Sheng-pao would be standing in a public meeting place, his manner neither forward nor apologetic. He would listen quietly while someone else was speaking, seldom interrupting. But when he finally spoke, he would express himself much better than the others. His words would be extremely well balanced and would attract everyone's serious attention. On each such occasion, Kai-hsia would feel herself irresistibly drawn to him. Sheng-pao — a poor village boy without a selfish thought in his head. This too tugged strongly at Kai-hsia's heart strings.

But Kai-hsia also had this sort of feeling: "Sheng-pao is a fine boy, it's true, but who knows how many years it will be until the countryside gets to socialism? A few dozen, at least. And the selfish forces trying to build up their private property are so fierce. No matter how good he is, how much of a wave can he stir up with his one little mutual-aid team? I'd better just attend to my own future and not be ruled by emotion."

Kai-hsia wanted to get married not because she was looking for someone to provide her with food and clothing, and even less to satisfy a physical craving, but because she had an honest desire — to help build a new society, husband and wife together. It was for this reason she thought that leaving Sheng-pao to work in a factory was right. The decision, she felt, was patriotic, forward-going and positive. For several days her mind was at ease.

But when she heard that Sheng-pao had organized a large group of men and they were getting ready to go to Mount Chungnan and strike back at the boycott of the low-interest grain loans by the forces of private expansion, Kai-hsia's heart again was moved. Dear Sheng-pao. To take such a step in the spring of 1953 was not easy. Many residents of Frog Flat were looking forward to a long era free of harsh taxes, marauding soldiers and bandits, tyrannical landlords, robbers and thieves — a period in which only they, ordinary peasants, and no others would be allowed to compete for property and profit!

Imbued with the spirit of the Party rectification, Sheng-pao was starting a new battle at the head of a group of poor peasants, the most reliable of the masses. His brave action made Kai-hsia waver about entering a factory. Several times she had thought of talking with Hsiu-lan, but after considering the fact that an intermediary never can convey the full import of the original words, Kai-hsia swallowed back what she was going to say. She had to have a talk with Sheng-pao quickly. She definitely would find a chance before he went off to the mountains. They'd have a good long chat, in detail, unhurried.

The chance Kai-hsia was waiting for came at last. Sunday also happened to be market day in Huangpao Town. She had learned from Hsiu-lan that Sheng-pao would be leaving for the mountains right after Clear and Bright Day and that he was busy preparing for the expedition. "He's bound to go to market," Kai-hsia thought. "I can meet him in Huangpao and the two of us can very naturally take a stroll along the road on the eastern plain. There aren't many people we know there."

"Ma, I'm going to market," Kai-hsia told her mother that morning.

The widow was surprised. "What for? I thought we were planting beans today?"

"I have to buy a notebook."

"What kind?"

"How many kinds are there? For homework."

Her mother glanced at her suspiciously, then said, "H'm. Go ahead."

While the widow swept the cottage and cooked breakfast, Kai-hsia sat by the window in the spring sunlight, combing and braiding her thick glossy hair carefully before the mirror. Lowering her head, the twenty-one-year-old girl followed with pleasure the line of the braids as they passed the swell of her breasts and extended down to her waist. With the expertness instinctive in all women she appraised the effect her primping was likely to have upon Sheng-pao. Finally satisfied, she tossed the two braids behind her back.

After breakfast, carrying a bamboo basket in which her mother had placed some thirty eggs, Kai-hsia went out of the gate of the persimmon-tree compound. Raising her head with its glistening dark hair, she looked for Sheng-pao. But she saw only his thatched cottage, silently squatting beneath the elm and poplar trees that were just beginning to bud. Her mother followed her to the compound gate and cautioned:

"Go early and come home quickly. Don't dawdle away the whole day. In the afternoon, we still have to plant those beans."

"Yes, ma," said Kai-hsia. And she thought to herself: "Sheng-pao hasn't left yet. I'll go on ahead and wait for him in Huangpao."

Her small feet, clad in plaid cloth shoes with button-down straps, trod lightly on the raised path between the paddy fields. Kai-hsia was happy, gay, like the dandelions and daisies growing in profusion by the side of the road.

With the approach of Clear and Bright Day, both banks of the stream had changed into colourful spring garb. It was the time of red peach blossoms and green willow tendrils, of flying larks and skimming swallows. Burgeoning wheat sprouts, warming in the sun, emitted a verdant fragrance. The barley was already putting out heads. Crystal clear water flowing in the creek beside the road gurgled as it hastened along on its journey to the distant sea.

The government had urged a spring-time irrigation. But many peasants who were still farming alone hadn't been able



Hsu Kai-hsia

to decide, their minds fettered by the old feudal superstition: "Irrigation in spring, no grain in summer." Sheng-pao's mutual-aid team had set an example for the other peasants. They had irrigated their land and spread chemical fertilizer, and now the leaves on their wheat were a lush dark green that rivalled the pines of Mount Chungnan.

Leaving the path between the paddy fields, Kai-hsia set out along the Huangpao road. Peasants — pushing barrows, driving donkeys, bearing reeds on their shoulders or boards on their backs, toting shoulder-poles, holding baskets, carrying chickens — moved along the dusty road to the market town in an endless procession beneath the warm rays of the sun. Some had already changed into light spring garments; others still wore their padded winter clothes.

Kai-hsia walked very slowly. Peasants travelling alone or in groups of two and three passed her from behind. Some turned to look back and then declared to their companions with a laugh:

"That girl must be waiting for someone. She walks looking at her toes."

"Is it any of your business? Nosey," Kai-hsia said to herself, sweeping them with an angry glare.

Small groups of Frog Flat peasants who were preparing to go into the mountains also passed her by. They were talking about the things they intended to buy — curved sickles, straight sickles, felt leg wrappings, hemp sandals. . . . One man said he already had a curved sickle, he would just buy a straight one. Another peasant responded that Sheng-pao said it wasn't necessary for each person to buy a straight sickle; two or three could share one among them; cutting thin branches off the handle of the bamboo broom wasn't like cutting the bamboo trunk — it took very little time. "Sheng-pao said," everything was "Sheng-pao said." He seemed to have become their authority.

As Kai-hsia listened, her heart felt smooth and comfortable, as if it had been ironed. "Sheng-pao can manage," they said. "He's bold but painstaking."

"Ah! Kai-hsia." The voice was old Jen the Fourth's. "Are you going anywhere, or aren't you? You're walking as if you can't decide."

"I'm thinking about something," the girl replied hastily, blushing.

The old man's stubble-covered lips split in a grin, and he walked on, his bow-back swaying. What's keeping Sheng-pao? Kai-hsia wondered. She wanted to look over her shoulder, but she was afraid someone she knew would see her and laugh. After a few more steps, she thought: Maybe Sheng-pao has a lot to do in Huangpao, maybe he's there already?

"Going to market, Kai-hsia?" Blabbermouth's leering voice struck her like a blow in the back. She didn't have to look; she could picture his lecherous stare. That avid gaze was enough to frighten any respectable girl.

Blabbermouth hurried a few steps to catch up. Now he walked by her side, deliberately pressing the white sleeve of his shirt against the blue sleeve of Kai-hsia's simple cloth tunic. Distastefully, she drew away.

"Here, let me carry your basket."

"No need. I can carry it myself." Kai-hsia shifted the basket from her right hand to her left.

The persistent Blabbermouth circled to her left side and again reached for the basket.

"You don't have to worry about those eggs. I can't eat 'em raw."

Kai-hsia moved the basket back to her right hand. Her face stiffening, she said coldly, a note of warning in her voice:

"You just walk along properly. Quit grabbing and skittering about. What will people think?"

Blabbermouth neither blushed nor looked sheepish. Though he gave up trying to take the basket, he wasn't discouraged. He would find some other way to render service to Kai-hsia.

"Is it worth making a special trip into town just to sell those few eggs? You must have other things to do also?"

The girl didn't reply. She felt uncomfortable, as if some fiend were walking at her side. "Of all the luck," she thought.

"Running into this mug. If he didn't help Chairman Chen-shan on the civil affairs committee, I'd be a lot less polite." She forced herself to be patient, for the chairman's sake.

"You also have other things to do at the fair?" Blabbermouth tried again.

"Yes."

"What are they? If you're too busy, I can help—"

"No need."

Kai-hsia quickened her pace. One by one, she caught up with and passed those who had passed her before. She wanted to shake off Blabbermouth. Kai-hsia couldn't bear the hungry way he stared at her face, her braids, her bosom. She had made up for Sheng-pao, not for Blabbermouth. And the leering, simpering tone he used—as if she were some hussy with a bad reputation. "The filthy dog," she thought furiously.

But Blabbermouth was blithely unaware. Matching his stride to Kai-hsia's, he went right on talking and smirking, trying hard to give everyone on the road the impression that here, beyond a doubt, was a young couple going to market. He told the girl that in the Huangpao cultural centre there was an illustrated series of posters explaining the new marriage law, and also a chart on the new method of midwifery. On market days, many, many people went to see them. As for himself, he made a point of going every time he went to market, because it improved his mind and taught him something scientific. He strongly recommended that Kai-hsia also go.

"Shameless wretch," the girl swore to herself. "Even if you improve your mind at the Huangpao cultural centre every day, you'll never find a girl. Eat your heart out."

But she didn't say a word. She just let Blabbermouth ramble on. Repressing her rage, she flew along like the wind. Only after she crossed the big Huangpao bridge and passed the grain, hay and animal market outside the town's south gate, did she finally manage to lose Blabbermouth in the noisy milling crowds. Kai-hsia pushed on through the south gate into Huangpao

proper. When she saw that Blabbermouth was no longer at her side, she heaved a sigh of relief.

She had come to meet Sheng-pao. But where was he? Should she wait for him at the big bridge? No, that wouldn't do. She had seen Chen-shan at the animal market by the bridge, buying piglets. The chairman had urged her so often to go into industry, she didn't want him to know that she was talking to Sheng-pao behind his back.

"Bad luck. Rotten luck," thought Kai-hsia, standing amid the crowds. "I rushed to get here, but what for?"

At the food purchasing department of the supply and marketing co-operative she sold the eggs her mother had given her. She drifted down the market street, lined by awnings held in place by rope and bamboo poles, then she drifted back again. Should she stand somewhere and wait for Sheng-pao, Kai-hsia wondered anxiously, or should she continue to wander around until she "accidentally" met him? She couldn't miss this chance. In another few days it would be Clear and Bright, and Sheng-pao would be going into the mountains.

Kai-hsia made three circuits of the Huangpao market street, which was heavily thronged with peasants. Looking for a ruddy young face with large eyes and thick brows in that moving sea of straw hats and cloth turban was very tiring. Kai-hsia was getting a headache. She changed her plan and went to the crossroads of the south gate street to watch for Sheng-pao there. Not a sign of him. Where could he have gone? Kai-hsia was beginning to get a trifle discouraged, and a trifle annoyed with Sheng-pao. Was he just being obstinate where their love was concerned? Couldn't he co-operate a little, be more considerate? Suddenly another thought struck her. Even if she met him, suppose he had Yu-wan, Huan-hsi or some of the others with him, all in a hurry to do things? How could she get him off to the east plain road?

"He's busy. He must be busy. How could he be otherwise? He's going to take a group of men into the mountains. What shall I do?" The more Kai-hsia thought, the more discouraged she became, and the more she felt there was no point in waiting.

But she continued to wait. She thought: "I'll just stay here till noon."

Damn. The bristly-faced Chen-shan, carrying two squealing piglets in a hamper, was coming her way. Beside him in a black cloth cap trotted Blabbermouth, fawningly begging the chairman for some favour. Kai-hsia hastily hid herself in the crowd, and they walked by without seeing her. After they had passed, she came out again. She could hear the chairman's big voice saying:

"There's no use your having any ideas about Kai-hsia. She's not meant for a country boy. She'll be leaving soon."

"Where's she going?" the neatly dressed Blabbermouth asked in surprise.

"Don't you bother about other people's affairs," Chen-shan instructed him. "Just mind your own business and you'll get along fine."

Kai-hsia couldn't hear the rest of the conversation, for the chairman and Blabbermouth walked on towards the farm implements' department of the supply and marketing co-op.

She thought the chairman's answer was very clever. He had given her the good idea of going into industry, and he was helping her keep the secret. Chen-shan was as shrewd as they come.

For a moment, particularly because Sheng-pao was making her stand on a street corner and wait for him in vain, for a moment her mind ran riot. The chairman was so concerned about her welfare, and here she was deceiving him. It was too discourteous of her. Kai-hsia felt ashamed, repentant. She felt unworthy of the chairman's care. Although she was alone, the honest girl blushed.

Standing by herself in the market crowds, Kai-hsia again wondered whether there could be anything behind Chen-shan's interest. Nonsense. What cause had she to doubt him? Had the bristly-faced peasant ever made any requests of her? He couldn't be thinking of matching her up with his youngest broth-

er. The young fellow was already engaged to a girl in another village. The couple had already come to Huangpao where they had their picture taken together, ate in a restaurant, strolled the streets, and bought materials for their wedding clothes; all they had to do now was register. Kai-hsia was sure that the chairman's kindness to her was prompted only by the best of motives — his sincere concern for her future and for the country's industrialization.

This attitude coincided entirely with Kai-hsia's own.

She decided to go home, she wouldn't wait for Sheng-pao. This was final. Unhesitatingly, she made her way through the crowds of peasants and crossed the big Huangpao bridge. The traditional code of conduct had once again overcome modern love.

On the road back, deeply stirred, she said to the absent Sheng-pao, wherever he was: "I wish you success, I wish you victory. I hope you find the kind of girl you want. As for me, I'm leaving."

Suddenly her nose tingled and tears welled to her lovely eyes. It wasn't that she was weak, and it wasn't that she was backward. When you sacrifice your love for a lofty ideal, tears are entirely reasonable. Just think. If you suddenly uprooted a tender sprout of love which you yourself had raised in your heart, how could your body help but bleed a few drops of emotion? Only if there was no end to them, only if the tears couldn't be stopped, could they be called the dirty water of weakness and backwardness. With a delicate finger Kai-hsia wiped away the two tears that had formed in the corners of her eyes, and continued towards home.

She was positive now that Sheng-pao was on the streets of Huangpao, swallowed up by the peasant crowds. She hadn't been able to talk with him. What a pity. What a pity.

Head down, she walked on. There were not many people going to market on the road now, so Kai-hsia didn't bump into anyone, even though she didn't look where she was going. As she trudged, she wondered about the mystery of love. Although

she had decided to be a new-type woman, she was still just a country girl after all. The change in the situation and the various unexpected elements made it very difficult for her to analyse a thing as complex as "being in love."

"Forget it," she said to herself. "I won't think about it any more, for now."

She looked up and suddenly she saw him. Sheng-pao, together with Yu-wan, was coming towards her down the broad highway. Kai-hsia was overjoyed. All at once the whole earth and sky became bright and shining. How delightfully soothed her heart felt.

What had she been thinking a moment ago? In the wink of an eye she forgot everything. Could it be that she hadn't been thinking at all?

Happily, she gazed at Sheng-pao. Yu-wan was excitedly telling him something as they walked, and Sheng-pao was listening, smiling, moving along with large strides. Her beloved had changed into his spring clothes, and he was wearing a white shirt, open at the collar, revealing his sunburnt neck. In one hand he carried a basket of eggs — products of the chickens of his hard-working mother.

When they noticed Kai-hsia, Yu-wan and Sheng-pao halted and exchanged a glance. Then they continued walking, but there was no more talk now. Both men were very serious, as if preparing to meet some important personage.

Their manner put Kai-hsia into a panic. On this big open road, where could she and Sheng-pao confer in private? She was tense, completely unprepared. What should she say? How should she say it? That nuisance Yu-wan. Had he been grafted onto Sheng-pao's body? Why did he always have to be tagging along? Just to embarrass her? What a pest.

Now both sides were drawing close. Kai-hsia's face was burning, her heart pounded, her hands and feet felt wooden. Yu-wan grinned slyly, hailed her briefly, then, leaving Sheng-pao behind, strode rapidly away. Young Yu-wan might be rough, but he knew when to show some tact.

Sheng-pao, red in the face, stood alone before Kai-hsia, very constrained. He peered to the left and then to the right, at the neighbouring fields and up and down the road. Only after he assured himself that there was no one nearby who knew him did he conquer his flurried sensation, and look at Kai-hsia and smile.

The spring sun shone down on them benevolently.

While Sheng-pao had been surveying their surroundings, Kai-hsia had pulled her two thick braids around to the front and let them hang over the gentle swell of her blue cloth tunic. It was an instinctively feminine gesture, no one had to teach it to her. She knew how to win the admiration of the man she loved. Sheng-pao's eyes ran over her quickly, and he smiled an understanding smile.

Kai-hsia waited for him to speak, but obviously he didn't know what to say. He wanted to be well-mannered, to chat first of other things. It would be rude to plunge right into the subject, like talking business. But he was very busy. He had a lot to do in town. Yu-wan was already far ahead. Sheng-pao didn't have time to beat about the bush. And this broad open road was hardly an ideal place for a country boy to talk of love. Sheng-pao looked very upset, and very much in a hurry.

The intelligent Kai-hsia could read his mind. She noticed a watchman's lean-to south of the road. The spring crop hadn't come up yet, and the place was deserted. What was there to be afraid of? She'd risk it. Let people say what they liked. She suggested to Sheng-pao that they talk in the lean-to, screened from the eyes of Frog Flat. He happily agreed. Taking separate paths through the fields, they both proceeded to the meeting place.

The weather-beaten lean-to was very helpful. Blocking off the road and Frog Flat, it gave them a little private world of their own. Now they didn't have to worry about being observed. There were just the two of them, face to face, alone with their serious problem. Unfortunately, this arrangement tended

to increase the solemnity of the atmosphere, and this was not favourable for a talk about love. Taking the end of one of her braids in her free hand, Kai-hsia stared at it and asked in a slightly reproachful voice:

"Why are you so late going to market?"

"Ha!" Here at last was something Sheng-pao could talk about. "We had a terrible time with Shuan-shuan's father. Shuan-shuan's in our team. The old man didn't want him to go into the mountains with us — thought it wasn't safe. We had to talk to him for hours. Otherwise we'd have gone to town long ago. We've got dozens of things to do."

"You're leaving for the mountains after Clear and Bright?" asked Kai-hsia. She knew very well he was.

"Yes. In three days from now."

"How many of you?"

"Sixteen will be cutting bamboo. I'm not sure yet how many porters there'll be. Tseng-fu's organizing them."

Kai-hsia, angry with herself, said mentally: "Stop this idle chatter. You're wasting time." But no matter how she tried, she couldn't bring herself to talk to him about marriage. She just couldn't get the words out. Kai-hsia realized at last that love was no simple matter. After a silence, she gathered her courage, and made a great effort to provoke him into proposing.

"Comrade Sheng-pao," she said formally, "there's something I want to talk to you about."

"Go ahead." Sheng-pao was very relieved. This would save him the trouble of raising the subject, he thought. He also was afraid that he couldn't speak out.

Head down, staring at the tip of the braid she was holding, Kai-hsia said, as if seeking his opinion:

"I'm thinking of going to work in the new textile mill in Sian. What do you think?" Eyes still lowered, she smiled at her braid tip and waited for Sheng-pao's violent opposition. Kai-hsia was quite pleased with her stratagem. Sheng-pao would be forced to plead for her hand without delay. Once he stated that he was against her becoming a textile worker, she wouldn't go no matter who urged her.

But when at last she raised her head, Kai-hsia was dumbfounded. Sheng-pao's face had turned ashen, and he wore a sarcastic smile.

"Fine. Take the entrance test, by all means," he urged courteously. Suddenly he had become cool and distant, with an unforgiving look in his eye.

Kai-hsia's heart sank. Her brain felt paralysed. It couldn't function.

"Fine." Sheng-pao concentrated his thoughts on going into the mountains. "I'm busy," he said politely. "Yu-wan's waiting for me in Huangpao. We can talk about this again some other time." He quickly rose and, even before his voice had died away, started off.

"Sheng-pao, how can you act like this? Let me finish," the girl shouted after him frantically, still hoping to save the situation.

But he continued walking with his basket of eggs, and called back over his shoulder: "Next time. I'm too busy now."

From the small path, he returned to the highway and strode away. *Ai*!

"Hey, Sheng-pao, so here you are. I've been waiting and waiting," shouted Yu-wan, running up to him. The young militia captain was carrying two pairs of hemp sandals and a curved sickle which he had just bought. A confidential grin all over his face, he gave Sheng-pao an affectionate slap on the back.

"How did you make out?"

Sheng-pao was squatting by the doorway of a hardware shop. On display, both inside the shop and out, were mattocks, spades, plough shares, sickles, carrying-pole hooks, iron ladles, cauldrons — the usual farm and kitchen implements. He was examining a small cauldron when Yu-wan came yelling down the street — there was nothing you could do with him; he was just that kind of a bird. Irritably, Sheng-pao poked Yu-wan with his elbow.

Yu-wan squatted down beside him and threw a friendly arm over his shoulder. Laughing, he asked:

"What happened to you two, Sheng-pao? When I got to the top of the bridge I looked around, and you both were gone. Did you burrow into the ground?"

"Don't make such a racket." Sheng-pao's face tightened. He pushed off Yu-wan's arm, obviously very annoyed.

Surprised, Yu-wan glared at him. "What's the matter? Did you try to get fresh and she wouldn't let you?"

"What do you think of this cauldron? Is it big enough to cook gruel for all our bamboo-cutters?" Sheng-pao asked, rapping a small cauldron on the ground before him.

Yu-wan was in no hurry to reply. Unwilling to let Sheng-pao change the subject, Yu-wan continued to study his face. Although Sheng-pao appeared calm, a bit of his unhappiness showed through. But he stuck to his cauldron.

"One foot eight in diameter ought to be big enough for sixteen people. If we get one any bigger, it will be too heavy to carry. What do you think?"

Yu-wan had no choice but to give up his inquisition. He looked the cauldron over, and considered Sheng-pao's question.

"Of course," said Sheng-pao, analysing the matter from every angle, "that's if we cook only gruel to eat with corn muffins. If we want to cook rice, it's too small. But why couldn't we use the cauldron twice for each meal?" His whole mind was centred on the problem at hand.

After thinking a moment, Yu-wan asked: "Why don't we borrow one from one of our homes?"

"From whose home? Every man going into the mountains is only a small householder. Nobody has more than one cauldron. The big households have extra cauldrons, but they won't lend them to us, that's certain. We'll buy our own. After we come back from the mountains, if no one else wants it, I'll take it. Deduct it from my earnings."

"Let me think," said Yu-wan. He pondered a moment, then he asked, "What about Tseng-fu's cauldron? When he goes off with his group of porters, there won't be anyone at home. His Tsai-tsai will be at your house."

Sheng-pao brought both hands down smartly against his thighs. "Right. Right. I wasn't thinking of him." His spirits were beginning to revive.

"Who were you thinking of?" Yu-wan quipped, almost automatically.

Sheng-pao refused to be diverted. "You're right," he exclaimed with satisfaction. "Tseng-fu's cauldron — no question about it. That fellow, if you ask him for a loan of his shoes, he'll give you his socks as well. It's a sure thing."

He bought a curved sickle and a straight one, then he and Yu-wan left the shop. Only as they were walking down the street through the crowds of peasants did Sheng-pao announce sadly:

"I guessed right. She's changed her ideas. She's not one of us any more."

"What?" Yu-wan was astonished. "What did she say?"

"She wants to go into a mill. If that's the way her mind's running, why should I stir up trouble? I'm just an ordinary muddy-legged peasant with a sunburnt back. I can't expect too much in the way of a wife. Besides, we're busy with mutual aid and co-operation, and we're pushing for high yields. Who's got time to hang around her? From now on, don't talk to me about her any more."

The brawny young Yu-wan was completely bowled over. This was something he hadn't expected. He swore violently.

"Where does she come off acting so high and mighty? She's only had a couple of days of schooling. Let my mother-in-law fix a match for you with that girl in the other village."

"No. This year I don't want to hear about it."

"Why not?"

"I don't want anything to divert my mind. If I hold up our mutual-aid team and we don't bring in a big harvest, my loss of face will be the least of it. The Party's prestige will suffer, and we'll be making it harder for others who also want to go in for co-operative farming."

His words moved Yu-wan deeply. The militia captain gazed at his friend respectfully, and said no more about the matter.

Wandering along the street, they made a few more purchases. Sheng-pao bought himself a pair of hemp sandals and some felt leg wrappings, and a set of each for two of his other team mates. He put the things into his basket and asked Yu-wan to take them back to the village.

"You go home first," he said. "It's only mid afternoon. You can still get some work done. I'm going up to the district Party committee to see whether Secretary Wang is in. Before we go into the mountains, I want to get his advice."

16

The main thoroughfare of Huangpao was the business section; along the backstreet were only peasant homes. Although the backstreet was not as spacious as the main thoroughfare, it seemed quieter and more comfortable to Sheng-pao than the crowded, noisy, dusty commercial quarter of town.

After completing his business in the market and getting rid of Yu-wan, Sheng-pao walked alone, and his personal unhappiness again surged up in his heart.

He was indeed unhappy. Kai-hsia's changed way of thinking made him miserable and upset.

Sheng-pao had to confess that he liked Kai-hsia's large expressive eyes; he liked her musical voice; he liked the way she carried her fine body when she walked and her graceful steps. He admitted that he liked this outward beauty. He wasn't the kind of fool who, when unable to attain the girl he loved, told one and all that she was ugly. It was just that he didn't let this outward beauty outweigh everything and seek after it regardless of cost. Our young peasant wasn't so crass.

There was another side to Kai-hsia which Sheng-pao liked even more: her intelligence, her grit, and her love of labour. It wasn't that he had a low opinion of girls in general, but the fact was that the determination Kai-hsia showed in breaking off her arranged engagement, the way she threw herself into hard work when her brothers-in-law came to help in the fields during the busy seasons, her enthusiasm in community affairs, the honest way she sought knowledge in her studies — all these were rare qualities in a girl her age and made her stand out among her schoolmates like a crane among hens. This will-power, spirit, this urge to progress, were exactly suited

to the demands of the community work Sheng-pao was doing. He felt that if he and Kai-hsia could marry they would be like a double-strand rope; their combined strength would be great. If he were interested only in outward appearances, there were plenty of beautiful girls on the stage — who all looked tender, intelligent and unaffected. Could he love every one of them? Nonsense.

But today Kai-hsia wanted to take part in the country's industrialization. Could Sheng-pao be so frivolous as to try and convince her to abandon this excellent intention just to satisfy his own personal wishes? For the sake of national construction he ought to help her enter a factory.

When he thought of this, Sheng-pao tried to conquer his unhappiness. But every man's spirit is sustained by a few emotional pillars — the way he feels about his parents, about his faith, about his ideals, about his intimate friends, about love. If any of these pillars snap, no matter which, his heart is bound to ache. Until such time as Sheng-pao could form an interest in another girl, whenever he thought of this matter, he would be unhappy.

Depressed by his disappointment in love, Sheng-pao entered a compound gate beside which hung the placards of the Huangpao district Party committee and the Huangpao district government.

Ho! Inside the front yard, bare except for a few thorny locust trees that were just beginning to bud, peasants — men and women, young and old — were crowded around in a large circle, six deep. Some were standing on tiptoe and craning their necks to see; others were turning their turban-covered heads and cocking their ears to listen.

"What's all the excitement about?" Sheng-pao wondered. "What's happened?"

He walked up to the edge of the crowd and also stood on his toes to try and peer over, but he couldn't see a thing. He too tilted his turban-covered head and listened. But he couldn't make any sense of what he heard.

Someone was shouting: "Look at that. See? That's a bruise. There."

And another voice retorted: "You said I practically beat you to death. Then what are you doing here? You can still talk loud enough. Why don't you tell the truth, eh?"

By listening to what peasants from the same village as the contestants said, Sheng-pao learned what the quarrel was about.

It seemed that the second brother and third brother of a family living in a village on the eastern plain of Huangpao district had a falling out. Their eldest brother had died that morning. His body was still lying on the floor; it hadn't even been placed in a coffin yet. Instead of getting busy with funeral arrangements, the two remaining brothers got busy with litigation. Because their eldest brother had died without leaving a son, second and third brother each wanted one of his own sons to be considered the deceased's heir.

Second brother claimed that according to the rules of kinship, his son was the next in line; third brother's son didn't qualify. Third brother's position was that he had three sons, while second brother had only two; second brother ought to be reasonable about this thing, not just talk about line of succession. Relatives, neighbours, kinsmen, had crowded the brothers' compound. They talked all morning, with no result, and so now the contestants had come to the district government. It had to be decided immediately who was the official heir, or the funeral couldn't take place. While the brothers were both here arguing their case, their wives and children were at home mourning the deceased, crying so vigorously they were practically howling, in a demonstration of their deep emotion. As a matter of fact, their emotion was actually directed at the ten *mou* of land the deceased had left.

The story made Sheng-pao sick at heart. During the Party rectification study sessions, he had heard a talk by Secretary Wang of the district Party committee on the history of the development of society. Today, he was again reminded how he hated that loathsome thing — private property.

Private property — the root of all evil. It had caused trouble between himself and his step-father, it was destroying the affection between these two brothers, it was sapping the capable Chen-shan of his enthusiasm, and preventing the soil of Frog Flat from developing its full potential. Faster. Faster. Faster. Let's get rid of this system of private property as fast as possible. Communists have more respect than anyone for the dignity of man, and Sheng-pao wanted to take this lofty aim as his own responsibility.

He didn't like the ugly comedy being enacted in the district government courtyard. It was a farce on humanity. Dejectedly walking away, he urged the crowd to leave also. He said the two brothers were just ridiculous.

As Sheng-pao proceeded to the rear courtyard which housed the district Party committee, his hatred of the private property system over-rode the depression his unsuccessful love affair had induced. In any honest Communist — be he soldier, worker, cadre, peasant or scholar — society's problems always take precedence over his personal difficulties. Sheng-pao wasn't one of those useless fellows who stewed all day over some private matter, groaning and sighing and cursing fate, while behaving quite tepidly when it came to social problems, the revolutionary cause or the immediate problem with which the Communist Party was dealing.

"Is Secretary Wang in?" Sheng-pao called from the centre of the district committee courtyard. His mood was again militant and strong.

He heard a door open, and a hand pushed aside a white cloth door curtain. Then his beloved Secretary Wang, round face wreathed in a welcoming smile, came out and stood at the top of the brick steps. The secretary wasn't tall but he was very solid. Extending his hand, he said cordially:

"Come in. Come in."

Sheng-pao ran forward and grasped the secretary's hand like a younger brother. The secretary's spirit and his own fused into one, as if they were material things. Sometimes you have

this relation between brothers, sometimes not. There are also brothers like the two who were fighting for the inheritance.

Secretary Wang had a rough exterior but a heart as pure and shining as snow. It was he who, the previous winter, during the Party rectification in Huangpao, had injected into Sheng-pao's plain peasant body a powerful spiritual strength. After joining the Communist Party, Sheng-pao felt that life had taken on a new meaning; its very nature seemed to have changed. Instead of living directly for himself and only indirectly for society, he was now living directly for society and only indirectly for himself. He was grateful to Secretary Wang for having taught him.

Meeting the secretary again, Sheng-pao laughed happily. His distress over Kai-hsia, his disgust with the two wrangling brothers, now vanished completely from his mind.

Pulling Sheng-pao by his large rough peasant hand, Secretary Wang smiled and said: "You've come just at the right time. See who I've got sitting inside."

With the secretary's hand resting lightly on his back, Sheng-pao fairly floated into the room. He was so delighted he wanted to skip like a child.

"Secretary Yang," he exclaimed. "When did you get here?"

The assistant secretary of the county Party committee was seated by a window at the rear of the room. Leaping to his feet, he strode up to Sheng-pao with a broad smile, grasping his right hand with his own left, and placing his right hand on Sheng-pao's left shoulder. With the warmth of a big brother, he said:

"We were just talking about going down to your Frog Flat."

"Let's all go together, then." Sheng-pao was beaming.

"Now that you've come, we don't have to go," said Secretary Yang. "The county committee just telephoned. They want me back today. I'm pretty busy."

The county Party secretary was about thirty. His handsome eyes shone with intelligence as he gazed appreciatively at the young peasant in the turban. He looked so long that Sheng-pao became a little embarrassed. Ever since his talk with Comrades Tao and Yang, the secretaries of the county Party

committee, in the first lunar month of the year, Sheng-pao began to have the feeling that he, a rough young peasant, was of some use in carrying out the Party's great plan. At the time, it was only a vague impression; he couldn't be sure. But now, Secretary Yang's warmth and affection, his obvious confidence in him, confirmed for Sheng-pao that his feeling was correct.

When Secretary Yang grasped his hand and shoulder so fondly, Sheng-pao was quite uneasy. Wasn't the Party estimating him too high? Was he really of much help in the Party's remoulding of the peasantry? Of course he hoped he could fulfil his splendid vow. He would have to be very diligent; he couldn't be unworthy of the Party's love. Sheng-pao was rather tense. He felt the weight of his responsibility. But the lively veteran comrade from north Shensi only patted him on the shoulder and, crinkling his eyes in a grin, demanded:

"What about it, young bachelor? Found yourself a girl yet?"

"Not yet," Sheng-pao replied awkwardly. He thought of his recent split with Kai-hsia.

Secretary Yang was displeased. "Why so shy? A big young fellow like you—and a probationary member of the Communist Party. What's so hard about finding a bride? You don't have to spend anything on matchmakers and gifts any more." Yang turned to the district Party secretary. "Do they still have to spend money? After the campaign to familiarize everyone with the new marriage law, do they still have to spend money here?"

Secretary Wang answered his superior modestly. "They don't have to spend any money," he laughed, "but they do have to spend a bit of time."

"That's it," Sheng-pao hastily interjected. "I'm just too busy—"

"Do it as a side line. You don't have to make love full time. Why be so mechanical about it? Public and private affairs can be managed together, I say. What do you think, Old Wang?"

Both secretaries laughed heartily. At Secretary Yang's friendly jesting, Sheng-pao's tension melted away. How easily their

political relation as comrades and their emotional relation as ordinary people blended into one. Sheng-pao, a young man who had only recently joined the Communist Party, felt this deeply. It seemed to him that comradely feelings were the noblest and purest in the world. Emotional relations among peasants, because of the system of private property, were often reflections of the perpetual vulgar scramble for gain. When neighbours' interests happened to coincide, no words could be too sweet. But let a man take one chicken egg from his neighbour by mistake, and an argument would immediately follow. They would be on bad terms for days.

Lighting a cigarette which Secretary Yang gave him, Sheng-pao was so excited he forgot to smoke it. He held the cigarette clumsily in a hand more used to a peasant's pipe, and sat down on a low stool beside Comrade Yang, his big body leaning forward, his eyes intent on the county Party secretary.

In his grey tunic and trousers, Yang looked like a primary school physical training instructor. He was tall, powerfully built, with close cropped hair. The healthy ruggedness of his face gave the impression of a working man who grew up out of doors. There was none of the pale delicacy of an office-dwelling intellectual about him. Staring at the secretary, Sheng-pao said warmly:

"You look much better than when I saw you in the county seat the first lunar month."

"Really?" replied the secretary. "Maybe it's because I'm a rough kind of fellow who's used to running around. Whenever I go into the countryside, I eat and sleep well. A month in the office and I'm all run down. Here an ache, there an ache —"

"It's because you've been used to working in the villages for so long," Secretary Wang said.

Sheng-pao had heard something of Secretary Yang's history from the district Party secretary. Yang's father had died a hero's death in a battle against the reactionaries in 1935. His mother had been captured by enemy forces led in by a cruel landlord, and tortured to death. This son of a revolutionary

family was brought up by his parents' comrades and went to a primary school for martyrs' children in Yenan. After graduating from the border area middle school, he worked his way up from township scribe to the position of secretary of a district Party committee. In 1949 he was transferred to this county where he served as head of the Party propaganda department. Now Yang was assistant Party secretary. He was in charge of mutual aid and co-operation in farming throughout the county.

Sheng-pao had attended several meetings in the county seat and had heard many responsible cadres speak. Although most of the reports were clear and vivid, there were also a few long dry ones that nearly put people to sleep. But Secretary Yang's speeches weren't like formal reports at all. It was a pleasure to listen to him. He used *simple* colloquial language that was full of content yet terse and lively.

Now sitting down on a chair, Secretary Yang tapped the ash from his cigarette and said to Sheng-pao with a smile:

"The go-it-alone forces are making a big noise in the countryside this spring. How's your mutual-aid team? Can it stand firm?"

Moved and impressed, Sheng-pao thought: "How sympathetically the Party watches over its members. When village Communists run into trouble, the county committee knows all about it."

He swallowed, then said boldly: "We'll stand firm, Secretary Yang. With every drop of energy that's in us, we'll hold the team firm. The go-it-alone forces may be pretty arrogant, but that's only temporary. They can't keep it up. We're the ones with sticking power."

Yang gave the district secretary a delighted grin. "That remark about the sticking power," he said, "that's very interesting, don't you think?"

Secretary Wang laughed, obviously pleased that his district had a comrade like Sheng-pao.

"According to your calculations," Yang asked Sheng-pao with a smile, "just how long will this arrogance last?"

"As soon as our mutual-aid team gets its roots sunk firm, they'll quiet down fast enough."

"Right. That's exactly right," Secretary Yang commended. To Secretary Wang he said: "A man's orientation must be clear. I've just been to five different districts. Everyone I met who's clear about our political line is battling actively and is very confident. Anyone who's fuzzy about it is just passively going through the motions, his brain in a whirl because of the opposition of the go-it-alone forces to the low-interest grain loans."

"That's so." Wang nodded his large head. "It's like that in our Huangpao district too. Some of our village cadres still don't understand that you can't depend on squeezing excess fat out of the rich and well-to-do middle peasants to solve the difficulties of the poor peasants and hired hands."

Sheng-pao was engrossed by this talk between the two Party leaders. As he listened, he thought of Yao and Shih-fu in Frog Flat. He also thought of Comrade Chen-shan. So the problem was the same all over.

"Tell us about your mutual-aid team," Secretary Wang said to Sheng-pao. "I've been meaning to come and see you, but I just haven't been able to find the time. If it isn't one thing, it's another. I can never get over your way. I'm here only because Secretary Yang has come today and called me back from the eastern plain. He's asked me about your team, but I haven't been able to tell him anything."

"I know you're busy," Sheng-pao said forgivingly. "You're secretary of the whole Huangpao district, not just our mutual-aid team."

Sheng-pao then went on to report that not only his team members, but half the poor peasants and hired hands of Fifth Village were preparing to go into the mountains collectively to cut bamboo. Both secretaries were pleasantly surprised, and their eyes danced.

"Oh? The upstream poor peasants and hired hands are going too?" Secretary Wang queried, rising to his feet. He seemed quite familiar with the situation.

"That's right," said Sheng-pao. "The poor peasants of Kuan Creek Hamlet will carry the finished brooms out. Tseng-fu is organizing them."

"Then on the whole your village won't have any spring food shortage?" asked Wang excitedly.

"We'll even have enough money to buy fertilizer for our paddy fields."

"Fine. Good work. That's precisely the way to do it." Secretary Yang, who had been listening carefully, was very pleased. To Secretary Wang, he said: "If every village had a mutual-aid team like this for its backbone, and organized the needy peasants to go into the mountains, we could lick this thing easily."

An imaginative look came into Yang's eyes. While Sheng-pao was talking, the secretary had risen from his chair with a pleased smile and energetically paced the brick floor.

Now Yang resumed his seat and stared thoughtfully at the cigarette between his fingers, as if analysing why burning tobacco gave off smoke. After a few moments, Yang's gaze shifted from his cigarette to Sheng-pao's face.

"Comrade Sheng-pao, I want to ask you a question."

"Is it something I can answer?"

"You just say whatever you think."

"Right." Sheng-pao prepared himself for the test.

The handsome Secretary Yang tapped the ash from his cigarette and said cryptically:

"There are two different views on this today. One is that without the carts and horses of the middle peasants, the mutual-aid teams can't produce much. And without rich harvests, they can't consolidate themselves. The people who think this also say that the teams must get the middle peasants to join or they're not carrying out Party policy, which is to unite with the middle peasants. What's your idea, Comrade Sheng-pao? Do you agree?"

Sheng-pao snubbed out his cigarette against the leg of his stool. Holding the butt in his hand, he concentrated on the

question. *Tien.* This was no small question — it concerned the Party line. How could he give an offhand answer?

After pondering a while, Sheng-pao raised his head and requested: "Let me hear the other view first, Secretary Yang. Then I can think some more." Sheng-pao always considered matters from every angle. He wasn't the kind to oversimplify.

Yang smiled and nodded. "The other view," he said, "is this: A mutual-aid team of poor peasants can get good harvests without the middle peasants' carts and horses. If they have to take in middle peasants who aren't very keen on mutual aid, the team either becomes a mere formality, or there's no end of insoluble problems and the team has to break up. As the peasants say, it becomes a case of:

> Organize in spring, in summer collapse;
> Then next year start again, perhaps.

People with this view say the Party's policy of uniting with the middle peasants simply means that the mutual-aid teams shouldn't attack them or harm their interests. It doesn't mean that the teams can't operate without asking favours from the middle peasants, or mustn't do anything that doesn't please them. . . . How does that view strike you?"

Even before Secretary Yang was half through, Sheng-pao's tension flowed away. The young peasant grew very cheerful. His own actions had already answered for him. He knew what Yang was driving at.

"Party policy is to rely on the poor peasants and hired hands, and unite with the middle peasants," said Sheng-pao. "If you claim we can't increase output without the middle peasants' carts and horses, then you're saying it's the middle peasants we must rely on. You're not showing a bit of poor peasant and hired hand spunk."

Secretary Yang roared with laughter. Then his face became serious and he said:

"But some people say Party policy is to rely on the poor peasants and hired hands to unite with the middle peasants. What do you think of that?"

"Just playing with words. What's the Party for, then?" interjected the straightforward district secretary, very annoyed with this bookish quibble.

Sheng-pao agreed with him. "Secretary Wang, you know our team," he said. "Yu-wan is a poor peasant, Sheng-lu is a middle peasant, I'm a Communist. I represent the Party. I can't rely on Yu-wan to unite with Sheng-lu — those two always clash. Sure, I rely on Yu-wan and our other poor peasant members to keep the team going. At the same time I try to think up ways for them to win Sheng-lu over. Our mutual aid and co-operation work today, I think, Secretary Yang — I think —"

"Throw away your reservations," Secretary Yang quipped jestingly. "Fearlessly reveal what's in your mind."

"Anyhow if I'm wrong, Secretary Yang can correct me," Sheng-pao thought. "There are no outsiders here."

Gathering himself, Sheng-pao plunged ahead. "Today, we have mutual-aid teams. It's different now than in the land reform period, it seems to me. During land reform, there was no contradiction between the poor peasants and the middle peasants. They stood together against the landlords. Today, in the mutual-aid teams, the contradiction between them is a big one."

Well satisfied, Yang nodded vigorously. His whole face — eyes, nose and mouth — looked happy.

Sheng-pao could see that the secretary approved. Sheng-pao was pleased. His studying far into the night during the Party rectification campaign hadn't been in vain.

Yang stood up and threw his cigarette butt into the spittoon, then excitedly began pacing the floor, thinking hard. Sheng-pao and the district Party secretary followed the movements of the tall leader with their eyes. Sheng-pao thought to himself: "To look at him you'd never think he has a sweet wife and cute kids waiting for him back in the county seat. He's more like a bachelor, the way he rides his bike all over the county. He puts everything he's got into working for the people." And Sheng-pao instructed himself: You must try hard to become like Secretary Yang.

The county secretary returned to his chair and sat down. On his weather-beaten face a wry smile and a regretful expression appeared.

"Have you ever noticed, Old Wang," he asked the district Party secretary, "how the worker in the factory, the soldier in the company, or the cadre in the village, when he fights wholeheartedly for our cause, is entirely in accord with Marx and Lenin spiritually and mentally? What goes on in his mind is exactly what Chairman Mao has been writing and saying. Isn't that so?"

"Yes. That's quite true." Secretary Wang cast an interested glance at Sheng-pao.

But Yang didn't look at the young peasant. In a serious voice, he continued:

"On the other hand, some comrades who are leaders, whenever something new comes up, insist on acting strictly according to every letter of the text. They refuse to go and learn from the masses. Although their intention is to support Party policy, because they're such sticklers, the result is that they go against it and make fools of themselves. In some places they're even criticizing poor peasant mutual-aid teams. They say it's a deviation to have teams with only poor peasants and no middle peasants, that we should go all out to correct it. They say only when you link poor peasants and middle peasants into a single organization are you carrying out the policy of uniting with the middle peasants. In Stone Bridge Village in the Sankuan Temple District, four peasants pooled their land and formed a mutual-aid team."

"Pooled their land?" Wang asked in surprise.

"They pooled their land," Yang repeated. "They wanted to call themselves an agricultural producers' co-operative, but the district Party committee there wouldn't permit it. The peasants said: All right. There are only four of us anyway. We'll still count ourselves as a mutual-aid team. But the district committee wouldn't even let them pool their land. Said it would cause confusion, have a bad influence. How do you like that? The committee wouldn't let the poor peasants go

ahead with the revolution. They had to do it together with the middle peasants, or not at all. But the middle peasants aren't very revolutionary right now. What are the poor peasants supposed to do?"

"We haven't pulled any boners like that in Huangpao District," Wang comforted himself.

"Of course, it will still take some time before all the comrades can make the turn. There has to be a transition period in everything. For years we've been fighting a democratic revolution. Now we have new tasks. Old concepts and new tasks — they contradict each other," Yang said thoughtfully.

"Yes," Wang agreed. "That's the situation confronting the cadres in all our villages. This year we're finishing up our old tasks and starting our new ones, so the problem is particularly obvious."

"The change between harvests."

"Yes," said Wang. "We see it in the thinking of our cadres. In spite of their studies during the Party rectification campaign, they have a tendency to consider our mutual aid and co-operation work no more important than our ordinary administrative duties. When they get busy with other things, they just push it aside. After all, it's a long-term job, they think, it has no time limit."

"A long-term, complicated, difficult, and glorious task. Isn't that it?"

"Right," Wang laughed. "A lot of township cadres have learned that phrase."

"It's too simple," said Yang irritably. "You can take any vital specific thing — once you spout that phrase, it's finished."

Sheng-pao sympathized with the county Party secretary. He too had been subjected to the bookish airs of certain cadres, and he hadn't liked it a bit.

Sheng-pao noticed the admiring look in the eyes of the round-faced district secretary. He plainly had learned something from Comrade Yang. Wang thoughtfully rubbed his cheek with his hand.

"In our district, we've got this kind of situation, Secretary Yang," he said. "Our cadres don't yet fully realize how revolutionary mutual aid and co-operation really are. So they tend to over-simplify in their actual work; they don't give the people enough ideological education. For instance, one of our township chiefs even said this at a mass meeting: 'Would you have been able to divide up the landlords' land if it weren't for the Communist Party? The Party is calling for mutual aid and co-operation. Aren't you going to respond warmly? What's the matter — do you want to go it alone? Where's your conscience?' "

Yang and Sheng-pao burst out laughing. Fan, the chief of Hsiapao Township, talked like that too. Sheng-pao had heard him express himself in just that manner.

"What use are cadres like that?" Wang demanded angrily. "They forget that all the calls the Communist Party puts out are for the people's benefit. The Party has no other interests except those of the people. And so, when our Party calls for something — whether it's land reform, or mutual aid and co-operation — it must be done on the basis of the people's political awareness. To bring about this awareness, of course, is always troublesome. It means a lot of educational work. The useless cadres don't like doing educational work; they'd rather go to the masses and demand payment. I gave you shares of land, how can you not respond to my call? How do you like that for crudeness? They never give a thought to the fact that the basis of all our Party's work is the people's political awareness, not their gratitude."

"It's not only educational work you have to do," said Yang, taking the matter a step further. "You have to create some models of mutual aid and co-operation to show the people. With the more advanced among them, if you talk sense, they'll accept it. But most peasants want proof. It's different from land reform. Now you can paint the prettiest picture in the world, but they still want to know whether it'll mean a bigger grain harvest, whether it'll increase their incomes."

The county secretary's analysis was deeper and more thorough than the district secretary's. It did Sheng-pao's heart good to hear him. He enjoyed it better than eating a feast, or listening to a good opera. Concentrating on the conversation between the two leaders, he tried to extract the full import of what they were saying. He was careful not to interrupt or distract them. Sheng-pao wished he were more literate. If he could take notes like many of the district and township cadres, he would write some of this down. He was avid for spiritual nourishment. Sheng-pao was sorry he hadn't brought Yu-wan along so that he could also hear this reasoning. When you understood the principles of the revolution, you knew what you were doing in your work.

The young peasant was listening so intently that, entirely unaware, he crumpled the half a cigarette in his hand to shreds.

Sheng-pao was anything but self-centred. But, encouraged by Secretary Yang's remarks, he couldn't refrain from saying a few words on behalf of his step-father. Agitatedly, he exclaimed:

"*Tien*! Peasants are all practical people, Secretary Yang. If they're not sure of a thing, they won't do it. What you hear is false, what you see is true — that's a favourite saying with them. They've only seen small families, small households, small affairs; they've never seen socialism. Take my pa. Though he and I eat out of the same pot, when I dream, I dream about our mutual-aid team. But when my pa dreams, according to my ma, he dreams about becoming a well-to-do middle peasant."

"Is that so?" both secretaries asked, laughing.

"It's so, all right," Sheng-pao replied. "It's really funny. To him, nothing could be better than being a well-to-do middle peasant. He hasn't seen anything else. I can't force him to believe. All I can do is show him and let him see. Our township chief, Fan, says my pa is holding me back, that he's ungrateful to the Communist Party, that he has no conscience, that he doesn't act like a poor peasant or hired hand. Who says he doesn't? The moment he hung our new land deed on

the wall, he fell on his knees and kowtowed to a picture of Chairman Mao. Is that the act of a man with no conscience? Fan probably thinks because he isn't my own father I don't mind hearing him attacked. Actually, I feel terrible. Fan rates my pa much too low. My pa is a good peasant. Secretary Wang, you probably know Pai in our Frog Flat? He says if we brought in communism tomorrow, he'd be all for it. Do you like that fellow? He's pretty sharp."

"Are you still angry with Fan?" Wang asked with a smile.

"Just talking about it upsets me," Sheng-pao said frankly. "It hurts me to hear anybody say bad things about my pa. In 1929, if he hadn't taken me in, even my bones wouldn't be here today, to say nothing of my being able to push mutual aid and co-operation. I always try to be good to him. We Communists can't forget past kindnesses. People would laugh at us."

Sheng-pao suddenly realized that he was letting himself get too worked up. In a calmer voice, he said:

"Of course, Township Chief Fan is only trying to help the work. He thinks he's doing the right thing. It's not that he wants to insult my pa."

The two Party secretaries were surprised to see Sheng-pao so aroused. But they didn't interrupt him. Obviously they hadn't thought that Sheng-pao was so emotional.

Quite moved, the county secretary said to Wang: "Many of our comrades don't pay enough attention to the small-holder and small-producer side of our peasants. Thousands of years of oppression and exploitation, heavy labour and a hard life, have created their revolutionary side. But, as Comrade Sheng-pao has just said, small families, small households, small affairs, thousands of years of small rural economy, have also given them a backward side. It's made them selfish, conservative, scattered, unaccustomed to organization and discipline, and so on. That was why in 1949, as soon as the country was liberated, Chairman Mao warned us: The education of the peasants is a serious task. He wasn't speaking lightly."

"Would you say the peasants' revolutionary aspect is dominant in mutual aid and co-operation, or their backward aspect?" Wang asked.

Secretary Yang gave Sheng-pao another cigarette and took one himself. Forgetting to light it, he plunged warmly into the discussion.

"The way I see it is this, Old Wang. We can't look at the peasant question the same way we view the two-sidedness of the national bourgeoisie we're always talking about. We have to make specific analysis of specific situations. The peasants are the allies of the working class; they're a labouring class also. They were allies in the democratic revolution stage, and they're still allies in the socialist revolution stage. The worker-peasant alliance is permanent, not temporary.

"But when the revolution starts putting the small peasant economy through a socialist transformation, the small-holder and small-producer side of the peasants becomes a contradictory aspect. That's something we have to watch, isn't it? I think that's where the significance of Chairman Mao's words lie. In dealing with the peasantry — a revolutionary class, we definitely cannot rely on force or issuing a lot of orders, or go around 'demanding payment' as you just put it. We insist on the principle of voluntariness; our method is for the masses to teach themselves. Experimenting in key spots, demonstrating typical successes, letting people see the accomplishment of others and compare — these are what will lead the peasants gradually to overcome their small-holder and small-producer side.

"What's more, in doing these things, we have to rely mainly on the poor peasants because, in the countryside, their revolutionary urge is the strongest, and the foundation of that tiny small peasant economy of theirs is the weakest. It seems to me there's nothing mysterious or frightening about it. We can handle this thing. Have you got a set of the *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung* here, Old Wang? Good. Let me have a look at volume one."

Excitedly, the district secretary pulled a well-bound book with a brown cover from his shelf. Secretary Yang stretched out his hand and accepted the volume. Turning through it familiarly to page 311, he scanned the lines quickly. "Here it is. Here. Listen to this." Very pleased, Yang read:

> . . . Between the new and the old aspect of a thing there is a contradiction which gives rise to a series of intricate struggles. As a result, the new and minor aspect grows and becomes dominant while the old and major aspect dwindles and gradually approaches extinction. The moment the new aspect becomes dominant, the old thing changes qualitatively into the new thing.

"That's the relation between mutual aid and co-operation and the small peasant economy," said Yang, as he returned the book to the district Party secretary. "Did you follow what I just read all right, Comrade Sheng-pao?"

"Yes, I did." Sheng-pao couldn't read much, but because he constantly took part in study groups and various big meetings, he had developed a keen listening ability. He said cheerfully, "Mutual aid and co-operation is new, the small peasant economy is old. Isn't that it? The new grows, while the old dwindles, isn't that it?"

Pleased, Yang smiled. "That's not all. The same thing is true of the contradiction within your family. When your mutual-aid team succeeds, your pa won't demand that you listen to him — he'll listen to you. Right?"

"Right. Right. That's a fact."

Yang struck a match and offered Sheng-pao a light. The young peasant courteously insisted that the county secretary light his own first. As Yang was drawing on his cigarette, Sheng-pao watched him admiringly. The secretary's face was intelligent, reasonable, forceful. An educated, experienced leader, thought Sheng-pao as he smoked. He knew so much.

It seemed to Sheng-pao that this had been a very fortunate meeting for him. If he had talked with either the county secretary or the district secretary separately, he wouldn't have heard this deep theoretical discussion. Only because the two

Party leaders were talking together was he able to pick up so many words of wisdom, words more precious than gold.

"Comrade Sheng-pao," said Yang, "you fellows have evolved a good method. Do the job well this year, and next year at the conference of mutual-aid team leaders, you can get up on the platform again."

"Right," said Sheng-pao simply. His voice vigorous.

"The county is sending two agronomists to Huangpao district this year," said Secretary Wang. "I plan to assign one to the eastern plain to handle the wheat and corn there. The other I'll send to your mutual-aid team to work on the close planting of rice."

"Wonderful." Sheng-pao's eyes flashed.

"Are you leaving anyone at home to plant the rice seedlings?" Wang asked him.

"Sheng-lu and Feng. They're both middle peasants and don't want to go into the mountains."

"That's no good," said Secretary Wang. "You ought to let Huan-hsi do it. Secretary Yang was just telling me — this year we want to produce sturdier seedlings. A whole series of new techniques is going to be introduced — not only close planting."

Secretary Yang told Sheng-pao: "We're changing our methods in the county this year. We want each of the agronomists to work in a single mutual-aid team instead of running all over the district. No matter how much they lecture, the peasants don't believe them. They've got to demonstrate, let the people see. So we hope you'll go at it hard, Comrade Sheng-pao."

"Fine. That's perfect." Sheng-pao was nearly jumping with delight. "Secretary Yang, Secretary Wang, I've got to go now."

"So soon?"

"I have to tell Huan-hsi that he's staying behind, and tell Feng to get ready to go into the mountains. Goodbye."

"Not so fast," said Wang. "Maybe Secretary Yang has some instructions for you."

"What sort of person is Huan-hsi?" asked Yang.

"Primary-school graduate. Poor peasant family."

"Good, good. We have to start developing personnel for the future. Understand?"

"Sure," Sheng-pao replied cheerily. "Start training our future agronomists."

"You'll be in the mountains for a month," said Secretary Wang. "You must be careful about your team's safety."

"Let him go to the district health centre and pick up some medicine and first-aid equipment," the county Party secretary said to Wang. "Don't take any money from them. Charge it to the district's mutual aid and co-operation fund."

"Right. Come along with me." The district Party secretary pulled Sheng-pao by the hand.

Sheng-pao was too happy for words. What could he say? Human speech at times is inadequate to register a man's emotions. How could the mutual-aid team be called his? Could he, as an individual, have thought of so much? Done so much?

He said goodbye to Yang at the door, then went with Wang to the secretarial office of the district government for a letter of introduction. At the compound gate, he took his leave of the district Party secretary.

"Don't forget," Wang reminded him, "safety first. It won't be good if you have any accidents."

Out once more on the street crowded with marketing peasants, Sheng-pao felt as if his heart had wings. You call this farming? You call this an expedition into the mountains? Maybe that's what they looked like—actually they were a revolution. They were a concentration of forces to overthrow the system of private property. Many of the things he had studied during the Party rectification campaign were now, step by step, becoming realities. Only the great Communist Party could have brought this about. The peasants never could have done it alone.

The more the situation developed, the clearer became Sheng-pao's understanding. So this is how we ought to do it. Sheng-pao was confident now, determined. He'd never be unworthy of the Party leaders' concern.

Weaving skilfully through the crowds, it seemed to Sheng-pao that life was full of interest. How red the sun was, how blue the sky. And weren't the peasants wonderful? He was possessed by an urgent desire to drive ahead.

At the health centre he handed the letter of introduction in through the small square window of the pharmacy. As he waited in the hallway for the medicines, he gradually calmed down. It was only then that he saw the crumpled half a cigarette in his hand. Carefully, he blew away the paper and placed the tobacco in his pouch. A man shouldn't be wasteful.

Sheng-pao began to review in his mind the Marxism-Leninism he had learned that day. Because he couldn't take notes, whenever he attended a meeting in the county seat, on the road home he would go over what he had heard to implant it firmly in his memory. He wouldn't forget Secretary Yang's words. No, never. He would make use of them all his life. *Tien*! Such deep reasoning, yet so easy to understand.

17

Three days before Clear and Bright, peasants in the neighbourhood of the Tang Stream began visiting their family graves. After washing their hands, they set out with baskets of sacrificial gifts, incense and simulated paper money. People with a strong sense of devotion also carried shovels so as to add more earth to the burial mounds and fill any holes field mice might have burrowed into them; this would prevent the graves from suffering damage when the mountain torrents came rushing down.

By the time Clear and Bright Day arrived, white paper money had been placed on all the burial mounds on the plain. Some had not been weighted down firmly and had been blown by the wind into the wheat fields and onto the paths, where they rose up and floated with every passing breeze, adding to the special atmosphere of the holiday.

Liang the Third watched to see whether Sheng-pao would go to the grave of his child-bride. That young fellow had a heart of stone. He was just brimming with energy. Preparing to go into the mountains, he had run to Hsiapao, and then to Huangpao. After coming back to Frog Flat, he had rushed around from one thatched cottage to another, busy enough to break his head. Just look at him. Everything else was important, but not to visit his child-bride's grave. What was he so busy about anyway?

"If the boy doesn't want to tell me, then I don't want to ask him," the old man thought sulkily.

To cast all private interests aside for the sake of the public good — this was something old Liang could not comprehend. All his life he had been simple, ineffective, docilely accepting the worst his environment had given him. Liang's purpose in

life was very limited. He wasn't accustomed to bold imaginativeness like Sheng-pao's. The boy really seemed to think he could beat the world.

Sheng-pao never discussed anything with the old man any more, and old Liang didn't feel like questioning him. Why should he? The boy was in the Communist Party. He could talk everything over with the other Party members. Why should he ask his pa?

That's how the old man's mind was running, and he muttered sarcastically to an imaginary Sheng-pao: "In all Frog Flat — no — in all Hsiapao Township, you're the only one with any ability. Who can compare with a young fellow like you — leading forth your army, building camp, setting up your cooking cauldron, spending a month in the mountains cutting bamboo. Huh! You'd think he was out to conquer a territory. Who ever saw a peasant behave like that?"

The old man squatted with his back against the stone roller outside the compound gate, thinking. And as his brain worked, his lips kept forming the sound: "That boy. That boy."

Blabbermouth, who was passing by, heard him. Stopping, he asked curiously:

"What are you mumbling about out here, all by yourself? Are you talking to the ants on the ground?"

Liang the Third shook his head. He didn't want to chat with Blabbermouth. He wouldn't complain about his private affairs even to someone who could curb his tongue, let alone to Blabbermouth who liked nothing better than to gossip about other people's family troubles. You shouldn't wash your dirty linen in public.

Besides, old Liang didn't want to hurt Sheng-pao's ma. In those years of disaster when he was more dead than alive, his old wife had been very kind to him. He'd never forget that, even if he were born again. Were it not for her sake — humph! — he certainly wouldn't let the boy go dashing around kicking up a dust storm. It was no way for a decent peasant to behave. To the old man it seemed there was a terrible

danger in conduct like this. Only the courageous few ever dared to raise such a rumpus. One day the storm would break; and then it would be too late to pull back.

But old Liang couldn't interfere directly. For Sheng-pao's ma was always there. That was where the old man's difficulty lay. Whatever he wanted to do, he had to look first at the dear smiling face of this quiet woman. In the early years of their marriage she had been a devoted wife, now she was a kindly mother. He couldn't ignore the fact that her love for Sheng-pao was deeper than his. He didn't want to hurt her. He would wait patiently until she came to understand that by defending her son she was only harming him.

On Clear and Bright Day, in the end it was the old man, representing Sheng-pao, who visited the child-bride's grave. Old Liang was very scornful of Sheng-pao for this. After all they were once married. "A day together as husband and wife, means endless devotion the rest of your life," as the old saying goes. Of course you burn paper money and incense for the dead because your emotions demand it. But sometimes you're also doing it for the living – people expect such things; you have to make the gesture. As a Communist you may not be superstitious, but the peasants on both sides of the Tang Stream are. Humph.

Old Liang squatted beside the child-bride's grave, burned the paper money, and lit the incense sticks. As he recalled their sad life in the past, tears gushed from his eyes.

At first, he kept weeping and drying his tears, which flowed in a continuous stream. Then, he broke down completely. After laying out the sacrificial gifts, his emotions were too much for him and, regardless of appearances, he sobbed loudly.

Since you're crying, you might as well really cry. A good cry will ease some of the misery in your heart, and your chest will feel better.

"My poor little girl. Oh. Oh. Oh."

A hand grasped his shoulder and shook it.

"Uncle. Dont cry."

Liang the Third raised his head. With tear-filled eyes he gazed at his nephew Sheng-lu.

"Where's Sheng-pao? Why are you the one burning paper money for her?" Sheng-lu asked, displeased.

His throat rather hoarse from weeping, the old man replied, "He's gone to the Forestry Section in town to get a mountain permit."

"You mustn't cry." Sheng-lu was very dissatisfied. "You'll make my family lose face."

"How can I make *your* family lose face?" The old man stared at him in astonishment.

"We're all in the Liang clan. If a father-in-law has to weep at a daughter-in-law's grave, it's a loss of face for everyone named Liang."

"Ah, I see. You can go. I won't cry any more."

Irritably, the old man gathered together the things he had brought and started back to his thatched cottage. He cursed Sheng-lu inwardly.

"Don't you know that girl was like a daughter to me? Since we're all in the Liang clan, why did you shove the job of leader of the mutual-aid team on to Sheng-pao? You shift your lice to our heads and then you have the nerve to criticize us."

After returning the sacrificial materials to his cottage, old Liang again came out to the clearing and squatted with his back against the stone roller. He glared in the direction of Sheng-lu's compound.

Old Liang was confronted with a disturbing situation. Sheng-pao was about to lead a group of men into the mountains and there was nothing he could do to stop him. When Sheng-pao went to buy the rice seed the old man had never imagined he was the kind of fellow who could chew iron and spit nails, that he would actually organize a large group to go into the hills. In the past, Liang the Third had felt inferior only in the presence of his native villagers. Now he felt inferior in Sheng-pao's presence as well. He didn't even have enough confidence to urge Sheng-pao not to over-do things.

A mountain expedition was dangerous. Ever since ancient times, a man might take the responsibility for his own risks, but he never would answer for the risks of others. Working alone, he had only himself to worry about, no matter what happened. Actually, what could happen? Enmeshed in traditional superstition, the old man didn't dare think too concretely. A person should think only of lucky events. When old Liang saw the medicines and first-aid material Sheng-pao was preparing to take on the trip, his heart shivered and dropped.

It was all wrong. The more he thought about it, the more he felt that as an older experienced man he shouldn't wait for something bad to happen before speaking up.

Old Liang rose to his feet and squinted towards Hsiapao. Then, lowering his head, he followed the path that led past Sheng-lu's peach orchard to the grass-covered dyke beside the Tang Stream. There he crossed the single plank bridge to the opposite shore.

Not long after, he was standing in Secretary Lu's room in the township government office.

There were two stools in the room on which peasants calling on the Party secretary usually sat. As a mark of affection and respect for the father of the leader of the township's key mutual-aid team, Secretary Lu asked old Liang to sit on his office chair, while he himself took one of the stools.

"You just make yourself comfortable on this chair, uncle," said Lu in a friendly voice, "and we'll have a nice chat. I've been meaning to cross the stream to pay my respects to you, but I've been so damn busy."

But old Liang sat neither on the chair nor on a stool. He just squatted on the brick floor a pace or two inside the door, and went over in his mind what he was going to say.

Out of courtesy for the old man's habits, the Party secretary squatted down opposite him, leaving the chair and the stools vacant. With smiling eyes he gazed at old Liang's troubled countenance.

"Are you thirsty, old uncle? Can I pour you a cup of water?"

"No." With a hand as gnarled as a tree root, old Liang caught the sleeve of the secretary's grey cloth tunic. "What could a peasant eat to make him thirsty?" He knew no false politeness. He could only speak the facts, whether his listener liked it or not.

Secretary Lu smiled. The old man's practical attitude pleased him.

Old Liang had already roughed out a draft mentally. Now he began:

"Old Lu, you're one of our own township people. You were a peasant yourself once."

"Right. You're absolutely right."

"You know all about how a peasant earns his living."

"I don't know much, really."

"You know all about it," old Liang insisted. "What peasant doesn't know how peasants live? Huh! But sometimes what you say isn't according to a peasant's way of thinking."

"According to whose way of thinking is it?"

"According to the Communist Party's way of thinking."

"Right. Right." Secretary Lu was delighted. "You analyse things very well."

But Liang wasn't at all pleased. He still looked as gloomy as when he came in the door.

"When Chairman Mao divided up the land and gave it to us poor peasants wasn't it so that we could earn a living? Be honest now, Old Lu." Liang the Third started to argue.

The Party secretary laughed. "Of course. Don't you see how we're doing everything possible to increase production?"

"But look at Sheng-pao. Does he act as if he wants to earn a living?"

"He certainly does, and in a big way. It's just that you want to do it in a small way, old uncle. I've heard that father and son don't agree about this."

"You see." The old man threw his gnarled hands wide. "I've always said you people in the Party were one family, and I wasn't wrong a bit. Naturally, you stick up for each other. You all sing the same tune. Your family name is Communist — right?"

The lined face of the middle-aged Party secretary became diffused with a heartfelt joy. Nothing could make him happier than this kind of discussion.

"Ha-ha, Uncle Liang. You're full of deep thoughts today. It looks like you've been thinking a lot about the difference between the Communist Party and the peasants. Otherwise you wouldn't be able to talk about it so thoroughly. Good. You've put it well. Very well. I admit it — we're all named Communist."

"He's just trying to flatter me." The old man warned himself not to soften.

But old Liang's unintentionally brilliant remark had given Secretary Lu an inspiration.

"You've really put it very well, old uncle. Our Party is one big family, and we love one another like brothers. In this village there may be people by the name of Wang but none by the name of Li; in that village there may be people named Chao but none named Liu. Yet in every village there are people called Communist. This Communist family of ours is very powerful, old uncle. The big landlords, the bandits and spies, the reactionary gangsters . . . they're all afraid of the men called Communist. But the ordinary people love us. And why? Because although we're all named Communist, we never squeeze families with other names. We unite with all the labouring people, whatever their names, to change the old society and build a new country. What do you think, old uncle? Does that make sense?"

Old Liang couldn't keep a straight face any longer. He laughed. The natural good-heartedness of a man who worked for a living, the oppression which his spirit had suffered, his bitter memories of exploitation, plus all the good things the

Communist Party had done in the three years and more since Liberation, led him instinctively to believe Secretary Lu's humorous dissertation.

Secretary Lu had made a few strong statements, but they were very realistic. Old Liang didn't consider them exaggerated in the least. Lu had been a practical peasant before he took up the work of the Party. Liang liked such men. He knew he was close in spirit to Lu and Secretary Wang and Sheng-pao, even though he couldn't for the life of him understand why they were pushing mutual aid and co-operation. "When you can bring machines to till the land, then we can have a go at it," he thought. "We're scores of years away from socialism. What's the good of a lot of idle boasting?"

The old man's wrinkled face relaxed. He grinned, and both halves of his moustache lifted up like wings. It would be an idle dream to expect him, or any other honest peasant, to rid himself solely by his own efforts of the spiritual burden a private property society lasting thousands of years had imposed. But words are the keys to the heart. Whenever old Liang was stirred by clear simple reasoning, his mind would brighten, even though later it might be clouded again by his desire to increase his property.

He was a straightforward peasant, aware of the greatness of the new society. Old Liang wasn't afraid of Communists. When Secretary Lu reasoned with him, he listened willingly. On the other hand, when the township chief said he had no conscience, he just ignored him. He didn't even greet the chief when they met.

"So you're the township chief, eh?" he would mutter. "I don't know you. Let's see you lock me up. You can't scare me. In our new society even a county chief or provincial chief has to be patient with the people. Who are you to put on bureaucratic airs? As long as I pay my grain tax you've nothing to say."

Secretary Lu looked at the old man's thoughtful face, then clapped him on the shoulder and asked warmly:

"Well, old uncle, is what I've said right or not?"

"It's right all right, but you won't succeed with the mutual-aid teams. And I'm not the only one who's standing in their way. Lots of other peasants aren't really in favour of mutual aid either."

"Who's not in favour of it in Sheng-pao's team?"

"My eldest brother and his son Sheng-lu – neither of them are for it. They're in the team in name only. If Sheng-lu's brother Sheng-jung, who's a Party member in the People's Liberation Army, didn't keep writing home urging them to stick with the mutual-aid team, father and son would have pulled out long ago. My Sheng-pao is stupid. He can't see what's in people's hearts."

"Oho! What's this you're saying? Sheng-pao stupid? That pair you've just told me about are middle peasants. Surely the poor peasants are all for mutual aid?"

"Some of them don't want it either. I can see it in their faces."

"Who doesn't want it?"

"You won't tell anybody?"

"Just listen to him. It's you who came to see me. You ought to trust me."

Gathering his nerve, old Liang decided to reveal to the Party secretary the latent contradiction in Sheng-pao's mutual-aid team.

"First of all, there's Blind Wang. Because his family doesn't have enough land, they depend on what his son Shuan-shuan earns working for Sheng-lu, as part of a mutual-aid deal. The whole family won't make a move until they see what Sheng-lu's expression is, first. As long as Sheng-lu's in the team, Blind Wang's family will be in it too. But if Sheng-lu quits, so will they. Blind Wang doesn't want to let Shuan-shuan go into the mountains, but hates to lose that money they'll earn cutting bamboo. Huh! You can't eat big griddle cake if you're afraid of tiring your teeth. The way I look at it, if he won't let Shuan-shuan go, that's fine. There'll be one less burden to worry about. Shuan-shuan isn't very bright, you know. But my boy Sheng-pao pushes hard. He wants the whole team to go. He's trying to drag them all along."

"Who else has no faith in mutual aid?" Secretary Lu queried.

"Kuo Suo. When he moved here from Hsiapao he had no plough or ox. If he hadn't joined the team he wouldn't have been able to till his land. From the look of him, he'd leave it the minute he could get his hands on a draught animal and some farm implements of his own. I don't say anything, but I watch them all. Yu-wan, Huan-hsi and old Jen the Fourth – they're the only ones who're really on Sheng-pao's side. The rest are just tagging along, half-hearted."

"What about Feng?"

"Feng's a simple-minded fellow. When the team is all right, he's all right. When it runs into trouble, he changes."

"Don't be in such a hurry, old uncle," the secretary said, very friendly. "To develop from no faith to faith takes a couple of years. Does the man who becomes a monk really 'become Buddha' the moment his hair is shaved off? He still has to go to the monastery and get disciplined, doesn't he? Don't worry, we'll gradually educate them. Just don't hold Sheng-pao back, old uncle, and we'll be able to move right along. Here on this side of the stream the Hsiapao people say: 'Old Liang of the paddy fields has raised a fine son. His flesh and blood were formed north of the Wei, but his heart is the heart of old Liang the Third – he's a wonderful boy.' You see how highly people rate you, old uncle. Don't make them think less of you, whatever you do."

Ashamed, the old man hung his head. So that's what the Hsiapao folk thought of him. He hadn't known, though they were only on the other side of the stream. But how could they link his cautious narrow peasant heart with Sheng-pao's bold free-soaring spirit? Old Liang felt miserable. His self-respect as a labouring man over-rode his pettiness as a peasant, and he asked himself: "You're past sixty; what do you expect to take with you when you leave this world?"

But again he returned to the mental refuge he had chosen after quarrelling with his old wife: "As long as I've food to eat and clothes to wear, Sheng-pao can do what he likes. It's his world now."

When he raised his head, the expression on his seamed face was honest and sincere.

"Secretary Lu, can I tell you something from my heart?"

"Of course, old uncle, go ahead."

"Going into the mountains is dangerous."

"I know. But Sheng-pao is prepared."

"Every spring, from the Tang Stream Gap, they used to carry out a few — " He couldn't say those awful words "dead and injured".

Secretary Lu liked the old man for being concerned. "Don't you worry, old uncle," he said. "Sheng-pao is a careful fellow. He's not one of those rash blunderers. Besides, they're a good sized group. Nothing can happen to them."

Old Liang sighed. "People should only think of good fortune. But if anything goes wrong, we really won't be able to stand it. As leader, he'll have to go to jail. Our family will feel terrible."

The secretary burst out laughing. "What in the world are you talking about? Why should Sheng-pao have to go to jail? If anything goes wrong, the Communist Party will be responsible. How could we let Sheng-pao go to jail? Don't you worry. Didn't you say we're all named Communist?"

Relieved, the old man laughed. He rose and said: "Well, I've got to be going. If anything happens, you men in the Party mustn't be too hard on him."

Secretary Lu, restraining a smile, saw old Liang to the compound gate and helped him down the steps to the street.

"You can put all your worries out of your mind," Lu said. "In the future if there's anything you don't understand, old uncle, just look me up. We can talk it over together."

In Huangpao, after picking up his permit to go into the mountains, Sheng-pao met Huan-hsi on the street. The boy told him that his step-father had gone to make a complaint against him in the township government. What a loss of face. Instead of going home, Sheng-pao hurried directly to Hsiapao along the county highway. Although he knew there was nothing wrong, the old man's raising a row in the township government would

create a bad impression. But when he arrived at the township office and Secretary Lu told him the real situation, Sheng-pao broke into a broad grin, and he gazed at the secretary with joyful eyes. He had been prepared to carry his step-father home on his back if the old man refused to leave.

"Did you get your permit for the mountains?" Lu asked.

Sheng-pao wiped the sweat from his face with one end of his sash. "I got it. But we're in rotten luck."

"What do you mean?"

"This whole side of the range is closed off this year to let the new trees grow up. No one's allowed to cut bamboo. We have to go over to the other side of the main range, near Bitter Herb Clearing, to do our cutting."

"*Aiya*! That means you'll have to travel an extra forty *li*. It's going to be tough on the men carrying the brooms out."

"And what a forty *li* it is — straight up and down on both sides, like a ladder. Have you ever been up there, Secretary Lu? Folks say it's forty *li* of trails fit only for monkeys."

The secretary laughed. "I've been through there at least a hundred times. Is the supply and marketing co-op paying the porters any extra, then?"

"I dropped in on the co-op on my way back. It's all arranged. They'll pay ten cents more for every broom. Even so, I'm afraid those shrewd fellows from Kuan Creek Hamlet won't like the idea. I've got to talk it over with Tseng-fu. If he can't convince them, I'll have to help him hold a meeting."

"Right," Secretary Lu approved. "Explain that closing off forest areas is government policy. The forests belong to the people. If the Kuomintang hadn't always been setting fires to the forests, trying to burn out our guerrillas, there'd be plenty of bamboo on this side of the range. Would our government restrict cutting if we didn't have to?"

"That's what I'll say — because those are the facts."

"Are you all ready? Is there anything the township can do for you? We really owe you an apology. The township government's been so busy, we haven't given you enough help."

"Not at all. Isn't this help? Teaching me is helping me." Young Sheng-pao was modest in the presence of the Party secretary, who was over forty.

He said they were ready. He and Yu-wan had checked over the tools they were taking into the mountains, as well as the men's food and clothing. Since Huan-hsi was being left at home to learn a new method of cultivating rice seedlings, they had persuaded the middle peasant Feng to join the expedition.

"Originally," said Sheng-pao, "we were going to ask the township to help us with our seedlings. But now that the county's sending an agronomist, the problem's solved." He seemed entirely satisfied.

As Sheng-pao rose to leave, Lu clasped one hand in his, and fondly rested the other on the young peasant's sturdy shoulder. Then the secretary escorted Sheng-pao out, as if seeing him off to the battlefield.

"Comrade Sheng-pao," Secretary Lu said quietly, "don't you think you might work a little harder on trying to win your step-father over? After all he's not your real father. Ordinary backward peasants only see things on the surface and not their essence. They're quite liable to feel sorry for him. Of course we Communists want to move forward, but we can't ignore the impressions we make on the community."

Lu walked with his arm around Sheng-pao's shoulders. The young peasant was moved by his words.

"I've really been busy, Secretary Lu," he explained. "It's not that I think any the less of him for being my step-father. I always feel that it's more important to do things for others, that my personal affairs don't matter. It's easy to patch things up in your own family, if there's a quarrel."

Lu nodded in agreement.

"There's another thing," Sheng-pao continued. "My pa has a craze for going it alone. Some days he's better, some days he's worse. He squats there by himself, his brows knit, thinking, thinking, thinking. But you never know what he's thinking about. If you talk to him about being progressive, he listens all right. But then he sees others working away on their private

property, and he gets mad at me. I'm running around all day long. Who's got time to keep guessing exactly what's on his mind?"

"You're right." Secretary Lu was sympathetic and understanding. "Then ask your ma and Hsiu-lan to pay more attention to him. It's mainly a question of the impression it may give the masses."

At the Tang Stream, Sheng-pao begged the secretary to go back. With a strong peasant hand, Lu clapped him on the shoulder.

"Have a good trip. See you in a month."

"No question about it." Sheng-pao, at the head of the single plank bridge, said this confidently. "If there's illness or injury, we've got medicine. If we run into any tigers or panthers, Yu-wan has his repeating rifle."

The two Communists parted company and Sheng-pao crossed the bridge. Secretary Lu remained on the bank of the stream, watching until Sheng-pao's stalwart figure passed Sheng-lu's peach orchard.

Sheng-pao returned to the family's thatched cottage by dusk. He asked his ma and Hsiu-lan where the old man was. They said he was sleeping on the small *kang* in the stable shed. They told Sheng-pao not to disturb him.

"Secretary Lu's words have really gone to his heart," said Hsiu-lan. "Pa was in a very agreeable mood when he came back from the township. He said you were doing big things. He hopes heaven will protect you and that you won't fall. He said people who do big things fall hard, while peasants walk a road that's been trampled flat by thousands of generations. So they don't fall, but live quiet peaceful lives. Don't you think pa's clever?"

Pleased, Sheng-pao laughed. "There's nothing simple about our pa. He thinks all day, and his ideas are deep."

He started for the stable shed. His mother caught him by the sleeve of his lined tunic.

"Don't go."

"Why?"

"He's feeling bad. You're going to leave home for a month and he's worried about you. He's left instructions that when you come back you shouldn't disturb him. He says he wants to sleep alone in the shed until daylight; you'll be gone by then. He says he couldn't bear watching you leave. Don't make him feel any worse. You go on about your business. Hsiu-lan and I will look after him."

But the love between Sheng-pao and his pa was strong. Sheng-pao wouldn't listen to his mother. He had to see the old man, to say a few filial words and, at the same time, explain the political significance of the expedition, so that pa wouldn't worry.

He went into the shed. Hsiu-lan stood watching from the doorway.

The old man was lying on the small *kang,* his face to the plaster wall. Sheng-pao walked over to him and called softly: "Pa."

Old Liang didn't say a word.

"Pa," Sheng-pao called again, shaking him gently.

The old man turned his seamed face around and opened his eyes. From the alert expression in them, it was plain he hadn't been sleeping.

"Get your mountain permit?"

"Yes."

"Everything ready?"

"All ready."

"Then go. I won't stop you. You do your big things. I'm just a timid peasant. I won't stand in your way. My only hope is that you bring your men safe and well out of the mountains again – Heaven and Earth willing. That's all I have to say."

"Pa, get up. There are a few family matters I'd like to talk to you about."

"Tell your ma about them. My heart's heavy. I don't feel like talking. That's a fact."

Sheng-pao knew his pa's stubborn disposition. He gave up the idea of talking to him, and left the shed, his mind at ease.

The following day at cock's crow, dogs began to bark and there was a hubbub of voices. Sheng-pao's group of bamboo cutters was setting out for Bitter Herb Clearing, deep in the Chinling Mountains.

Part II

18

Among the wheat was goose grass; among the rice were tare weeds. Although the grass and weeds resembled the crops, they did not produce grain kernels, only grass seed. The peasants gave them equal quantities of fertilizer, soil and water until they were recognized. Then without the slightest complaint they calmly pulled them up. The following year, although the peasants knew very well there was goose grass among the wheat and tare weeds in the rice, they still allowed them the same conditions as the crops. The weeds were only a tiny fraction of the grain anyway.

Unfortunately, such things were not restricted to the sphere of nature. Tseng-fu had his brother Tseng-jung. Sheng-pao had his neighbour Blind Wang.

Twenty or thirty paces west of the compound of Liang the Third, and forty or fifty paces east of the compound of Jen the Fourth and his nephew Huan-hsi, stood an old thatched cottage on an open piece of ground. The east wall of the cottage leaned outwards. Were it not for the two poles propping it up, the wall would long since have toppled in any storm. Year after year, the cottage's owner put off replacing it just to prove that his judgement was correct – the wall was all right, good for another ten years at least. At the same time he was demonstrating how stupid and ridiculous were those peasants who claimed that the wall was dangerous. Blind Wang was nearly eighty. Was there anything he didn't understand? Did people have to tell him what to do? Nonsense.

Quarrelsome old Wang was also known as Surly Wang, or just plain Surly. Yet in spite of his cantankerousness, the villagers were quite respectful. After the poor old fellow lost his

sight, who in Frog Flat would call him by his inelegant nickname to his face?

Blind Wang was seventy-eight. Eight years before, he had stubbornly survived an attack of typhoid, but he lost his sight. Wang could no longer do any kind of work. He could only, leaning on his stick, grope his way out of the thatched cottage and sit in the sunlight. Or go behind the cottage to the outhouse beside the pig pen.

He had never spared himself. When he was in his prime, he used to go hoarse every rice planting season shouting at his water buffalo. The first few days his voice would override those of all the other ploughers in the paddy fields of Frog Flat. But by the end of the season Surly Wang could no longer be heard. It wasn't that he had finished his ploughing. He just couldn't produce any sound. That was the kind of person he was. He worked as if his life depended on it, as if he wished he could crawl on the ground and plough open the field with his head.

Now, a poor blind old man, he could only squat before the door of his thatched cottage, or lie curled up on the stack of brushwood in front of the house, and think back emotionally on his past experiences. His clothes were ragged, he was thin and bony, but the old man was still tough. Though seventy-eight, he wouldn't let his son Shuan-shuan run the family affairs. Whenever he heard footsteps approaching the cottage, the old man squatting outside the doorway would shout sternly, like a sentry:

"Who's that? Whatever you want, tell it to me. They can't settle anything."

In 1900, Wang was a young hired hand in Wang Village on the banks of the Wei River. Caught stealing crops from his landlord employer, he was sent up to the county magistrate for punishment. With all the elegantly dressed important personages in the great hall looking on, the bailiffs pulled down his coarse peasant pants in broad daylight and, ceremoniously counting, proceeded to smack his ugly naked backside with a



Blind Wang

long board. He was supposed to be given a hundred and twenty strokes, but because he kept blubbering and howling "Great One have mercy," they stopped at eighty. Asked whether he would dare to break the royal laws again and steal from his master, Wang, his face covered with tears, sobbingly guaranteed he would never take so much as a single straw from any landlord as long as he lived. "Mercy" was granted. He hauled up his pants and the bailiffs carried him back to the jail.

When his wounds were healed, and after twenty-four days of hard labour, Wang was allowed to return to his village. For many days he was ashamed to show his face. He kept out of sight, like a mole. His physical injuries had quickly healed, but the spiritual damage seemed likely to last him the rest of his life. Although his elder brother tried to comfort him, quoting the homely aphorism, "A son is not angered by his father's beating, a citizen is not ashamed of being chastised by the magistrate," young Wang nevertheless shouldered his luggage roll and took leave of his brother and sister-in-law with tears in his eyes. As he set off on his wanderings he told them he would settle down in any place in the central Shensi plain which struck his fancy and become a farmer. He would start afresh and be a loyal subject of His Majesty the emperor.

In 1902, on the nineteenth of the first lunar month, passing through Frog Flat, Wang decided to put an end to his travels. He became the neighbour and good friend of Liang the Third's father. Today even Liang the Eldest was his junior in the village. Compared to him, bald-headed old Liang was one of the younger generation. Wang was the only real ancient in Frog Flat. He still wore his hair in a small queue.

Although the old man's spirit was crushed in the days of the emperors, it wasn't until he lost his eyesight that he had sufficient time to reflect on the gains and losses in his life. He was grateful to the emperor's representative — His Honour the county magistrate — for those eighty smacks of the board. Wang felt he had led a blameless existence, and had done his duty by all emperors, rulers and landlords. He never stinted of his strength, never delayed paying his rent or taxes, never

stole a single grain from his landlords. Never. Surly Wang's actions could "stand scrutiny by gods or demons".

When his younger sister's orphaned sons — Jen the Third and Jen the Fourth — came to him as famine refugees in the year 1912, he rented some land in his own name from Miser Lu and let them cultivate it. After the autumn harvest he insisted that they give their very best grain as rent. Cursing his nephews, he absolutely refused to let them play any tricks on the landlord. Unless a poor peasant could gain his landlord's trust, said Wang, he could simply forget about getting along in this world. But uncle and nephews couldn't see eye to eye. Although Jen the Third reluctantly continued ploughing the rented land, impetuous Jen the Fourth got fed up; he gave back the land and went into the wilds of Mount Chungnan.

"If you don't want to farm, then don't," said Surly Wang. "I'm not going to lose my good marks in the next world for your sake. No respect for the royal laws. Young wretch."

This illiterate old relic of the last imperial regime liked to explain to peasants born in the early decades of the twentieth century the profound inner meaning of the phrase "Heaven and the officialdom give their blessing" — a slogan peasants often pasted above their gateways at New Year's time. The trouble with the crude fellows was that they just stick it up, they didn't probe carefully into its true spirit. To Surly Wang, who had received such a blow in his youth, the words were a holy scripture. He believed that heaven and the officialdom were the highest authorities. Everyone had to obey their mandates unquestioningly. Family possessions and children were all rewards from heaven and the officialdom. Peasants were only permitted to go quietly about their work. They had no right to demand anything. "You'll bring down disaster if you're not careful. Hah!"

During the land reform in the winter of 1950, Wang was confronted with his most difficult problem in the half a century that had elapsed since 1900. The philosophy he had been evolving all his life was put to a severe test that winter. Of course had he been able to see, it might not have been so

unpleasant. Unfortunately he was blind and couldn't go anywhere. Could it be that this hard-working old man who had enjoyed the respect of a considerable number of people in Frog Flat was going to turn into an object of derision?

"Old Wang, would you still rather wait for rewards from heaven and the officialdom," someone asked him mockingly, "or will you divide up the landlords' land together with the rest of us poor peasants?"

This was in the early stage of arousing the people and organizing the ranks of the poor peasants and hired hands. Wang had firmly shaken his head with its small braid of hair.

"Not me. I don't want anybody else's land. If I carried that sin with me into the next world, I'd never be able to explain it away. I couldn't even hold on to the property my ancestors left me. What do I want with anybody else's? If I were fated to have land I'd have it already, children."

Since he was blind, he had an excuse not to attend any meetings or join in community activities. If anyone notified him of a meeting, he retorted sarcastically: "Send a sedan-chair for me, children." In Frog Flat it was commonly agreed that he was a "backwater"; no wind could stir him. He was very familiar with the old society. But the new society, although he was living in it, was merely something in his imagination, something he had only heard about.

If anyone called at the door of his tumble-down thatched cottage and tried to explain things to him, he became irritable and launched a barrage of counter-propaganda, presenting a large array of facts to prove that land reform was a subversion of the proper order: In Hsiapao, so-and-so had inherited his uncle's land—over twenty *mou* of dry level fields, but in less than ten years he was bankrupt. In Wang Bridge, so-and-so had come into possession of someone's property—a pauper grew rich overnight. But later, with a branch for a staff, he had to beg from door to door. In Big Crossroads, so-and-so . . . etc., etc. . . . Wang never spoke in empty generalities. Every statement he made he could bolster by innumerable examples from his experience. And he was extremely positive, and full

of self-confidence. Wang believed that only property earned through bitter toil was dependable. This was the only kind of possession a man would cherish. You'd get no support from any other kind.

He never dreamed that by the time the land reform was concluded his mouth, framed by a snowy white beard, would be stopped so completely. Except for the shares left for their own use, all the land of Tenant-skinner Yang and Lu the Miser was parcelled out. Whoever had been classified as a poor peasant or hired hand was given a piece of land. How could Wang be the only one to refuse?

He knew that from then on, there were no longer any landlords. Yang Family Creek became Unity Creek. Lu Family Creek became Liberation Creek. Peasants were now their own masters. They divided up the land and ran their own affairs. If Wang didn't accept a share, where could his son Shuan-shuan find a piece of land to rent? The need to earn a living and other material considerations were the most merciless, the strongest, the most convincing forces in the world. The creed to which he had carefully adhered for the past fifty years he now had to abandon. With a feeling of guilt, he accepted a share of the land. But he still hadn't abandoned his fundamental tenet—that heaven and the officialdom gave their blessing.

"Isn't this a case of blessing from heaven and the officialdom?" he demanded. "Heaven above! If it weren't heaven's will, would the paddy fields of the Yang family and Lu family, which they accumulated piece by piece, be gone in a flash just like a bolt from the blue? If the officialdom hadn't sent emissaries here to divide up the land, would the peasants have dared to touch it? You needn't talk so big. It's still heaven and the officialdom that have given us this blessing."

Yet in spite of forceful arguments, he was weakening. From that day on, he was much more cautious when expressing his views on community affairs. He didn't want to make himself look silly again, as he had during the land reform. Fortunately, he now had eight *mou* of paddy field. Under his supervision,

Shuan-shuan could earn them a living from it. Wouldn't they get along just as well without him spouting a lot of ideas that went against the times?

Blind Wang's deepest regret was that the wife he had "bought" at a bargain after coming to Frog Flat wasn't too bright. Shuan-shuan, the son she bore, hadn't a tenth of his own intelligence. The young fellow could carry a two-hundred-catty load easily; he didn't even breathe hard. But any problem, even if it were no bigger than a sesame seed, stumped him completely. Shuan-shuan had one good attribute — he was honest and listened to orders. He never argued with the old man. The family ran very smoothly, very harmoniously. There were no impediments in the way of the blind old man's exercise of his patriarchal authority. Wang thought Shuan-shuan ten times better than Sheng-pao.

"For better or worse, he's my own flesh and blood."

The morning of the day after Shuan-shuan went into Mount Chungnan with Sheng-pao, Su-fang, his twenty-three-year-old wife, approached the old man. A pall of dissatisfaction clouded her face. She was stitching a cloth shoe sole.

"Pa," she said, "there's something I want to discuss with you. . . ."

"What is it?" demanded the family dictator. He was seated on a pile of brushwood in the yard. Raising his head, he gazed at her with sightless eyes.

"My uncle Yao, who has that big compound in the west end of Kuan Creek Hamlet, wants someone to tend his wife for the month after she has her baby. Why not let me do it? Shuan-shuan has gone into the mountains, only you and ma are at home. Ma can cook for both of you. By the time Shuan-shuan comes home, my aunt will be getting out of bed I can be back before the busy farming season starts. I'll be eating there while I'm looking after her. We'll be saving grain, and I'll earn twelve yuan for the month besides."

Finishing her proposal, Su-fang smiled. Blind Wang couldn't see her, but he could feel the smile.

The young woman had lively eyes, and she was a good talker — the exact opposite of slow, plodding Shuan-shuan. If they hadn't got her as a bride before liberation, the self-assured surly old man thought, and if Shuan-shuan, under his direction and with the mother-in-law's help, hadn't given her a couple of good beatings — planned in advance — with a stout stick, Su-fang would never pass her days in the thatched cottage in such a well-behaved manner. There was a "truism" which Surly Wang knew well: No matter how refractory the mule in the shafts of your cart might be, if you belaboured it enough with your whip, it would become docile — to say nothing of a human, who was a thousand times quicker to understand.

It seemed to him that this treatment was entirely reasonable. Those eighty smacks of the board in the magistrate's hall in the old dynasty had not been suffered in vain! When the old man decided that Su-fang's spirit had been sufficiently broken, he began acting quite considerately to her. He did his best to satisfy her where food and clothing were concerned, so that she should want to be Shuan-shuan's wife and bear him children. Wang knew that any woman, no matter how restless, after ten years of married life and two or three kids, would settle down and remain with the man, even though he displeased her.

But despite the fact that Su-fang had been tamed, after liberation the old man would not let her attend any mass meetings, or women's meetings, or join in any community activity. He wouldn't allow it, and that was that. Who could do anything to him — a blind old man well over seventy? If some representative or committee leader really wanted to insist on Su-fang attending a meeting, he, or she, would have to take a club and beat old Wang to death first — then Su-fang could go. Wang took full advantage of the privileges of his old age. He wasn't going to remain on this earth another seventy years, was he?

Now, the blind old man seriously considered the question his daughter-in-law had raised.

"Yao is a rich peasant. How does he dare to hire labour?" Wang asked suspiciously, his thin hand stroking his white beard.

"The land reform is over, pa," Su-fang assured him solemnly. "There won't be any more struggles against the rich."

"Your family and the family of Yao's mother-in-law are only distant relatives." The old man wasn't too keen on the idea.

"My father and Uncle Yao's wife had the same grandfather. Their fathers were brothers. It's just that Aunt Yao's father made his family prosper, while my grandfather died young and my father burned up our family property with his opium smoking."

"I know all that. What I'm saying is that it is true you are relatives. But when two families have nothing to do with each other, they become indifferent relatives."

"Indifferent relatives are still relatives. Before liberation we were poor, so they didn't want to bother with us. After liberation when they were classified as rich peasants, they were ashamed to face us. Today things have settled down again. Uncle Yao went to see my ma and said they'd like me to come. If anyone asks, we can say it's just one relative helping another; he's not hiring a serving woman, there isn't any exploitation. You get what I mean, pa?"

"I get you." Surly Wang nodded his head with its small braid. His unseeing eyes registered consent as he said: "When you put it that way, I get you perfectly."

Although he was stubborn and irritable, Wang was never inflexible where earning a living or practical interests were concerned. He had let Shuan-shuan join Sheng-pao's mutual-aid team, and although reluctantly, he had finally agreed to Shuan-shuan going with the team to Bitter Herb Clearing — deciding in both cases from the same angle.

It was seven years since Su-fang had come to this thatched cottage as a bride, and she knew now how the old man's mind worked. You see how easily she convinced him. As easily as Sheng-pao convinced him of the advantages of Shuan-shuan going into the mountains to cut bamboo.

Seated on the brushwood, Wang, taking hold of the staff by his side, thought the matter over.

To save a month's grain for one person and earn twelve yuan besides — that was a good deal. If it weren't for the fact that she was related to them and that the Yaos were afraid of being labelled exploiters, how could Su-fang have found such a good job? She'd get much more than she was earning at home, stitching cloth shoe soles. Old Wang's eyes were blind, but his mind was sharp. He knew how to calculate. Nobody need think he was stupid.

"We can do it," he said to himself.

Then he remembered — before liberation Yao had been carrying on with Blue Moth. That's the only thing that was wrong with him. Just that one little thing. If Su-fang should go to his home —

But old Wang quickly reassured himself: "Yao is a rich man. He wants face. Blue Moth slept with lots of men and Yao had her too. But I've never heard it said that Yao fooled around with any other woman. It's Blue Moth's own fault for being a slut. Besides, he and Su-fang are relatives. Yao isn't an animal. Su-fang has been very obedient these last few years. She wouldn't dare get gay."

Clenching his teeth, he growled menacingly at the young woman standing before him:

"You behave yourself when you go to his house. Be respectable, you bitch. We don't want people laughing at us and saying that we don't train our women properly."

"Yes, pa." Su-fang docilely accepted his order.

And so the matter was decided. The blind old man was quite satisfied. Contact between poor relatives and rich relatives could only bring profit to the poor. Nothing bad could come of it. Pitiful old Blind Wang. The land reform had given him land and shook his inner being, but it hadn't changed his rusty old brain. To him Yao was still a wealthy man of a stature he could never attain; Sheng-pao was a mere beggar boy he had seen grow up, a person of low origin. Shuan-shuan had gone into the mountains with him solely for the practical

purpose of earning money. As to whether or not socialism could be achieved, Wang just laughed and said:

"Children like to talk. I have my own ideas — a full stomach, respectability."

Shih-fu returned to Frog Flat. The grey-haired well-to-do middle peasant in his fifties, carrying a letter of introduction from the county government, had gone to the foot of Taipo Mountain along the upper reaches of the Wei and bought two *tan* of rice seed. How proud he was! Hey! Double what Sheng-pao's brought back. Let's see what Sheng-pao has to say now.

On learning that Sheng-pao, Yu-wan and the others had gone into the mountains, Shih-fu was a bit disappointed. Nevertheless, he had his brother Shih-hua, who drove the rubber-tired cart, borrow the big crier's gong from civil affairs committeeman Blabbermouth Sun and walk along the main pathways of Frog Flat, shouting:

"Whoever wants a share of Hundred-day Ripener, come and get it. It doesn't matter whether you're in a mutual-aid team or not."

His long-stemmed pipe in hand, Shih-fu stood on the bank of Kuan Creek, watching his brother Shih-hua as he beat the gong and shouted the announcement through the paddy fields. How happy Shih-fu felt. Already wearing his white spring tunic, the well-to-do middle peasant thought to himself smugly:

"Who says I can't outstrip you, Sheng-pao, you young punk. You bought a *tan* of rice seed and divided it only among the mutual-aid team leaders, with nothing for the independents. You're good, I'm no good. I'm a go-it-aloner, a stubborn hold-out. Well, I don't make those distinctions. I share with everybody. What are you going to do about it? Any tiller in Frog Flat — hired hand, poor peasant, or middle peasant — I treat them all the same."

Shih-fu savoured the flavour of revenge. He hoped that this act of his would arouse friendliness, respect and gratitude in the non-needy peasants, that it would give him prestige

among them. He wanted to make himself the centre of those peasants "to whom nothing else mattered except working from sunrise to sunset". To put it bluntly, he wanted to become their leader. *Aiya*! He had never been a glory seeker, a man active for the community weal. But circumstances were forcing him to behave in this manner. He was afraid there would be a large expansion of the mutual aid and co-operation which Sheng-pao was promoting. Things were different now than before liberation, Shih-fu knew it well. Yao was tagged with a rich-peasant label — he had to lie low. "Isolate the rich peasants. Limit their activities." *Tien*! The words were written in big letters on the earthen walls of every village. How could Yao dare to say anything, do anything?

What Yao had told him was absolutely right. He, Shih-fu, had nothing to fear. The slogan "Unite with the middle peasants" protected him. He had to stand at the head of all the new and old middle peasants of Frog Flat. Of course he couldn't spout a lot of counter-propaganda as freely as Communists and Youth Leaguers explained the advantages of mutual aid and co-operation in agriculture. But if by his conduct he could serve as a model for all the new and old middle peasants and those eager to climb into their ranks, that would be enough.

Shih-fu was confident he could play this role successfully. Although Yao couldn't show himself, he could help Shih-fu plan his moves. The rich peasant was a bit vicious, but Shih-fu was a steady fellow who knew what he was doing. He would simply refuse to accept Yao's more venomous proposals, or engage in any foolish hostile activities. Shih-fu would take the same line advocated by the Communist Party and the people's government — increase production but don't scorn the independent farmer. He decided to stress that point in any public meeting or private conversation. "Excellent," Shih-fu intended to intone. "Mutual aid is excellent — but so is independent farming. Whatever increases our grain output is good."

At other times, he might not put it so directly. He'd be more subtle, perhaps say something like: "Any ox that can pull the plough is a good ox, whether it's red or whether it's black." Peasants would know exactly what he meant. What could the Communists and Youth Leaguers do about it? Give him a dirty look? From now on he would openly admit it — he was old-fashioned, conservative. Shih-fu would explain that just like Chen-shan, chairman of the village deputies, he had tagged along with the majority during the land reform, but now he had fallen behind; he couldn't keep up with members of the Communist Party and the Youth League and the young people.

Carrying his long-stemmed pipe, Shih-fu went to Yao's handsome compound in the west end of Kuan Creek Hamlet to discuss the distribution of the rice seed. He drank the rich peasant's tea, smoked his tobacco, and settled with Yao his expenditure on train fare and freight charges for the seed. He called on Yao in person, but to Chen-shan he merely dispatched his little niece, with instructions to tell the chairman of the village deputies: "The rice seed has been bought. If you'd like a share of it, come and get it yourself."

Yao was delighted to see what a great change had taken place in Shih-fu's bearing, speech and behaviour. His own walk, the way he worked and ate took on a new vigour. He even slept more soundly. Yao became aware of the joy of spring, the beauty of the scenery along the banks of the Tang Stream. For once again he was becoming a man of influence in the five villages of Hsiapao Township. In this season of Clear and Bright, the idea of strengthening himself began sprouting in the depths of his mind, naturally and easily, like the green grass on the banks of the river, on the edges of the fields and on the sides of the roads. This was a law of nature. Yao called it the will of heaven, something beyond his control.

"What does that Tseng-fu amount to, anyway?" he thought to himself. "I only have to use my head the merest trifle

and I'll give him more than he can bear!" Yao was keeping his eye on Sheng-pao, now. He wasn't going to let that young punk breeze into power in Frog Flat without a breath of opposition. When the expedition went into the mountains Yao recognized his new enemy. Sheng-pao was an even more serious menace to him today than Chairman Chen-shan.

"Uncle Shih-fu," he said to the well-to-do middle peasant.

"What is it?" Shih-fu queried fondly.

"That son of Liang the Third has taken a group into the mountains. They've set up a camp and are cutting bamboo and making brooms. And he's boasting — naming names — that his team is going to raise more rice per *mou* than you are. Does that make you feel good, uncle?"

"It makes me feel bad," Shih-fu admitted frankly. Obviously, Sheng-pao's vigour was rather frightening to this well-to-do middle peasant.

Yao's eyes, with the scar on the right lid, observed his worried demeanour. The rich peasant laughed.

"Don't be a softy," he said forcefully. "We may not be as good as Communists and Youth Leaguers in preparing a struggle meeting, but we're much better at raising crops. Are big farmers like us going to lose out to that gang of paupers, uncle?"

"You're right," said Shih-fu. "That's just what I was thinking."

Yao ground his teeth. "Spread the fields thick. Sell your stored grain and with the money buy fertilizer. Spread it on the rice fields. Isn't this the kind that doesn't grow wild no matter how much fertilizer you give it?"

"That's what they say."

"Then what are you afraid of? The Communist Party is urging increased production. If a private farmer raises more grain they give him a bonus too. There was a whole list of high producers in the newspaper the other day. I'm a rich peasant, so I can't qualify. But heaven's on your side, you're qualified. Raise hell, I'll cheer you on."

"I've been thinking of stirring things up —"

"Right. If you can't raise better crops than these Frog Flat paupers, uncle, you won't have the face to cross the stream. You won't dare show yourself in Big Crossroads."

"That's a fact. Where are you going now?"

"Downstream. My missus is going to start lying-in in a couple of days. I hear Shuan-shuan's wife is willing to give her aunt a hand during the first month after birth."

Yao crossed the small bridge at Kuan Creek Hamlet and followed a path through the paddy fields towards the Tang Stream. In high spirits, head up, chest out, Yao felt himself a power again, a man who had strong support. He was very satisfied with the conversation he had just concluded. Formerly, he had been a trifle indignant. It seemed to him that designating him a rich peasant and Shih-fu only a well-to-do middle peasant was unfair, that Chen-shan had been favouring Shih-fu because they were relatives. Now he knew it was nothing of the sort. What's more, he was glad it had worked out that way. Having Shih-fu out in front, while he advised and encouraged from behind, was infinitely better than having to act openly. He knew that the most formidable person was the fellow no one could do anything about though everyone knew he was making trouble. Yao's dream was to be just that kind of an uncontrollable power.

"Brother," a seductive feminine voice hailed him.

Passing through a field of barley, Yao turned in alarm. Blue Moth, wife of ex-corporal Pai, stood leaning against the doorway of her thatched cottage.

"Come on over, brother," she called beguilingly. "Sister has something to tell you."

Never hesitating, Yao continued on his way. He didn't want to get mixed up with her again. Although this spring his rich-peasant label didn't weigh so heavily on him as it had in the past, after all, his enemies were still in power in the village. He had to behave discreetly, and not give them any excuse to "correct" him. Repeatedly he had warned himself — no more hanky-panky with Blue Moth. Why bring disaster

on yourself for a moment of pleasure? Thus thinking, he strode along, while retorting vaguely:

"I'm busy. Got no time. Later on, maybe."

But "sister" wasn't letting this opportunity go, finding it hadn't been easy. She had been standing in that doorway for several days, waiting for her lover of three years before to pass along the road. Now he had come at last. She was still eating the rice he had given her. Recalling what it was like to be wrapped in Yao's strong arms, she felt unbearably soft all over. Of all the men she had been intimate with in Frog Flat, Hsiapao Village and Huangpao Town, only Yao had a really irresistible masculine attraction for her. She was willing to let him do anything he wanted with her. As long as she could have the love of this powerful fellow, she would be completely satisfied. To the rough peasant bachelors who sought sexual warmth from her body, she played the benevolent donor, at the same time abusing them, toying with them, making them so miserable they couldn't sleep nights. If they didn't like it they could quit coming around. Her affairs with them were all very short. Only two men in the world had ever occupied her heart for long. One was Pai, former corporal in the Kuomintang army. The other was Yao, one time local big shot. Both men were tough. She believed that only the tough had any guts, dared to take risks. These were the only kind worth loving, worth waiting for in doorways.

Now, seeing that Yao had no intention of coming to her thatched cottage, Blue Moth grew frantic. With the cloth shoe sole she had been stitching still in her hand, she flew after him along the path that ran at an angle from her fence to the road.

Her face was flushed, her teeth gleamed white, her handsome eyes were moist and glistening. Every part of her capable of externally expressing affection was in action, working to arouse Yao's interest.

Yao became even more alarmed. He hastened his stride upon the ox-cart road fringed by spring grass, afraid Blue Moth would ensnare him again. He'd be in real danger if that happened; he wouldn't be able to save himself. Only a

worthless moron lusted after women with no regard for the circumstances. Yao was trickier than a demon. He wasn't going to fall into the net of illicit intercourse while a people's government ruled.

Hastening his steps, his heart beating wildly, he mentally beseeched Blue Moth who was hastening towards him along the path:

"Leave me alone, dear little sister. Even if you never give me your favours again, I won't ask you to return those two bushels of rice. Rest assured."

He hurried on, not even turning his head, fearing that one look at the alluring Blue Moth would weaken his resolve. A few words of endearment, and he'd be undone. It would take no more than a fraction of a second for misfortune to start. Only after Blue Moth saw that he was determined not to revive their affair and dejectedly abandoned her pursuit, did Yao slow his pace.

When he reached the yard in front of the door of Blind Wang's thatched cottage, only a brief conversation was needed to settle the matter of Shuan-shuan's wife Su-fang looking after her aunt during the one month post-delivery period.

When Huan-hsi heard that his uncle Shuan-shuan's wife Su-fang was going into the rich peasant's big compound to serve the expectant mother, he couldn't restrain himself. It was as if he had been stung by a scorpion. Blind Wang's foolish decision nauseated him. The seventeen-year-old boy was so angry he couldn't even bear to keep his hat on. All the blood rushed to his head. The arteries in his temples pulsed. Rage nearly set his jet-black hair ablaze. Flinging down his carrying pole, booting an empty basket out of the way, he started furiously for the blind old man's thatched cottage. He wanted to stop Surly Wang's shameless plan. It was a betrayal, pure and simple, of the stand of the poor peasants and hired hands.

His mother, who was like a sister to Sheng-pao's ma, urged him:

"Don't be that way. You're still young, child. You don't know what your granduncle is like. Let him do whatever he pleases. There are partners in money and partners in trade, but there aren't any partners in face or emotions. A person is responsible only for his own behaviour."

"What are you saying?" Huan-hsi glared at his mother, breathing hotly. "What are you saying? He and my grandma were born of the same mother. As a relative I ought to be ashamed for him. But that isn't what matters. He's losing face for all the poor peasants and hired hands along the lower reaches. He's making our mutual-aid team lose face. When Sheng-pao hears about this up in the mountains, he'll burst with rage."

Although Huan-hsi was young in years and thin in stature, there was nothing weak about his determination. He spoke like a hammer driving nails — concise, sharp, with no beating about the bush, no mumbling or vagueness. After graduating from the Hsiapao primary school, he had been unable to go on to middle school. Since his father was dead, he had valiantly taken over the bulk of the family's work. Huan-hsi was beginning to understand the seriousness of life. In his speech, in his actions, he imitated the tone and the manner of adults, even copying the way they walked. A child's voice and the words of a grown-up, an adolescent's body and a man's stride — did not make Huan-hsi seem comic, but lovable. After he began taking part in agricultural production, he saw little of friends his own age, spending most of his time with the adults in the mutual-aid team. He listened to their words, watched their expressions, thinking, learning to be a man. Huan-hsi already understood a great deal, including a bit about things he had not yet experienced personally. This was entirely a result of the observations of his flashing eyes and the cogitations of his lively mind.

The boy knew that the marriage between Shuan-shuan and Su-fang was one of life's misfortunes. While only an innocent girl of sixteen, Su-fang had been seduced by a rascal in Huang-pao Town. Some months after she had been bestially corrupted, when her abdomen was already visibly bulging, she went as a

bride, with tears in her eyes, to a thatched cottage in Frog Flat. In those days if a girl got into trouble, her parents could give her to any man who would take her. Huan-hsi and all the neighbours knew that the marriage took place only because the dull clumsy Shuan-shuan was in no position to be fussy about his bride's reputation. Surly Wang, who had just gone blind, shrewdly seized this opportunity to arrange a marriage for his son. He said Su-fang was still young, she could be beaten back into proper behaviour. So they beat her savagely, beat her until she had a miscarriage. And her parents couldn't open their mouths.

This happened before liberation. Although the neighbours all knew, nobody said anything. But just because people couldn't bring themselves to talk about the crimes of the old society, it didn't mean there weren't things done in the old society that would make your blood curdle.

Seventeen-year-old Huan-hsi had never felt any sexual craving, but he was learning to recognize it in others. The second year after liberation, the youngster noticed that Su-fang, who was so strictly controlled in old Blind Wang's home, seemed attracted to Sheng-pao. He saw her looks of tender admiration, her odd little smiles, the way she sought opportunities to talk with Sheng-pao, her efforts to win his approval. Realizing that she wasn't too satisfied with Shuan-shuan, Huan-hsi thought: It's a lucky thing Sheng-pao's high moral calibre makes him keep cool and avoid her. Otherwise, who knows what a disreputable place this would become?

Huan-hsi knew also that not only Sheng-pao but all the decent neighbours living along the lower reaches were guaranteeing, were seeing to it, that no improper young fellow stepped in between Shuan-shuan and Su-fang. Everyone was hoping for one thing: that Su-fang would have a baby soon.

The more he thought, the more worried Huan-hsi became. Neither Sheng-pao nor his Fourth Uncle was at home, yet he couldn't just remain silent. He hurried over to the wide yard in front of Blind Wang's thatched cottage. As usual, the old man was seated on a pile of brushwood, sunning himself. Su-

fang was out visiting a next-door neighbour. Wang's dull old wife was inside the cottage, busy with something or other.

The boy had never learned the adult way of skirting around a subject. Nor was he able to squat down beside the old peasant and, in a pleasant manner, offer him friendly advice. Unfortunately he was still just a blunt youngster.

"Are you sending Su-fang to work for that rich peasant, grand-uncle?" he demanded abruptly.

"Why, yes," Blind Wang replied confidently. He raised his head with its small braid. Although he could see nothing, he faced in the direction of Huan-hsi's voice.

"Forget it," the boy snapped contemptuously. He stared angrily at the white-bearded wrinkled face of the self-righteous old man.

"Why? She's not doing anything at home."

"Twelve yuan isn't going to last you a lifetime."

"*Aiya.*" Blind Wang was very surprised. "How can you talk like that, young fellow? Have you and your mother got so much money? Can you load a cart or fill a boat with it?"

"We're poor, but we've got backbone."

"Oh? So going out to work for somebody means you've got no backbone? Then your Fourth Uncle has no backbone either."

"But Su-fang is a woman."

"She's helping her aunt in the post-birth month. It's not as if she were going to some outsider's place."

"Yao is a rich peasant."

"Won't a rich peasant's money buy grain? Or salt? Is a rich peasant's food poison? Is that it?"

Blind Wang was angry. Twisting his jaw, he said harshly: "Where do you come off to try and teach me, boy? I'm nearly eighty. Is there anything I don't understand? The reign of the Ching dynasty emperors, the years of the republic — haven't I been through them all? You're too young to be giving me instructions, young fellow. When your father was alive he wouldn't have had any land to plant if I hadn't rented it for him."

Speechless with rage, Huan-hsi turned to leave.

"Stop," Blind Wang barked.

"What do you want?"

"Why don't you go into the mountains? Yu-yi has gone; why haven't you? Why are you idling around at home?"

"Our mutual-aid team has left me behind to raise the rice sprouts."

"Simpleton. They're all in the mountains earning money, but they've left you behind."

"I'll be getting work-points for this job."

"It won't bring you as much as you could make in the mountains. I'm not senile yet. I know how to add."

Huan-hsi turned and walked away. The difference between seventeen and seventy-eight was too great. Remould. Improve. Anything could be remoulded – anything except this stubborn old man. All he could talk about was the reign of the emperor Kuang Hsu, the days of the emperor Hsuan Tung. Let some more competent person talk with him. Huan-hsi didn't have the right magic charm.

Perhaps he was so enraged he didn't listen, or maybe he was going a bit deaf. In any event Surly Wang continued to lecture the place Huan-hsi had been standing even after the boy had left:

"What does a young squirt like you understand? I'm your granduncle, but do you ever ask me anything? No, instead you go to some outsider and treat him like a relative. Why? Let me hear the reason, eh. Tell me – Oh. He's gone."

19

After the Clear and Bright festival, the barley in the paddy fields and the wheat sprouts on the dry land began to tiller. In fact the barley would soon be putting out tassels. Before anyone knew it, the sea of crops on the Wei River Plain changed from kingfisher green to a deep blue.

Petals fell from the yellow jasmine on the banks of the creeks, along the roads and in the graveyards. Stout bold dandelions blossomed. Asters, gentle and lush, waved charmingly by the sides of the roads.

The elm, willow, ailanthus and locust trees surrounding the compounds, the white poplar on the dykes of the Tang Stream, shimmered in fresh and tender splendour. The villagers who worked in other parts of the township left their homes. Those who had sidelines started producing. The opera lovers spent their days taking in the dramas being staged at the fairs of neighbouring towns. The burgeoning fields of Frog Flat became a playground for all kinds of pretty birds. Larks, finches, thrushes – everywhere were making love. Swallows from the south gathered mud from the paddy field ditches to build their nests. Turtle-doves busily reinforced their abodes with twigs, preparing to lay their eggs. How simple is the love of birds. The male merely pursues the female – pursues and pursues until she consents. But in the case of our Kai-hsia, love was very complicated indeed.

As she travelled the road to and from the primary school in Hsiapao Village, Kai-hsia looked gloomy, depressed. She always had her head down, and seemed deep in thought.

The irritating encounter she'd had with Sheng-pao that day near the Huangpao Bridge left her unhappy for a long time. In spite of her intelligence and persistence, Kai-hsia had a

weakness common to all women. Tears flowed from her eyes the moment she flung herself down on her *kang*. Her pride had been hurt; her heart had been pierced. While this could in no way affect the spring ploughing, the market prices, the supply and demand of grain, or the armistice negotiations then in progress at Panmunjom, nevertheless to Kai-hsia — a twenty-one-year-old country girl disturbed by the turbulence of her emotions and the question of what road to choose in life — Sheng-pao's stiff attitude had been a severe blow.

Later, Kai-hsia had reasoned it all out: Sheng-pao was proud. He thought he was wonderful. When a man became proud — even if he had talent as big as the sky and the best of personalities — he was no longer lovable.

What are you so proud about? she thought. What's so wonderful about you? Can you guarantee your mutual-aid team won't fold up? Have you already fulfilled your production plan? You've only just overhauled your team, comrade, you've only just made your production plan, and already you're proud? Actually the credit should go to Secretary Wang's strength, not to your talent. What are you proud about? Just because you talked with the assistant secretary of the county Party committee? Just because you organized a year-round mutual-aid team and you're close to Secretary Wang? Go ahead and be proud, then. You're riding for a fall.

Sheng-pao's standing in her heart dropped precipitously. What's more, she discovered he tended to be selfish at times. If she had played up to him in the crop-watcher's thatched shed that day, she wondered, if she made it plain that she was dying to marry him, would he have behaved towards her the way he did? Just because she had asked what he thought of her working in a factory, his pride had been hurt. That was why he treated her so shabbily. If that wasn't selfishness, what was it? Was that any way for a Communist to treat a Youth Leaguer? Thus, it seemed to Kai-hsia that the chairman of the village deputies was a competent fellow after all. His only trouble was that, as an older person, he had been more subjected to the bad influences of the old society. But his

concern for Kai-hsia was selfless, pure. With all his heart he wanted nothing more than that China should industrialize quickly.

After thinking everything out, Kai-hsia became firm. Wiping her eyes, she decided to apply for a factory job. She went out with her mother to plant beans.

These last few days she was melancholy, depressed. Since she had made up her mind to work in a factory, there didn't seem much point in going to the primary school any more. She had already obtained the approval of the secretary of the school's Youth League branch. He had agreed that, in view of her age, it would be better to go into a factory than to remain in school. If only the state-owned Textile Mill No. 3 would transmit a call for workers to the county authorities tomorrow. Kai-hsia wanted to get away from Frog Flat soon. The best thing would be for her to pass an entrance examination in the county seat and be at work in the mill by the time Sheng-pao returned from Mount Chungnan. Then, like the girls in the two previous groups which had gone to work in factories, she would come back only during the National Day and Spring Festival holidays to see her mother. Her romance was ended, and she longed to move to a new environment lest familiar scenes stir up painful memories.

Although she wanted to quit school, the chairman of the village deputies had advised her not to be too hasty. What if she didn't pass the textile mill entrance exam? Chen-shan was really all right.

But Hsiu-lan gave her a pain. Perhaps it was because of something her brother Sheng-pao had told her, or maybe she herself had noticed a change. In any event she behaved distantly to Kai-hsia now, and was not affectionate any more. She couldn't seem to think of anything to say, and gazed at Kai-hsia with eyes devoid of the slightest warmth. This made Kai-hsia all the more anxious to get away from the irritating environment of Hsiapao Township as quickly as possible. Kai-hsia had a strong sense of pride. She couldn't bear people treating her coolly.

"A fine attitude," thought Kai-hsia. "When a girl's on good terms with your brother, you're affectionate. When she's not, you show plainly whatever you think in your heart. Who wants to look at a face like that?"

Since Hsiu-lan seemed to dislike her, Kai-hsia didn't seek her companionship and started going to and from school alone.

One afternoon after the last class, during the free activities period, Kai-hsia was in the school reading-room, looking through the *China Pictorial* for photos of women textile workers. Hearing a bunch of girls noisily chattering in the schoolyard, she threw down the magazine and hurried outside. She found Hsiu-lan surrounded by a group of older girls.

"Give us a look, Hsiu-lan."

"If she doesn't let us see it, don't let her go."

"Don't grab, you might tear it. Let her take it out and show it to us herself."

Hsiu-lan's ruddy face was crimson. Her strong mannish hands were pressing tight the pocket of her blue denim tunic. Curiosity impelled Kai-hsia to join the crowd.

Ah, a letter from Hsiu-lan's sweetheart Yang Ming-shan who was at the Korean front, and in the letter a snapshot. The girls were eager to see what this hero of the Chinese People's Volunteers looked like, but Hsiu-lan wouldn't let them. Her hands pressing down on the pocket containing the photo, Hsiu-lan searched for a weak spot in the girls' encirclement where she could break through. But her charges could only shake it; she couldn't get away.

At last in a corner outside the fifth-year classroom, Hsiu-lan capitulated. The bevy of girls, with their long braids of glossy black hair, craned their necks to look at the picture of the man who had been decorated for bravery. Nineteen-year-old Hsiu-lan covered her furiously blushing face with her hands. The girl's shy heart was scorching her cheeks.

Kai-hsia, even though her friend had been cool to her not long before, couldn't help pushing forward for a look at the heroic visage of Ming-shan. It was a poorly taken picture, not nearly as good as those in the window of the photographer's

shop in Huangpao Town. Ming-shan was standing by the entrance to a cave in a rocky Korean mountain, far on the other side of the Pohai Sea. The sunlight was making him squint. Perhaps due to the bad technique of the photographer, the hero's face appeared mottled, as if his cheeks were dirty, scabby. He was rather old-looking too — at least thirty.

Like the other girls who had gazed at the picture with such eagerness, Kai-hsia, on seeing it, was very disappointed. Ming-shan didn't look a bit like the heroes she had seen in the pictorials with medals on their chests. Most of the girls were too embarrassed to say anything, and walked away. The remaining few, returning the photo to Hsiu-lan, only murmured: "Got a nice build."

Kai-hsia glanced sideways at Hsiu-lan as she took back the picture, an unhappy expression on her face. Kai-hsia was unhappy too, for her friend's sake.

She watched Hsiu-lan deliberately. She wanted to get close to her again, to comfort her. But Hsiu-lan was as stubborn as her father. Angrily, she pushed Kai-hsia away. Later, Kai-hsia saw her alone in the fourth-year classroom, reading the letter and wiping her eyes with a handkerchief. Kai-hsia stood outside the room miserably. She had no idea what to do.

When the students lined up for dismissal at the end of the day, Kai-hsia saw that Hsiu-lan's eyes were still red from weeping. This made her feel even worse.

How she sympathized with Hsiu-lan. She knew that Hsiu-lan was only seven when her father arranged the match for her, and only sixteen when Ming-shan joined the Volunteers and went to Korea to resist the American invasion in 1950. Hsiu-lan would have liked to have seen what her fiancé looked like, but by then he was on a foreign battlefield. A clause in the Marriage Law provided that no wife could divorce and no girl could break an engagement with a man while he was at the front; if they were incompatible, the matter would have to wait until he returned home. At least that was the general idea — Kai-hsia remembered the clause quite clearly. A girl

could show her patriotism and her desire to be progressive in many different ways, thought Kai-hsia, but she couldn't take the love of once in a life-time and bestow it casually on anyone at all. It seemed to Kai-hsia that no matter how heroic and outstanding a man might be, unless you loved him from your heart, living with him would never be agreeable, joyous, satisfying.

Hsiu-lan's heart was as firm as the flesh of her ruddy face. But she was different from Kai-hsia, who couldn't act or do anything that was in the least contrived. Sometimes in life this slight touch is just what's required, only then it isn't called contrived, it's called self-possession. It gives the impression that you don't care. Nothing seemed to be troubling Hsiu-lan, from the look of her. But her eyes, so like those of her father old Liang the Third, saw everything clearly, and her emotional reactions were rapid.

Ever since she understood the relationship between man and woman, that cause of infinite joy and limitless pain, Hsiu-lan thought of Ming-shan, the young fellow she had never seen. He was always in her mind. She worried about him, dreamed about him. She constructed an image of him in her imagination. Although they were separated by miles of plains, mountains, rivers, cities and countryside, although he was beyond the county, the provincial, the national boundary line, neither storm nor artillery fire could snap the invisible thread that linked her heart to his.

To Hsiu-lan, Ming-shan seemed dearer than her ma, her pa, or her brother Sheng-pao, whom she was with every day. In the not-too-distant future, she and this hero would build a home, work together, discuss family affairs, have children — she hoped they could raise them to be loyal useful citizens. When she heard that Ming-shan had been decorated at the front, and the people of North Poplar Village, proud of her fiancé, had beaten drums and cymbals in celebration, although Hsiu-lan's body was in Frog Flat her heart flew to the mountains of north Korea. In spirit she took part in the fight against

the American invaders, as she had seen it portrayed on the screen during the open air film shows in Hsiapao.

Primary school student Hsiu-lan couldn't quite imagine what war was really like. In her simple mind it meant merely that we were attacked by a wicked enemy whom we then counter-attacked and wiped out. She could visualize only the outward aspects of war, she couldn't comprehend its deeper meaning. Hsiu-lan didn't understand that when the Japanese and the American imperialists forced cruel wars upon the Chinese people, and the Chinese Communist Party organized forces to oppose them, the wars turned ordinary workers, peasants and intellectuals into extraordinary heroes. Beloved sons, sweethearts and husbands gave their precious lives on the battlefield. But, forged in the fires of war, those who remained were stronger, braver and nobler than before. At the same time, these wars gave the enemy a more correct estimation of the Chinese people, led by the Chinese Communist Party. Although Hsiu-lan couldn't think so deeply, she had seen that all the peasants — regardless of whether they approved of the equality between men and women guaranteed under the new Marriage Law — approved of the war in support of Korea against American aggression. Those same peasants who temporarily lacked a true appreciation of the actions of her brother Sheng-pao, had the fullest respect for the deeds of her sweetheart Ming-shan.

"Hsiu-lan got a letter from her fiancé."

"He sent her his picture."

"He's the leader of a gun crew."

Peasants who lived amid the paddy fields of the upper and lower reaches of the stream, on their way to work and on their way home, or when they stopped for a meal by the roadside, reported this good news to one another. Women flocked to the compound enclosing the thatched cottages of Old Liang the Third, seeking a look at the picture of Hsiu-lan's future husband. Like the older girls of the Hsiapao primary school, the peasant women came with a feeling of respect for the hero

and envy for his bride-to-be. But when they saw the mottled face in the photo, they didn't quite know what to say.

"Very healthy-looking."

"He's a big fellow."

"Regular features, nice."

No one said anything about his scabby cheeks, but from the women's expressions you could see that they were disappointed. What a pity: A fine, upstanding hero, with regular features and a big strong body — why does he have to have such ugly sores on his cheeks? *Ai, ai*! *Ya, ya*! How different from the idealized picture of a hero in the minds of the ordinary peasants. People are seldom aware of the vulgarity of some of their own conceptions. Poor Hsiu-lan, thought the peasant women. With a boy friend who looks like that, how dissatisfied she must be.

Hsiu-lan enclosed herself in the thatched cottage of her brother Sheng-pao who had gone into the mountains. She had brought her *Small Dictionary for Students* with her, for much of Ming-shan's letter she couldn't read. Two sentences had so many words she didn't know that she couldn't make head or tail of them, although she could connect what came before with what went after. She wished she could enlist the help of Huan-hsi, who was a primary-school graduate, but since the letter began with "Dear Younger Sister Hsiu-lan", how could she let anyone else see it? She couldn't very well keep the salutation covered with her hand indefinitely. She would look up every word she didn't recognize until she understood everything that was in the letter. Hsiu-lan barred the door of Sheng-pao's room. No one could come in. As she poured over the little dictionary, beads of perspiration appeared on the bridge of her nose.

Later, she wept alone in the thatched cottage, sobbing bitterly. Her ma and pa and Huan-hsi's ma were out in the courtyard, and it hurt them to hear her.

"For better or worse, he's the one it's going to be. If you start acting like that Kai-hsia, I'll murder you." In a bad mood over this distressing business, Old Liang fumed and

threatened. But he wasn't really being cruel. Squatting with his back against the elm tree growing on the site of the three-roomed shack that had long since been torn down, the old man was miserable.

The two old women hushed him. They wouldn't let him upset the girl further at a time like this.

Finally, the women forced the door open and entered Sheng-pao's room.

"Listen to me, child, don't cry," urged Huan-hsi's ma. "You're only making us unhappy too. Luckily the face hasn't been cooked yet. When Ming-shan comes back from Korea, you can still change your mind. If he's not suitable, we'll find you another boy — "

"What?" Hsiu-lan suddenly was furious. Her tear-filled eyes glared at Huan-hsi's ma angrily. "What are you saying? How can you talk such nonsense?"

The two old women were astonished. What was this all about? A tender steady girl like Hsiu-lan recklessly, almost madly, flaring up at Huan-hsi's ma? Her startled mother reminded her that any problem, no matter what, could be discussed calmly.

Sobbing, Hsiu-lan told them: "His face . . . was burned by a napalm bomb."

"What?" The women stared at her, shocked.

Very agitated, the weeping Hsiu-lan said: "Never mind saying he doesn't look too bad. Even if he looked terrible, I wouldn't care."

She felt in fact that Ming-shan was now more handsome, that being with him would be a still greater honour. But she couldn't bring herself to say it aloud. She was a girl who thought a lot and said little.

"Fine, fine." Her mother was pleased and relieved.

"You're a good child," Huan-hsi's mother commended. She didn't resent Hsiu-lan snapping at her.

Again the women examined the scarred face in the photo. Old Liang, who had heard the whole thing, also came in for a look. The dangerous exploit of his future son-in-law had

caused the old man to pale and his heart to pound. Deeply moved, he muttered: "*Ai*! *Ai*! The older generation can't compare. The older generation can't compare."

Lying on her brother Sheng-pao's *kang*, Hsiu-lan wept afresh. Now it wasn't Ming-shan, but she herself who was being burned by the napalm. His pain was her pain. Before she had known only that it was glorious to be a hero. But how, after all, did one become a hero — that she didn't know. Now she understood. She would have given anything to go to Korea and share her beloved's hardships and dangers. The rocky mountains of Korea were being pulverized by American artillery; shell holes and shell fragments were everywhere. But the battle position of the heroes never wavered. And her dearest one was there in that position. Her pure girlish heart was enormously stirred. She could barely credit her senses that her betrothed was such a great man.

Later, when no one else was around, her mother asked Hsiu-lan: "Where is Ming-shan now?"

"Sangkumryung." Hsiu-lan's voice was hoarse from weeping.

"What kind of unit does he belong to?"

"After his wounds healed he went back to his artillery company."

Pleased and respectful, Old Liang the Third asked his daughter: "Does the head of a gun crew rank as a platoon commander or a squad leader? Did he say in his letter?"

"He didn't say." Hsiu-lan wasn't interested in this.

Her mother rudely berated the old man. "That's all you care about. If it isn't getting rich then it's becoming a high official. That old brain of yours just can't change."

Life's violent transformations always rush at people when they are not in the least mentally prepared. It is then that a person's temperament and character, or what is generally known as his "inner self", is most easily revealed. The urgency and the seriousness of the matter is such that he has no time to consider how to conceal his true feelings.

The morning after Hsiu-lan received the letter from her fiancé, Old Liu, who had been the matchmaker years before,

now leaning on a cane, his back bent, came to the rude compound of Old Liang the Third in Frog Flat. This was no coincidence — Ming-shan's mother had been thinking of her wounded son in Korea for some time. She missed him so badly she couldn't eat. She wished her future daughter-in-law would come and stay with her a while. Old Liu believed that if Hsiu-lan could be at her side, it would be a great comfort to her.

Hsiu-lan's pa and ma gladly agreed to let the girl go. Ma who some twenty years earlier had been forced to beg on the streets was very pleased with the attitude Liang the Third, her second husband, displayed before the old matchmaker today. Enlightened, unhesitating, broad-minded, he in no way resembled a selfish, stubborn, petty, envious peasant. Obviously, his patriotism and the honour his prospective son-in-law had won overseas had made the old man magnanimous. He felt himself to be one of the noblest Chinese on earth.

That afternoon, when school let out, Hsiu-lan crossed the Tang Stream and returned home. Her emotional crisis had passed. With the dawning of a new day, her heart had grown calm. The thought of her beloved brought only a feeling of sweetness, warmth and honour. The sole difference was that previously "heroism" had been an abstraction to her, now it was something concrete. Why should she feel badly?

Ah, life is so fascinating....

Hey la-la-la-la, hey la-la-la,
Hey la-la-la-la, hey la-la-la,
Rosy clouds sail overhead,
The earth is carpeted with flowers of red,
The might of the Koreans and the Chinese,
Beats the Yankee soldiers to their knees!
. . . . . .

Hsiu-lan sang this song in her heart as, carrying her school bag, she entered the compound gate. Her pa was standing beneath the elm tree, looking very stern.

"Hsiu-lan."

"Yes, pa."

"Now, look here. You — "

Hsiu-lan's mother came charging out of the thatched shack and cut her husband short. She was very displeased.

"You stay out of this. Who asked you to butt in?"

The old man understood. He flurriedly picked up his whisk broom and went into the stable — although the whisk broom was of no use in the stable, since you couldn't pick up manure with it and it was too small for sweeping the trough.

Hsiu-lan was uneasy, sensing that something was amiss. Entering the cottage with her mother she asked:

"What's wrong? What makes pa so fierce?"

"There's nothing wrong."

"I don't believe it."

"Why not? You know your pa. He'll raise a row over any little thing, or even over nothing at all."

"I don't believe that nothing's wrong."

"When your brother came back from Kuohsien County with that rice seed, was anything wrong? And didn't your pa storm then?"

Convinced, Hsiu-lan hung her school bag on the wall beside Chairman Mao's picture above the long table. Never was a girl more honest than our Hsiu-lan.

She began eating her meal, at peace with the world. Hsiu-lan ate pleasurably, and obviously with good appetite.

Ma watched lovingly, dotingly, her heart brimming with devotion. A mother's warm and kindly gaze makes you enjoy your food when you're eating and rest comfortably when you're sleeping. . . .

Hsiu-lan put her bowl down and rose from the low stool. Ma asked:

"Had enough?"

"Plenty."

"Be sure to fill up."

"Why?"

"This afternoon you're going to North Poplar Village. Your future mother-in-law is very ill. She thinks about her son all the time and wants to see you. It will make her feel better."

Hsiu-lan's ruddy face crimsoned. All the blood in her body seemed to rush to her maiden's cheeks. She was overcome with shyness. Everyone has instinctive responses. And these, since different people have different ideas and emotions, are converted into varying reactions. Hsiu-lan immediately pictured an awkward scene — a strange village, an unfamiliar lane, eyes of innumerable strangers peering at her, people whispering to one another, discussing her appearance, smiling, nodding, appraising the bride-to-be.

A woman. A woman. How many disadvantages there were to being born a woman.

Hsiu-lan suddenly pressed her hands to her ruddy face and ran out. In the courtyard she saw her pa, who had been listening attentively, and she hurried through the compound gate. Halting on the clearing she stood beneath the wide blue sky. It seemed better here.

"You'll get a beating if you don't do what you're told." Pa, coming through the gate with unsteady pace, said menacingly. His fists were clenched.

Ma hurried out and pulled him back inside. "You don't have to interfere. Can't a girl have any feelings?"

As she stood on the broad threshing ground, the lofty Chinling Mountains, the vast plain, the twisting Tang Stream, the mountains and river of her great motherland, evoked Hsiu-lan's noblest thoughts. Aristocrat Ridge of Mount Chungnan she saw as Sangkumryung. There, her beloved Ming-shan was driving back the American invaders, protecting the peaceful plain below. Her future mother-in-law was longing for her son and wanted to see the precious girl who would be his wife. What if according to the old custom the girl didn't visit the boy's parents until she came to his house as a bride? It was all a lot of nonsense anyhow. What if strangers did stare at her? Hsiu-lan was engaged to a member of the glorious Chinese People's Volunteers — let them stare. She was what she was. She would go to North Poplar honestly and openly, seriously and without any pretentions. She would not let

feminine weakness reveal itself in any of her behaviour, lest people laugh at her and cause her dear Ming-shan to lose face.

Ma pushed pa into the stable, then came out of the compound gate again. Embarrassedly, Hsiu-lan said:

"I'll go, ma. If you'll give me a change of clothes – "

"They're all packed. I put them in the cupboard. Come inside now and ma will fix your hair."

As she combed Hsiu-lan's hair, tears fell from her eyes, encased in a network of wrinkles. The girl hadn't grown so big in just one day. The sweet and tender infant she had borne on the eleventh day of the eighth lunar month in 1935 was now a charming young woman. It hadn't been easy. At three, Hsiu-lan had caught the measles, but hadn't been able to break out in spots. While ma held her in her arms, pa had knelt in the courtyard and prayed to the gods for help. Pa had gone to the edge of the Tang Stream in the middle of the night and dug up some reed roots, which ma had brewed into a broth that brought the spots out.

The old couple couldn't be without their Hsiu-lan. If it weren't for her, how empty these last eighteen years would have been. A home without children, no matter how well it may be furnished, is never really satisfying. But when there are kids in the house, even if the furnishings are absolutely ugly, a home has warmth and life. Because she had no grandparents and no aunts and uncles to visit, Hsiu-lan had never left her ma. But today, she would be leaving her for the first time.

Hsiu-lan's abrupt departure for North Poplar took Kai-hsia by surprise. Not having the faintest idea of what was in the letter from Korea, she of course couldn't understand Hsiu-lan's feelings. And anyone who judges solely by appearances without knowing the inside story is likely to draw some ridiculous conclusions.

Well-meaning Kai-hsia was even sorry she couldn't give her friend emotional support at a time like this. Kai-hsia wasn't

the kind of girl who admired and flattered a friend when all was well, then mocked her when things went wrong.

Yes, Kai-hsia was a good girl, pure and intelligent. Her naivety and her superstitious faith in Chairman Chen-shan should be forgiven. The chairman of the village representatives became the only person in Frog Flat who could influence her, especially after her unhappy parting from Sheng-pao.

As usual, Chen-shan frequently wandered over to the compound across the lane, carrying his big bowl of grain and small dish of vegetables, and talked about the industrialization in the large cities. At noon, he chatted in the shade of the persimmon tree; in the evening, on the steps of the thatched cottage. Breakfast he always ate in the field.

Because her daughter finally decided to accept her advisor's guidance, Kai-hsia's mother respected Chen-shan more than ever.

"Chen-shan, have you finished levelling those two *mou* of land on the west side of Liberation Creek?"

"Yes," the chairman replied with satisfaction. His stubble-covered cheeks moved as he chewed a mouthful of food. In a very experienced manner, he explained: "I've already flooded them. When you turn a piece of dry land into a paddy field you have to flood it early. If you flood it just before transplanting, the rice shoots won't grow very well. Why? Because in some places you've got fresh earth."

Chen-shan was quite pleased with the way he was managing his family affairs.

"These last two days my brother Chen-hai has been carting home bricks and tiles from that kiln outside the north gate of Huangpao, and I've been preparing fertilizer for our rice shoots."

"Our *kang* needs rebuilding," Kai-hsia's ma offered tentatively.

"Don't worry. When Chen-hai finishes bringing those bricks and tiles, we'll rebuild it. We'll use the old earth for fertilizer."

"I still haven't bought the earth bricks."

"I've already asked Old Chin of our mutual-aid team for a price. He'll make them for you at a hundred bricks per yuan."

The heart of Kai-hsia's ma throbbed with gratitude. What a good man Chen-shan was. Observing his serious, responsible manner with the utmost respect she thought: There aren't many peasants who can get things done the way he does.

After he had departed from the persimmon-tree compound, she said to her daughter approvingly:

"That chairman is all right."

Kai-hsia agreed. "He knows his business. The best village cadre in all of Hsiapao Township."

When Chen-shan had gone to the kiln to see about his bricks and tiles, the proprietor had tried to be tricky and give him only a small token delivery. It was obvious at a glance what he was up to. Chen-shan had glared and the stubble on his face had bristled. "Open your eyes and take a good look at who you're dealing with," he had snarled. "If I report to the Party that a crooked business man is trying to inveigle a Communist into investing money, you'll have more trouble than you can handle. Don't think you're too big to be taken down a peg." The proprietor docilely agreed to give the full amount ordered.

Chen-shan had reported this glorious victory to Kai-hsia. The pure Youth Leaguer was deeply moved. She believed that the dishonest kiln owner had attempted to lure him into investing the money which he had given for the purchase of bricks and tiles, but that the chairman had taken a firm proletarian stand. She never dreamed what Chen-shan was really up to. Believing in the chairman had become a habit with Kai-hsia.

The girl was very stirred as she recalled this incident. "Now that we've joined his mutual-aid team," she said to her mother, "you won't have to worry any more."

"I'm not worried. You go off to your factory. I'll be all right."

The next day, a call for girls put out by the state-owned Textile Mill No. 3 of Sian was transmitted to Hsiapao Township.

Aiya! The big courtyard of the township government office was jammed with girls. There were nothing but heads — with braids, with cropped hair — as far as the eye could see, bobbing and moving. A sea of girls and waves of heads undulated beneath the courtyard's ancient cedars. They had come to apply for jobs in the textile mill. It was just what they all had been longing for.

Such tension. Some girls thumped their thighs and stamped their feet regretfully because they hadn't worn new clothes. Some untied their braids right then and there, and had friends help them recomb their hair and do up the braids more neatly. Did they think that representatives of the state-owned Textile Mill No. 3 had come to Hsiapao personally?

Kai-hsia inquired about the procedure. After registering at the township government office, you had to go to the health station in Huangpao Town for a preliminary physical check-up. All the girls who passed the physical would go in a group with a letter of introduction to the labour department of the county government, where they would be given a written examination. Time was not very urgent — the exam was still several days off. But every girl was afraid of being left behind. If the list were filled she would lose the chance of going to the county seat. Tense hearts created this tense situation. After registering with the township government the girls wanted to leave for the health station in Huangpao immediately. It was a real competition.

Seeing the others, Kai-hsia automatically patted her own hair and inspected her own clothes. She was neat and clean as usual. And she remained steady. The member of the Youth League committee of the Hsiapao primary school had the air of a leader among these country girls.

"Kai-hsia, are you going to take the textile mill exam too?" The voice of Comrade Lu, secretary of township Communist Party branch, hailed her in surprise.

Embarrassed, Kai-hsia pretended not to hear, and pushed through the crowd of girls towards the door of the township clerk. The clerk was noting down each applicant's name, age,

level of education, and the class status of her family. Somewhere behind her, Kai-hsia heard Secretary Lu sigh:

"*Ai*! In 1950, when the war against American aggression started in Korea, some of the good Youth Leaguers we developed during the land reform went off to join the Volunteers. Now the textile mill puts out a call for workers. We're sure to lose more of our best girl Youth Leaguers, especially those who aren't tied down by family obligations. If we have another big campaign in the countryside, who's going to do the work?"

Kai-hsia heard him very clearly, but she didn't dare to turn around and look at the Party secretary's expression. "Develop some new people, then," she said to herself. "Isn't the industrialization of the country more important?"

20

Huan-hsi's father Jen the Third had been laid up with rheumatism of the back and legs for several years. But he clung to life stubbornly. A few times he seemed about to draw his last breath, and his wife brought out his burial clothes, which had been prepared long ago. But he always revived. It happened time after time — the poor fellow opened his eyes and stared at Huan-hsi and the boy's mother, who were waiting beside him. Some of the neighbours said he was only a little over fifty — he didn't want to die. Others said it was because Huan-hsi was too young — his father was afraid he couldn't look after the family without him. Jen the Third came back from death's door three times in two days. He never stopped breathing altogether. This was before the country was liberated, but he hated to leave this world in spite of the wretched life they were leading.

Since there was no hope of the invalid regaining his health, his wife — Huan-hsi's ma — wished he would go to Heaven quickly. She loved him dearly and couldn't bear to see him suffer. She had been doing the farm work for him, and her feet were badly swollen from long hours of standing at his bedside and tending to his needs. She used to carry him on her back out of the dim thatched cottage into the courtyard so that he could see the blue sky, the red sun, the green mountains and plains.

An illiterate peasant woman, she was very strong physically, and a kindly heart beat beneath her ragged tunic. Once, when Jen the Third's aching bones made him grind his teeth in agony, he had picked up his stick and, twisting his mouth and squinting his eyes, pounded it against her thighs. She didn't avoid his blows. "Let him hit me," she thought. "How much

pain can a sick man inflict?" She only shifted a bit so that he could strike more easily, letting the stick fall upon her sturdy buttocks. "Does it make you feel any better when you hit me, Huan-hsi's pa?" she asked. Jen the Third had been moved to tears. Clasping his hands together, he begged her pardon. He pleaded that she take a rope and strangle him, to lessen her burdens. Tears running down her cheeks, she had wrapped him in her arms.

Now he was much worse. He could no longer eat. She hoped he would die.

"Go on up to your Heaven," she urged him earnestly. "Huan-hsi's nearly eleven. I can raise him. Things will be better once he's grown. You needn't worry."

But Jen the Third gazed at her weakly and rolled his head negatively from side to side on the pillow. When he was able to speak again, he asked:

"Has Sheng-pao come back yet?"

"No," Huan-hsi's ma replied. "They're grabbing army conscripts and he's hiding in the mountains. He doesn't dare return."

Disappointed, Jen the Third closed his eyes.

He asked this question several times. Everyone surmised that he had some unfinished business with his young neighbour — they were on very good terms. Jen the Third was a man of strong character. He wouldn't die until all his affairs were in order.

"Do you owe Sheng-pao money?"

The invalid shook his head.

"Does Sheng-pao owe you money?"

Again he shook his head. These wild guesses seemed to displease him.

He suffered terribly during his last few days. The neighbours talked it over and decided to send Jen the Fourth into the mountains to find Sheng-pao and bring him home.

On a dark night when the moon was covered by clouds, Sheng-pao entered Jen the Third's thatched cottage. His padded tunic had been rent by brambles in a dozen places.

Smelling of dusty earth, he leaned over the invalid and said gently:

"Remember me, uncle?"

Jen the Third opened his eyes and looked at Sheng-pao. A dying smile showed faintly on his paper-white face.

"Sheng-pao," he said — his voice was very weak — "I'm finished."

"It's not up to us whether we live or die," Sheng-pao sighed.

Jen stirred under his bedding. He pulled out a hand that was thin as a chicken's claw and reached for Sheng-pao's hand.

Sheng-pao put his hand — hardened from cutting brushwood — into Jen the Third's.

"I'm . . . finished . . ." the invalid repeated slowly. "Sheng-pao, I'm placing Huan-hsi in your care. Look after him. Teach him . . . to be like you."

"Don't worry. We'll be the same as brothers."

"His uncle, Jen the Fourth, is just a big windbag. His mother's brother is too inflexible. Take care of my boy."

"I understand."

Jen the Third closed his sunken eyes for good. Eleven-year-old Huan-hsi wept heart-brokenly. His sleeve and tunic were drenched with tears. The intelligent child longed to console his father, to promise that he would listen to Sheng-pao. But he was so choked with sobs, he couldn't speak.

The following morning before dawn Sheng-pao, like the wolves that came down during the night, slipped back into the mountains. After daybreak, Huan-hsi put on white mourning clothes and took up a bereavement staff. Calling at the homes of his neighbours, he kowtowed and formally announced the death.

After his long-ailing father was buried, the boy looked at the troubled world around him. The northern plain, Tang Stream, Huangpao Town, Hsiapao Village, the houses, the trees — all were shimmering. Even the ground beneath his feet seemed to tremble. His heart was as heavy as lead. He was dizzy from having wept too much. Huan-hsi was vaguely conscious that he would probably end up a virtual slave to the

Hsiapao landlords Tenant-skinner Yang and Miser Lu. His main function in life would be to increase their wealth. After he grew up he would either become their hired hand, or he would rent their land, giving the best part of his grain crop each year as payment. When he became old enough to be of use to the Kuomintang army, he would have to run away to the mountains to avoid conscription. The fatherless boy could see only a bleak and bitter existence before him. He would have to leave primary school.

Huan-hsi never dreamed there would be such a thing as Liberation, as land reform. When they came, he went mad with joy. He dashed about here and there, skipping, running, singing the new songs the Communist Party had brought. Although he couldn't understand the full significance of the changes that were taking place, the very fact that Tenant-skinner Yang and Miser Lu had been knocked off their high horse was enough to make him deliriously gay. He saw his father in his dreams several times. Only after he awoke did he realize that it was merely wishful thinking. Huan-hsi would have given anything to be able to bore down into the ground and tell his pa what the new society was like, so that his dear one in the nether world could be happy too.

In 1949 Huan-hsi, then thirteen, finished the fourth year of primary school. His ma was strongly opposed to his going on. "A boy from a poor family — why do you have to know how to read so many words?" she said. "When you take peaches or persimmons to market in the slack season, if you can write and calculate a little, that's enough."

But good neighbour Sheng-pao insisted that the boy complete the full six years. A village cadre since Liberation, Sheng-pao laughed at Huan-hsi's ma for confusing the purpose of getting an education in the new society with the reason one studied in the old. Huan-hsi was impressed when Sheng-pao told him how much difficulty he was having as a cadre because he couldn't read or write; Sheng-pao hoped that when Huan-hsi grew up and became a cadre also he wouldn't have this problem.



Huan-hsi (Jen Chih-kuang)

Who could have known that after a few short years, not only would Huan-hsi have become the work-point recorder of Sheng-pao's mutual-aid team, but that he soon would be studying new techniques from an agronomist who was being sent by the county government. Every pore in Huan-hsi's body breathed with satisfaction; he felt light, and brimming with energy. When he walked he wasn't satisfied with just taking one step after another — he wanted to run, to leap. He had expected to be a hired hand as a child and a tenant farmer as a young man, but the new society had afforded him a different road altogether. Huan-hsi was eager to hurry along it, sure that still better things were in store ahead.

In the few days since Sheng-pao had taken his group into the mountains, Huan-hsi did an enormous amount of work. He carried nearly all the fertilizer of the mutual-aid team to the seedling beds, and heaped it in piles along the sides. The only exception was the fertilizer for Sheng-lu, Sheng-pao's cousin. Sheng-lu, who had not gone with the others, transported his own. All the rest — some three hundred loads — were delivered to the fields of seven families by the seventeen-year-old boy. His shoulders were swollen from the pressure of the carrying pole.

"Don't rush so," his ma urged sympathetically. "Carry a while, then rest a while. Don't try to do it all in one breath. You're not fully grown yet."

Huan-hsi wouldn't hear of it. "Is the weight of the pole going to push me down and make me shorter?" he scoffed. "Nonsense. You don't have to worry."

Determination is a spiritual power which is converted at times into a material force. Huan-hsi knew the folk saying: "Nothing is impossible." On Sheng-pao's instructions, he had asked Sheng-lu to help him distribute the mutual-aid team's fertilizer. With the superior manner of a well-to-do middle peasant to a poor peasant, plus the lofty air of an adult to a mere boy, Sheng-lu had retorted coolly:

"After I finish carrying my own fertilizer, we'll see about it — when I have time."

But he never seemed to have any time. Today he was going to Huangpao, tomorrow he was visiting relatives, the day after there was an opera he wanted to see in town. Huan-hsi knew Sheng-lu didn't like helping poor peasants. It was plain that he had joined the mutual-aid team only in order to use the poor peasants as hired labourers; to do any work for them would lower his status. That being the case, Huan-hsi didn't insist. There wasn't too much fertilizer anyhow. He'd deliver it himself and be done with it.

He piled heap after heap around the field for the seedling beds. Formerly the families of Sheng-pao and Sheng-lu raised water chestnuts here. The field had to be ploughed once, twice, three times, and set to soak. Then, when the agronomist came, they would only have to spread the fertilizer and sow the seed.

But the days sped by and there was still no sign of the agronomist. Working in the field from morning till night, Huan-hsi kept looking down the road to Tang Stream. And at the end of each day, disappointment came on the heels of dusk, casting a pall over the lad's heart.

"Sow at Grain Rains, transplant at Slight Fullness" — this rule was well-known to all the rice-raising peasants in the Tang Stream area. According to another aphorism: "Five days before Grain Rains is not too early, five days after is not too late." In other words there were about ten days within which the rice seed had to be sown. Some peasants preferred to sow early in the period, some to sow late. Those who had large holdings often put down part of their seed first, and the rest later on. In this way, they could ensure against the seedlings growing too big for transplanting.

Now, it was already very close to the ten-day period. Around the Tang Stream everyone was preparing his seedling beds. Families which always started particularly early — like those of rich peasant Yao, well-to-do middle peasant Shih-fu, and the other few rich and well-to-do peasants in Hsiapao — these families had already spread their fertilizer and sown part of their early rice. Seeing their fields, guarded by felt-capped

rice-straw scarecrows to frighten off the sparrows and water fowl, Huan-hsi became concerned. Although the mutual-aid team was made up mostly of poor peasants, together they had as much land as any of the large holders.

The young fellow began to get worried. When he heard that Kai-hsia was going to the county seat to take an exam for a job in the textile mill, he decided to ask her to drop in at the county agronomy station and urge them to hurry up with that expert. But by the time he got to Kai-hsia's house in Kuan Creek Hamlet, her mother said she had already gone.

Not only did he miss his messenger, but he took a ribbing from a few of the hamlet's residents.

"I hear the government's sending you an agronomist," sneered Blabbermouth Sun. "Where is he?"

"If they said he's coming, then he'll come," the boy retorted, keeping his face expressionless with an effort.

"Sure enough. He's really come," cried Blabbermouth. "Isn't that him, over there? There — on the path west of Pai's cottage."

Huan-hsi knew he was being kidded. Ignoring Blabbermouth, he walked on. "A hell of a village cadre you are," he thought to himself. "And you've got the gall to apply to join the Communist Party. Instead of being anxious for our sake, you're happy when you see us anxious. Which side are you on anyhow?"

Though angry, Huan-hsi was not downcast. His faith in the mutual-aid team hadn't wavered in the slightest. He had Blabbermouth sized up exactly. Blabbermouth never really responded to the calls of the government and the Party. The only calls he responded to were those of Chen-shan, chairman of the village deputies to the township people's council. To Blabbermouth, the government and Party in the village were Chen-shan personally, no one else mattered. As long as he stayed on Chen-shan's good side, he could swagger about the village any way he liked. . . . Huan-hsi had heard all this from the mouth of Yu-wan, the village militia captain.

"Hey, Huan-hsi. Wait a minute. I want to ask you something."

Huan-hsi turned. It was well-to-do middle peasant Shih-fu who had hailed him. He halted.

With a mocking smile on his wrinkled face, Shih-fu squinted. "You've piled your manure around your seedling beds, but you haven't spread it. What's the idea? Trying to show us go-it-aloners how much better your mutual-aid team is?"

Every word was like a knife slash against the boy's class self-respect. Obviously, he couldn't take the same attitude to this treacherous well-to-do middle peasant that he took towards Blabbermouth. In a flash he recalled how Shih-fu had pressed his uncle Jen the Fourth for debt instead of helping with loans of grain to the needy peasants, how he had gone up to Kuohsien County for "Hundred-Day Ripener" rice seed so that he could compete against the mutual-aid team and hurt its standing. . . . As the memory of these poisonous deeds surged into Huan-hsi's mind, he determined to return a knife for a knife. But his seventeen years' experience in life wasn't enough to provide him with a knife-sharp retort. His face flamed scarlet. He had to drop his role of the self-possessed adult. He cursed Shih-fu furiously.

A few old middle peasants who lived in the east end of Kuan Creek Hamlet, holding their big rice bowls, were squatting in their compound gateways, eating. They had been enjoying Huan-hsi's discomfiture. But when the boy began swearing at their respected elder, they no longer remained mere spectators.

"Hey, puppy. Watch your language."

"Grab him and throw him in the creek."

"Don't let him get away. Where does he come off pulling that sort of stuff around here?"

They put down their bowls and advanced on Huan-hsi. Not liking the look of things, he dashed down a path through paddy fields where summer barley was growing. He heard the men guffawing. Turning, he saw that they weren't really chasing

him. He slowed down his steps and walked towards the lower reaches of the Tang Stream, deeply humiliated.

Hurt and insulted, Huan-hsi started home. Kids still weep easily at seventeen, but he kept a tight grip on himself. Nearing his house, he wiped the tears from his eyes with his sleeve. He intended to enter their compound gate as if nothing had happened. Huan-hsi didn't want his ma to worry about the heavy responsibility he was bearing.

But at that moment he received another blow. Su-fang, wife of mutual-aid team member Shuan-shuan, freshly washed and combed and smartly made up, emerged from her thatched cottage, a cloth-wrapped bundle in her hand. She followed the grassy path to the road, then came south in Huan-hsi's direction. He knew she wasn't going to visit her mother, but that she was on her way to the handsome compound of rich peasant Yao in Kuan Creek Hamlet.

Shame bit into the boy's tender young heart like a wolf. A blush spread from his face to his neck. It was an insult to the mutual-aid team and the poor peasants and former hired hands. Except for his ma, Huan-hsi had little contact with women, and had no desire to know them better. But of this he was sure — even when he grew old enough, he would remain a bachelor all his life rather than marry a slut like Su-fang.

They met where the iron-rimmed wheels of ox carts had worn deep ruts in the road. His brows knitted in a frown, the boy deliberately looked towards Huangpao Town. He didn't want to see the hussy. Quite unaware of his feelings, Su-fang greeted him:

"Where to, Huan-hsi?"

The boy walked by without a word. He spat into the grass by the roadside — the smell of Su-fang's scented face cream simply sickened him.

When he got home his mother asked: "Did you speak to Kai-hsia about the agronomist?"

"She left long ago."

"Never mind. It's all right."

"What do you mean?"

"A man just came with a message from Secretary Lu. The agronomist will be here in another two or three days. Secretary Lu says we shouldn't worry. Just get the fertilizer ready, but don't spread it."

Huan-hsi practically leaped for joy. All his humiliation vanished at this one word from Secretary Lu, as if wiped away by a hand. Compared with the mutual-aid team, what did it matter if a couple of people in Kuan Creek Hamlet picked on him, or if Su-fang took an improper job? It didn't matter a bit. Huan-hsi felt he wasn't a youngster, but a big strong man. He saw it more clearly than ever — the whole government and Party were on his side. They had made him their agent; he belonged to a powerful collective. What a pity he had run from those middle peasants in Kuan Creek Hamlet. They had only been trying to scare him. Actually they wouldn't have dared to toss him into the creek. Next time he'd show them a thing or two.

At dusk, bald-headed Liang the Eldest, staff in hand, came charging into the Jen family compound.

"Huan-hsi," he bawled from the middle of the courtyard.

"Ho," the boy responded from the ox shed.

"I'm telling you now. Tomorrow we're going to spread our fertilizer and sow." Having spoken his piece, the old man started out again.

Huan-hsi threw down his feed strainer and chased after him. He was puzzled.

"Wait a minute, uncle. What do you want to do that for?"

"What for? Our field is big. We've got to begin early. That's what for."

"But uncle . . ." although he saw that the old man was angry, Huan-hsi wouldn't give in. Forcing a smile, he tried to talk reasonably, like a grown-up. "You may have a big field, but there are a lot of us in our mutual-aid team. Secretary Lu sent a message today. He says the agronomist will be here in another two or three days."

"So what? I'm not waiting." With a downward flick of the wrist he walked away.

Huan-hsi followed. At the compound gateway, he seized the old man's sleeve. His attitude stiffened.

"If your family spreads manure and sows, then I suppose you'll want to irrigate right away."

"Why shouldn't we?" snarled Liang the Eldest. "If we're not going to flood the field, why should we sow? To feed the birds?"

"It's all one piece of land. If you irrigate, how is the mutual-aid team going to sow?"

"If that doesn't suit you people, you can sow tomorrow also."

"Are you deliberately trying to make trouble for the team, uncle?"

"What's that?"

"You heard me. You're making trouble for the team." Representing a newly formed social force, Huan-hsi held his head higher.

The old man was furious that the boy wouldn't yield. He thumped his staff on the courtyard hardened by the steps of many feet.

"Just because I loaned the team some land for seedling beds, do I have to go along with every move the team makes?" he demanded harshly.

"Your family is part of the team too. When we worked out a production plan, your son Sheng-lu was there with us. If we're using your seedling-bed land it's because Sheng-lu agreed to it. Why pick a time when the whole team except me is away in the mountains to bring up the old go-it-aloner rule about lending seedling-bed land?"

"Humph. You've learned to be a slick talker. And what kind of rule does the mutual-aid team go by? Let me hear that, eh?"

"The mutual-aid team works according to plan."

"Getting tough, are you? Hit me, why don't you? Go on — hit me, hit me."

The old man pressed closer. Huan-hsi hadn't expected him to make such a show of himself. Gritting his teeth, he stared angrily at the grey beard he couldn't respect, while giving ground step by step. Liang the Eldest was obviously baiting him. The boy was nearly in tears. Only a little while ago he had been tormented by go-it-aloners outside the team, and now he was being abused by one within it. Huan-hsi was very upset. How should he cope with this old rascal?

While all this was going on, Huan-hsi's ma, who had been cooking supper inside the thatched cottage, stood silently in the dimness, watching. To see Liang the Eldest taking advantage of his financial position to molest her young son brought blood to the eye of this hardy woman. She wanted to rush out, seize the old man by his clothes, wrap her arms around his legs and let him beat her — anything rather than be tortured this way. But then she thought — that would be too lowly. It would hurt the mutual-aid team's reputation also. Villagers would laugh and say: Come look, quick. Sheng-pao's team is fighting among themselves.

Huan-hsi's ma, twigs of brush fuel adhering to her tunic and coarse cloth trousers, walked out into the courtyard.

"Must you talk so much, Huan-hsi?" She turned to the old man. "He's just a boy, uncle. You've eaten more salt than he has rice. Don't hold it against him if he says anything wrong."

Liang the Eldest ignored her. He continued to glare savagely at Huan-hsi.

"You're pretty shrewd for a young squirt. Take me down to the government office if you're so shrewd. I'm going to stick to the old rule for lending seedling beds." He twisted around and strode away.

Repressing her ire, Huan-hsi's ma accompanied the old man to the gate. He was hopping mad. Only after she saw him go through his own gate did she return to the courtyard.

Huan-hsi was standing there in the dusk, clenching his teeth, his lips tight, his eyes burning. Young but not weak, he was wondering what to do next. He didn't consider the situation

particularly serious. Sheng-pao, as he was leaving, had quietly spoken into his ear: "You needn't be afraid of Sheng-lu. Don't pamper him. Secretary Wang has told us that we absolutely mustn't pamper the well-to-do middle peasants. The more we pamper them, the harder it will be for us to consolidate. It's the good hard work of the poor peasants and ex-hired hands we've got to rely on, not Sheng-lu's horse and cart. Why should we pamper him?" Huan-hsi wished Sheng-lu himself had come forward in this, instead of that coffin carrion.

"What were you saying to that stubborn old fool?" his ma asked. "You're still a boy, after all. When he picks on you, you ought to go after Sheng-lu, if you've got any sense."

"She's right," Huan-hsi thought to himself. He knew he shouldn't have lost his temper and given the old man a chance to create such a scene. He realized now that while it was the old man who had done the talking, Sheng-lu was the one he should have had it out with. That would have been really shrewd. But he couldn't hold himself in check like Sheng-pao. Would the day ever come when he'd be equally skilful?

Mother and son stood in the darkening courtyard. They could hear each other's heavy breathing. The first bright star of evening watched them both with much concern, waiting to see what they would do.

They heard a light footfall beside them. Huan-hsi's aunt, wife of Jen the Fourth, her tunic undone, nursing a suckling baby, approached timidly to express her sympathy. She had been too terrified to emerge from her dilapidated thatched cottage when Liang the Eldest had been raging in the courtyard. She was afraid of him like a mouse fears a cat, as though the old man could gobble her down in one gulp. Now, seemingly worried that he might hear, she tip-toed up to Huan-hsi and his ma and whispered:

"Sister-in-law, Huan-hsi, don't feel bad. Go and eat your supper."

Unwilling to quit, neither mother nor son moved.

"Good sister, no one will listen to the poor. The rich can shout them down. It's always been that way. A thin little arm like us can't budge a big thick leg like him."

"Just the opposite," Huan-hsi interrupted hotly. "A thin little arm like him can't budge a big thick leg like us."

"But child, we poor neighbours have to keep borrowing the use of his roller, his grinder, his trays and scoops. We mustn't rile him."

"You've got no backbone. Why can't we go upstream to Kuo Ching-hsi's place to grind our grain?"

"I've got a bad leg. It's far."

"Then do your grinding at Sheng-lu's. Don't bother about us." Huan-hsi turned to his mother. "Light the lantern for me, ma."

"Where are you going?"

"To see Secretary Lu in Hsiapao Village. Sheng-pao told me to go to him if there's anything I can't solve myself."

"Right. Go ahead," Huan-hsi's ma said approvingly. "Otherwise that old man will find riding on our necks too comfortable. He won't want to get off."

As she was lighting the lantern at the stove, Huan-hsi got a stick to carry it on.

Their determination moved Jen the Fourth's wife. Perhaps she was ashamed of her cowardice. Or perhaps her class feelings wouldn't let her stand on the sidelines. Or maybe it was because the affairs of the mutual-aid team were so intimately tied with her own family interests. In any event, she gathered her courage and decided to risk a split with her well-to-do neighbour. As Huan-hsi started for the compound gate, she plucked him by the sleeve.

"Huan-hsi, do you know why the old man is acting so fierce?"

"No."

"I'll tell you. Sheng-jung, his son in the army, has sent him fifty yuan. That's stiffened his backbone. He even walks and talks different than before. Sheng-lu wrote Sheng-jung a letter, saying the mutual-aid team is going to close-

plant the rice and they have to spend more money on fertilizer. He said the team plans to cut bamboo in the mountains, but that he can't get away because they're busy at home. But you see, as soon as Sheng-jung sent them the money, father and son talked it over and decided not to invest in the rice crop. They think it's not safe."

"Then what are they going to do with the fifty yuan?"

"I couldn't hear clearly. I was in their grinding shed. That's all I heard."

Furiously, Huan-hsi took up his lantern and stalked out of the gate. He strode across the threshing ground and walked down a path through the paddy fields where summer barley was growing, in the direction of the single log bridge that spanned the Tang Stream, deliberately avoiding the peach orchard of Sheng-lu and his father. The lantern lit up the grassy path beneath his feet and the barley, about to tassel, on both sides. On the banks of a nearby creek, a few frogs, awakening from their long winter sleep, were croaking rhythmically. Smoke from stoves cooking the evening meal rose and spread above Hsiapao, on the northern side of Tang Stream. There was a hum of voices.

It was not a very dark night. The path was faintly visible. Huan-hsi carried the lantern mostly to give himself courage. The peasants always took lanterns when they went out at night to scare off the wolves which came down from the mountains at dusk. Just after darkness and just before dawn, you frequently met these "Demons of the Hills" on the banks of the stream. But, at the moment, Huan-hsi feared nothing. It was as if wolves simply didn't exist. Every organ in his body was charged with anger. Hot blood surged through the seventeen-year-old boy's veins. He was incapable of feeling hunger, fatigue or fear.

As he walked, he muttered to himself:

"You've pushed me too far, old man. I'll make you open your eyes and take a good look at the world. In new China even the landlords have been overthrown. Where does a

well-to-do middle peasant come off to misbehave? Tenant-skinner Yang was tough, but now he's sticking close to the law in the county seat. Miser Lu was a real blood-sucker. When just a piece of his family's property was divided up, he died of rage. Is that the road you want to take, old man? It won't get you anywhere. I'll bring Secretary Lu across the stream and he'll give you a lecture. Just because your son's an officer in the People's Liberation Army you needn't try lording it over your poor neighbours. Look around you. Is new China going to take any guff from old China? Sheng-jung is a Communist. He thinks his family is really answering the call to increase production. If he knew the dirty way his father was behaving, do you think he'd give you fifty yuan? He wouldn't give you fifty cents.

Walking along, Huan-hsi felt that he was already grown up and very competent, very shrewd. Even though Sheng-pao and Yu-wan were far away on Mount Chungnan's Aristocrat Ridge, spending the night in the forest, they seemed to be with him in spirit. And Comrade Wang, secretary of the district Party committee, and Secretary Lu, of the Hsiapao township Party branch — they were with him too. Old Liang the Eldest thought of him only as the son of poor departed Jen the Third, someone easily put upon. He didn't seem to realize that Huan-hsi was the work-point recorder of the famous Liang Sheng-pao mutual-aid team and its future agronomist. Huan-hsi would show him what this meant.

"Huan-hsi. Huan-hsi," someone called from behind him in the darkness. The voice was Sheng-lu's.

The boy paid no attention and continued walking.

"Huan-hsi, wait a minute. I want to tell you something."

Huan-hsi hardened himself. He walked still faster.

"Where were you when your father was picking on me?" he thought to himself. "Why didn't you speak up before?"

Behind him came the sound of running footsteps, closer and closer. His elbow was seized.

"Don't go to the township government, Huan-hsi," Sheng-lu panted. "Let's talk it over like brothers. If we can't settle it peacefully, it still won't be too late to go."

"Hah," Huan-hsi tightened his boyish face. "You and your father play your roles of good man and villain very well."

"Ah, brother, how you wrong me. I've only just come home. When I heard that my pa had a row with you, I went rushing over to explain. Ah, if I could rip my heart out, I'd show it to you." Sheng-lu seemed extremely agitated.

Huan-hsi remained silent. Sheng-lu tugged his sleeve.

"Don't go to the township government. Don't let people laugh at our Hsiapao villagers. My pa is an old man. The earth of the grave is already on his neck. He's just a lamp in the wind. Who knows when he'll be blown out? But you're a rising sprout, brother. Why should you pit yourself against him? Our hair is black, brother, we're growing up in the same era. If you take this to the township government, do you think it's only my pa who'll lose face? No, brother, everyone in the downstream region will be shamed. Other Hsiapao villagers will say: 'Those Frog Flat people do nothing but quarrel.' How disgraceful. Our mutual-aid team is supposed to be a model. Think of its reputation."

Huan-hsi's mind was made up. But when the interests of the team were mentioned, he had to consider, didn't he? In his most adult manner, he asked:

"What about the seedling beds? Will your family wait till the agronomist arrives, then sow together with the rest of us?"

"*Aiya,* brother, you've got to be patient about that." Patting his head which had a big hairless scar, Sheng-lu, very distressed, exclaimed: "Don't you know my pa's temper? That year he had a row with my ma, he took his hoe and smashed our earthen oven. We couldn't do any cooking, do you remember? Someone else could have gone to the government to complain about him, but I'm his son — I just had to stand by and watch. Let's settle it this way. He's my father; I can't let him make trouble for the team. If he definitely refuses to wait for the agronomist, though it may mean more effort for me, I'll bring in some earth and build a mound separating our seedling bed from the rest of the field. We'll do our own irrigating and sow our seeds separately. That won't hurt the team, will it?"

"Are you intending to pull out?" Huan-hsi asked quickly.

"No, brother, certainly not," Sheng-lu vowed. "We're only sowing separately because my pa's brain is backward. He can't change overnight. If he wants to quit the team, I won't listen to him. I'm determined to follow the road you're all taking to common prosperity. I definitely won't go it alone. You can depend on me. If my pa makes any more fuss about leaving the team, I'll write a letter to my brother in the army. He's a Communist, you know. I can't let him lose face. My pa listens to Sheng-jung, though he thinks nothing of me."

Picturing the heroic PLA officer, Huan-hsi was won over completely. He sighed in what he hoped was a grown-up fashion, then turned and walked towards home.

Wearing a battered straw hat, Huan-hsi waited for the agronomist at the cart stop in Huangpao Town. This was the second time. The first time, he hadn't come. Now, when the cart which served as a bus arrived at the station, Huan-hsi's whole being was concentrated in his eyes. He gazed intently at a tall young fellow in a grey tunic who had a bulging knapsack on his shoulders and carried a box wrapped in a white cloth. Beneath his grey cap was a fair intellectual face. He stood among the passengers who had got off the cart. On his chest was the white-lettered red identity disc of the county people's government. Huan-hsi saw it clearly. Forgetting even to introduce himself, the delighted boy rushed over to relieve him of his box.

"What are you doing?" the county cadre demanded.

"Comrade," the beaming Huan-hsi cried warmly. "Aren't you the agronomist who's going to the Liang Sheng-pao mutual-aid team in Fifth Village, Hsiapao Township?"

"Why, yes. And you — ?"

"I've come to meet you. I'm called Huan-hsi. The rest of the team has all gone off the mountains. But I've been left here to learn new technique from you."

"Fine. Fine," the agronomist laughed. "Wait till I get my luggage down and I'll go with you. I'll carry this box myself."

When the agronomist's things were untied from the cart, Huan-hsi shouldered his bedding roll. He wanted to take his knapsack as well. Hard and bumpy to the touch, it was full of books. But the agronomist wouldn't relinquish it.

"If you carry everything," he smiled, "I'll have to walk along empty-handed."

Huan-hsi shifted the bedding roll to a more comfortable position on his shoulder, and the two started off for Frog Flat through the slanting rays of the setting sun.

"What's your name, comrade," raising his boyish face, Huan-hsi asked in a man-of-the-world manner.

"My family name's Han. I'm called Han Pei-sheng. I was away for a course at the provincial agronomy school. When I got back to the county, we had a week of conferences. Only then was it decided to send me here. You people must have been getting worried."

"Not at all, not at all," Huan-hsi replied, like a grown man. How happy he was to walk side by side with Comrade Han, who was a head taller than he. What an honour. He was very lucky to have found such a fine teacher. The bulging knapsack on Comrade Han's back aroused his deepest respect. Huan-hsi was convinced that he was a man of learning.

On the road Huan-hsi told him all about the mutual-aid team like an old friend — the names of the members, how many *mou* of rice paddy they had, how they had prepared the field for the seedling beds, how they had changed to "Hundred-Day Ripener" seed, their bold decision to sow wheat after rice, how Sheng-lu, the go-it-aloner in the team, had sown first without waiting for the agronomist, how well-to-do middle peasant Shih-fu — another go-it-aloner — was also planning to sow wheat after rice in competition with the team. . . . He

talked so volubly that Comrade Han was aroused. The agronomist looked as if he wanted to plunge into the fray immediately.

They entered the area of Fifth Village. In the fields, peasants were soaking the seedling beds and sowing rice seed. Wearing straw hats, their trousers rolled up, their legs splattered with mud, they laboured with the slanting rays of the sinking sun on their heads and backs.

"The agronomist has come. The agronomist has come," yelled Huan-hsi.

He couldn't control himself, so proud was he that their team had an agronomist of its own. He wanted those fellows of Kuan Creek Hamlet who had mocked him, made fun of him, to hear. Walking beside Comrade Han, he felt exceptionally strong, exceptionally energetic. Maybe he was only a boy, but he was going to do big things. Those men who had teased him would look foolish in the end. They would have to come humbly and ask him to teach them.

As Sheng-pao had instructed, he moved Comrade Han into Sheng-pao's empty room. Hsiu-lan hadn't returned yet from North Poplar, where she was visiting her future mother-in-law who was ill. Old Liang the Third, missing his absent children, had gone off somewhere to try and put his mind on other things. Only Sheng-pao's ma was at home in the quiet courtyard. She was looking after little Tsai-tsai, who had been left in her care by his father Tseng-fu. The motherless boy was shy of strangers. He wouldn't leave his good "grandma" by so much as an inch. His small hand seemed stuck to the edge of her tunic. Wherever she went, he went with her. You couldn't help pitying the poor kid. Remembering what the mutual-aid team leader had been like at Tsai-tsai's age, Sheng-pao's ma loved the child all the more. Whenever her hands were free, she walked about with his small hand in hers, like a doting grandmother.

Sheng-pao's room had already been swept and put in order. It was just waiting for the guest to arrive. Sheng-pao's ma,

grey-haired, leading the little boy, after welcoming Comrade Han, went out and gathered an armful of brushwood. She wanted to boil some water so that the guest could drink and wash his face.

"Don't trouble, old mama." Comrade Han, having deposited his things in the thatched cottage, was in high spirits. "Huan-hsi, let's take a look at the seedling beds."

"Why not wash up a bit first, drink some water, rest a while — "

"No, the seedling beds come first." Comrade Han rose to his feet.

The agronomist and his young pupil went out through the compound gate.

A scarecrow stood in the seedling-bed field of the mutual-aid team. The long black strips of cloth trailing from its hands swayed in the breeze. In keeping with old custom Sheng-lu had set this one up when he sowed his seed to keep off the birds.

"We'll see whether you destroy the team," Huan-hsi said angrily, as he gazed at the mound Sheng-lu had built, separating his seedling bed from the others of the team.

"It's just as well," laughed Comrade Han. "The same field will produce two different kinds of sprouts. It will give people a chance to compare."

As he examined the surroundings, Comrade Han said the field had been well-chosen. There were no big trees or houses nearby to cut off the sunlight, and the ground was fairly high.

By then the Frog Flat peasants, who were preparing their seedling beds or sowing, had all noticed the gesticulating agronomist. Curiosity impelled them to drop their implements and hurry over. When those farther away saw those nearer by heading towards Comrade Han, they followed suit. Gradually, even peasants way over by the Hsiapao Village land on the south bank of the stream were unable to restrain their curiosity. They too hastened to see what that agronomist of Sheng-pao's team was up to.

Soon the embankment around the seedling beds was crowded with people. Their reflections, tall and short, were cast upon the muddy water.

Blabbermouth Sun spoke: "Say, comrade, what kind of new-fangled seedling beds are you going to build? Please tell us."

"All right," said Han. He took off his shoes and socks, and rolled up his trousers. Borrowing a spade from a by-stander, he waded into the soaking field.

Next to Sheng-lu's mound, he shaped out a bed about ten feet long and four feet wide. Beside this, he made another one. Then, standing in the water, he addressed the onlookers:

"This is a new style of seedling bed." He pointed to Sheng-lu's plot, which though large was not divided into sections. "That's called 'stars all over the sky'."

"As simple as that?" Blabbermouth's lip curled contemptuously. He wasn't impressed.

Huan-hsi gave him a dirty look. He knew that because Chen-shan wasn't keen on mutual aid, Blabbermouth knocked anything Sheng-pao's team did whenever he had the chance. "Yes, as simple as that," he felt like saying. "Take off." That would make Blabbermouth look silly. But after all Blabbermouth was a village cadre, and well-to-do middle peasants and rich peasants were all around them. You had to distinguish between insiders and outsiders. Huan-hsi decided to ignore him.

Shih-fu, the well-to-do middle peasant who was going to compete with the team, wasn't satisfied. He said:

"Well then, comrade, tell us about this new-style seedling bed. What advantages does it have?"

"It has lots of advantages, old-timer." Standing in the mire, Comrade Han, with the ardour of a propagandist, explained respectfully to this elderly man: "First, after you soak the bed, you can get all the water out of it. It won't grow moss. Second, it lets the wind blow through. The sprouts won't get overheated and sicken. Third — this is the most important — in order to produce strong sprouts, we've got to fertilize, weed, and kill the insect pests. But — " he

pointed at Sheng-lu's seedling bed, "— in that 'stars-all-over-the-sky' type of bed, there's no place you can put your foot down. How are you going to do all that? Once you've sown, you just have to trust to luck."

"Right."

"He's talking sense."

"A good crop of rice depends ninety per cent on good seedlings."

The peasants looked at each other, talked it over. They were interested in this new type of seedling bed. Han was very pleased, very excited. His words had gone home. Previously, the district government had sent a couple of agronomists on a tour of the various townships. They sat in on regular meetings of the township cadres and, when the meetings were ending, got up and explained the merits of the new technique. But experience had proved that this method was not effective. Comrade Yang, assistant secretary of the Party county committee, suggested that this year they give practical demonstrations. The young agronomist found the response to his first try at it very encouraging.

Huan-hsi swelled with pride at the obvious interest of the peasants. He flicked a scornful glance at Blabbermouth, whose face had lost a bit of its colour.

"And what are the sprouts like in the 'stars-all-over-the-sky' type of seedling bed?" Comrade Han continued animatedly. "They're what you might call 'ox-hair sprouts'. Why? Because they're long and very thin, like the hair of an ox. If you transplant them shallow, the first wind blows them over and they float on the water. If you transplant them deep, they turn yellow in two or three weeks. They're more dead than alive, and don't regain their green colour. Or if they do, by some chance, they won't branch. You get just one tassel to each plant. The stems are weak. Before the kernels are filled with sap they're knocked down by the first autumn wind, and when you thresh them they're full of tares. Is that so, or not?"

"Sometimes it's like that," one man admitted.

But among themselves the peasants said:

"Even when it's bad, it's not as bad as he says."

"He talks about our traditional methods as if they were completely worthless."

"Just listen to him. Doesn't he sound like a quack medicine pedlar?"

Huan-hsi looked quickly at Comrade Han to see his reaction. This was Han's first encounter with the peasants of Frog Flat. By telling them the entire truth, frankly and without any reservations, Han had hurt their pride. A bit sorry he had been so direct, he said to his audience with a laugh:

"You asked me, and I gave you an answer according to the facts."

Blabbermouth spoke again. A mocking smile on his face, he demanded:

"Do you mean to say that nothing ever goes wrong with the sprouts you raise? That every single one is as strong as a sapling?"

"Heckler." Huan-hsi got red in the face with anger.

But Comrade Han was a county cadre. He was quite self-possessed. Barefoot in muddy field, he walked up to Blabbermouth, who was standing on the edge-ridge, and said pleasantly:

"You put things too crudely, neighbour." In a very serious and very responsible voice, he declared: "The sprouts we raise are not as strong as saplings, but they don't go bad. They're sturdy and have strong stems. They don't wilt when they're transplanted, so they don't have to revive."

"Don't blow so hard," somebody hooted. "You're liable to bring the sky down."

"Who ever heard of non-wilting sprouts?" laughed another.

"How do you raise sprouts like that?" asked Shih-fu. He was completely in earnest.

Huan-hsi watched Comrade Han carefully. The agronomist calmly walked over and explained courteously, for he discovered that this old fellow was interested in new methods.

He told why seed should be sown thinly, why the water had to be changed every day when the sprouts were about one-centimetre high, why you should spread a fertilizer of burnt grass and wood ash when they were an inch or so tall, why the water had to be changed every five or six days when they reached an inch and a half . . . as well as the different times of the day and the frequency with which the water had to be changed according to whether the day was overcast, clear, cool or hot. He was still talking as the scoffers began drifting away.

"Balls. It's enough to make your head ache."

"Much too complicated. Who can remember all that?"

"A man going it alone couldn't do it even if he did remember. How much time is there in a day? What about the other work? You can't spend every minute on the sprouts."

"Sheng-lu shares the same field with them, but he's not doing it their way."

Rich peasant Yao, who had been standing in silence all this time, now surreptitiously tugged at Shih-fu's tunic. They started away together.

"Let's go," said Yao. "What crap — non-wilting sprouts. Better to call them 'propaganda sprouts' and be done with it. He can't fool us."

Huan-hsi stepped up to Han and pointed at the backs of the departing two. "You see them?" he asked in a low voice. "The one who spoke is a rich peasant. The other is a well-to-do middle peasant. Those two are our mutual-aid team's enemies!"

Han was startled. A serious expression came to his fair smooth face. His first day at Frog Flat showed him how complicated life was here, how acute the conflicts.

Better be careful of your bookish approach, comrade, he warned himself. Don't judge people by their appearance. These Frog Flat peasants aren't by any means as peaceful and serene as their scenery. If you think they're all so beautifully harmonious, you won't be exactly covered with glory when you leave. Watch your step, my intellectual friend.

21

Wearing a bright blue tunic and trousers and carrying a cloth-wrapped bundle, Shuan-shuan's wife Su-fang left her dilapidated thatched cottage, its east wall propped up by two poles, and entered a handsome compound whose buildings had brick walls and roofs of tile. She was delighted with the neatness, cleanliness and comfort of the place as her feet trod the smooth stone-flagged courtyards and floors. Her eyes beheld spotless walls and coloured New Year pictures, bright windows and polished tables. The rooms had none of the smoky grimy smell of her thatched cottage home. Su-fang was cleanly, prettily dressed — not because she was trying to win anyone's admiration, but because she wanted to fit in with this new environment. Her blind old father-in-law had told her several times — she must present an agreeable appearance to the eyes of the people of the handsome compound.

"Over there, it's altogether different from our humble shack. You don't want to let them think we're dirty," the old man had warned her sternly.

During her first few days with her rich aunt and uncle, Su-fang felt a bit strained, because she didn't know them well. She was afraid of Yao, and didn't dare look him in the eye. He owned over forty *mou* of paddy land and fields, a fine compound, a mule and a horse. This, in Su-fang's mind, placed him inaccessibly high. Fate had decreed him a class above her from the day he was born. She wished she knew whether he was satisfied with her work, but at most she only ventured to glance at him from the side or from behind. She didn't have the courage to meet the direct gaze of those eyes with the scar on the right lid.

Whenever she encountered him in the house or in the courtyard, she lowered her head and dropped her eyes, and servilely stepped aside to let him pass. He had only to cough gravely somewhere in the compound, and her heart would tremble as though struck by a thunderbolt. Su-fang had heard that Yao had been intimate with Blue Moth, wife of former corporal Pai. But his demeanour was so serious, she simply couldn't believe it. Could a diligent, frugal man like Yao be guilty of such debauchery?

At night, Su-fang slept with her aunt on the *kang* in the west room of the main building. The superstitious old lady (Yao's mother) slept with the children in the east room. Yao, his wife having just given birth, had no choice but to sleep alone. The superstitious old lady wanted her son to use the kitchen *kang* in the west wing, but Yao felt the weather was already too warm to sleep in the kitchen. So he set up a bed in the east wing and slept there.

One night when they were all in bed, Su-fang blew out the lamp and whispered:

"Aunt."

"Yes?" came the reply from the bed-clothes.

"I'm afraid of uncle. His face is so stern, so fierce, he really scares me. Is it because he thinks my work is no good?"

Yao's wife laughed. "He's always like that. A man of forty — do you expect him to be constantly grinning and smiling at a child like you? Besides, he has to run the whole farm and household all by himself. He has a lot on his mind."

That was what Yao's wife said aloud, but in her heart she thought contemptuously: "No wonder you've got a bad reputation. When you come to work in a man's house, just do your work and be done with it. What is it to you how he looks?"

But Su-fang only heard the words. She couldn't get behind their sound and expression to know what was in the speaker's mind. "It's true," she thought. "Everyone says 'big household, lots of work'. It certainly is a headache. The poor have

the poor's troubles, and the rich have the problems of the rich. Now I understand."

Her respect for the serious way her uncle managed his affairs increased. Just see what a day's work he put in. Up before dawn, he tended to the stock, cleaned the manure from the animals' pen and added soil. If there was even so much as a stick of brushwood in the courtyard, he picked it up and brought it to the kitchen. After listening to her aunt's explanation, Su-fang felt a bit easier towards her uncle. She was no longer so tense when she saw him.

One day Yao and Tseng-jung were sowing rice. At noon, they came back to the handsome compound for a meal. It was then Su-fang heard her uncle say something which changed her opinion of him completely.

As they were eating, Yao asked Tseng-jung with a smile:

"For the past two years you poor peasants and hired hands have drawn a clear line between us. You wouldn't have anything to do with me. Today you and I soaked the paddy field together and sowed the rice. Did you find anything very hateful about me?"

Tseng-jung had no class standpoint. He gave a silly laugh.

"A lot of fuss over nothing. Seeing wolves where there are none."

"Well put." Yao was very pleased. "As long as you don't look down on my status, we can be as close as mire and water. We'll have our own mutual-aid team, like Sheng-pao's. We can take the road to socialism too. I don't know about other rich peasants, but I'm not against the people's government. *Tien*! What a wonderful world this is now. No bandits, no robbers, no harsh taxes. They don't grab army conscripts, they don't make levies, they don't swear at people or beat them. In our township, we haven't seen even the shadow of an army. When the government cadres come, all they talk about is increasing production. Where else in the world do you find such good officials? I often tell my wife: Chairman Mao is better to us than a father. The new government's labelled me a rich peasant, but it's saved the lives of my whole family.

Where would I be, if not for liberation? I always used to be scared that I'd die at the hands of the Huangpao Town Kuomintang garrison soldiers. In an out-of-the-way little place like this, we had no protection. They were soldiers during the day; at night they were bandits. If they surrounded my compound and demanded silver and money and I didn't have any, wouldn't they torture me to death? That's why I say Chairman Mao is my father and mother who gave me new life."

Su-fang, who was taking her aunt's place at cooking and serving, respected her uncle greatly for this speech. She rarely attended the mass meetings or the community activities which had taken place since liberation. Her blind father-in-law limited her strictly. Poor Su-fang's concepts and ideas were still those of the old society. To this day she hadn't been entirely liberated, or hadn't been liberated at all. Su-fang was not allowed to come into contact with any man. If her blind old father-in-law ever heard of such a thing, he would surely say that she was having an illicit affair. Su-fang was not allowed to come into contact with any woman either. Her father-in-law would be sure to say that the woman was inciting her to divorce Shuan-shuan. Su-fang could only visit the compound of bald old Liang the Eldest, because her blind father-in-law considered the rich to be of higher moral calibre than the poor. How could Su-fang possibly gain any new ideas or understanding?

In her mind a man who had as much land as Yao, whose front building was packed with grain in the upper storey and housed a mare and a mule colt in the lower, who spoke with such deep affection of the new government, had to be a very good person. He certainly wasn't the sort you need to draw any clear line against. Of course. He harvested several thousand catties of grain each year, he paid no levies and made no contributions. His only expenditure was a very small annual tax based upon an appraised reasonable yield for his land. Why shouldn't he support the people's government?

She also remembered what she had heard said in Huangpao Town when she went to visit her mother — that certain Communists, Youth Leaguers and government cadres did things mechanically, that they were too extreme, too strict. Su-fang was convinced that her uncle was a good man. She needn't be the least worried about working in his home. Let Sheng-pao and Huan-hsi say what they pleased — she liked it much better here than at home where she had to look at the sour face of her blind father-in-law all day.

Gradually, she became accustomed to her various jobs in the handsome compound. She heated broth for Yao's wife and washed the diapers of the newly arrived baby in the creek. She took the wife's place at cooking and at grinding the grain. Yao fed the pigs himself, except when he was busy in the fields. Then his mother fed them. His eldest son and daughter were both away attending middle school in the county seat. His small son and little girl were looked after by their superstitious grandmother. Su-fang's work was very light. To the healthy twenty-three-year-old girl it seemed simply nothing. And a month passed so quickly. If her aunt were willing, Su-fang would have gladly remained in her home all her life. She thought that this rich-peasant family was a highly respectable one — some at school, some at work, some intoning scriptures. The centre room of their main building was fragrant with incense. It made you feel reverent, as if you were living in a temple.

One muggy day, Su-fang went to grind flour in the mill shed, which was in a large courtyard on the other side of a door through the eastern wall of the main courtyard. Filled with trees of various sorts, this courtyard also contained the pig pen, a shed for Yao's big cart, and the mill shed. It had a large gate opening on a lane that led to the village; this was usually locked. In the mill shed were two millstones — one for coarse grinding and one for fine. When Yao's father was alive, he hired a skilled man every winter to grind white wheat extra fine for the family table. Today, Yao preferred not to call any attention to his prosperity. The stone for the fine grinding became a resting place for the implements used when milling and sifting flour of ordinary texture.

Su-fang's good-hearted uncle led into the shed the red mare that had recently foaled a little mule, then helped Su-fang carry in the wheat and dump a part of it on the upper millstone. By the time she brought in the tray and scoop and sifter she needed, the mare was already hitched to the mill and in motion. A new white towel cloth covering her bobbed hair, Su-fang waited for enough wheat to be ground for the first sifterful. She didn't feel as if she were working for a rich-peasant family. It was more like living with fond relatives.

"You don't have to stay, uncle," Su-fang said respectfully. "I can manage by myself."

But Yao didn't leave immediately. A prudent manager, he gave his wife's niece detailed instructions: She should be careful when she added wheat that the kernels didn't spill into the millstone channel — every grain was earned by the sweat and blood of labouring people. When she swept she should do it lightly, otherwise the dust would settle on the flour. Finally, pointing at some reeds lying at the foot of the wall, he said:

"When you're milling the second time, put two stalks in the hole of the upper millstone so that the wheat will come down smoothly."

Right. Right. Right. Su-fang accepted his orders one after another — respectfully, servilely, timidly. She wished she could see the expression on his face, but she didn't dare to lift her head, especially in this silent remote courtyard where she and her uncle were all alone. In the presence of any man, Su-fang always felt inferior.

She didn't know why she blushed, and grew tense. Egged on by her blind father-in-law, her husband Shuan-shuan had already beaten the spirit out of her. She had no courage, no nerve to do anything. After coming to Frog Flat from her mother's home in Huangpao Town, she gradually gave up all plans, all hope, and resigned herself to being a kind of implement — an implement for working around the house and bearing children.

Poor mentally-unawakened Su-fang. Poor unemancipated Su-fang. Her most fundamental trait now was self-abasement. Where would she get the courage to look at her uncle while he was giving her his instructions? She heard only the dignity in his voice, the voice of a senior who commanded respect. Her response to this rich and competent elder relative could only be one of docile obedience.

At last Yao left. Su-fang felt as if her eyes, hands and feet had been freed.

But then he returned. From the door leading to the main courtyard, he shouted:

"Su-fang, bar this side door. I don't want the colt running in here and bothering the mare."

"Yes," the girl replied, complying. Her uncle certainly thought of everything.

Now, the remote courtyard was completely cut off from the outside world. Su-fang was alone in her little kingdom. What a serious-minded manager her uncle was. Su-fang was convinced that the tale about him and Blue Moth was only some wicked person's invention.

The mare pulled the millstone. Crushed wheat kernels fell on the stone base. Su-fang walked behind the mare, sweeping the kernels with her hand into the sifter.

She sat down on a low stool and began shaking the sifter over a tray. No one cursed her. Working this way, she was very happy.

How quiet the courtyard was. Elm petals and willow fluff brought by the breeze settled on the spring grass. Charming little birds sang in the trees. A turtle-dove cock flew down, warbled a few times, and was soon followed by a turtle-dove hen. An instant later, they took off together. The mare, thinking of her colt, had whinnied when being hitched to the mill. Now she was quiet, and plodded peacefully around the millstone. Everything was entirely satisfactory. Even this remote courtyard seemed to inspire reverence.

As Su-fang sifted the flour she reflected upon life as she saw it. By what authority, she wondered, was it decided what

kind of parents, in-laws and husband a girl should have. She couldn't figure it out. Equality. Equality. Talking about it was all very well. But when would she ever get genuine equality? After liberation, many women who were unhappy in the marriages that had been made for them demanded divorces. But could Su-fang dare do such a thing? She was prepared to accept whatever fate decreed for the rest of her days — the work she did, the food she ate, the clothes she wore. If only she weren't beaten, she'd be satisfied. After her blind old father-in-law died, life would be a bit better. *Ai*! When would he finally die?

The more Su-fang thought, the sadder she felt. In spite of herself, her nose tickled and tears sprang from her eyes. She wiped them. Alone in the remote courtyard, it was really a fine opportunity for a good cry. She had no chance to weep when others were around. Someone might ask her whether it was because she didn't like being married to Shuan-shuan, and then what could she say?

Something thudded against the earthen wall behind the mill shed. Su-fang stopped sifting. She ceased weeping and meditating on life. As the millstone ground on, she listened attentively, her heart beating fast. Had a section of the wall separating the two courtyards collapsed?

She stared rather apprehensively at the earthen walls of the shed. Were they strong enough? No matter how unpleasant her existence might be, Su-fang still wanted to live. Later, after her blind old father-in-law died and she gave birth to a child, things would be better. It would be just her luck to be killed by a falling wall after doing a month's work here. Although her marriage wasn't a happy one, she hoped some day to know the joys of motherhood.

She heard a rustling sound behind her. Su-fang quickly turned her head. *Tien*! Why was her uncle coming over the back wall?

How could such a thing be happening? Was she dreaming? *Tien*!

How terrifying uncle looked. His bristle-covered mouth was open, revealing gleaming white teeth. His eyes with the scar on the right lid were half shut in an evil leer. He was simply another man. What had happened to the prudent manager, the meticulous uncle? It was a sheer nightmare.

Su-fang shrank into a ball. She was chilled, trembling, completely unprepared. Her face paled; the warm blood seemed to drain from her body.

She wanted to scream, to shout, but she was afraid. If anyone should learn about this, how could poor Su-fang face the consequences? *Tien*! She hadn't the strength to fight her tormenting fate. Her reputation was already bad.

Ai! *Ai*! Now it was too late to scream even if she wanted to. Her uncle had wrapped his brawny arms around her.

The hot blood returned to her body. She burned all over. Her face was on fire. It was so red, fresh blood seemed to be seeping out of her pores. She felt as if she were bound with a rope.

Her heart was chaotic. It was as if someone had stuffed her chest with pig bristles and they were pricking her painfully. "What is he trying to do?" she thought with repugnance. "It's too preposterous."

But Yao recklessly put his bristly mouth against her flaming cheek. He had sized her up when they had been preparing for the grinding and had decided that she wouldn't resist. Tightly, ardently, with one arm he pinned her arms to her sides while his other large horny hand horrifyingly crept under her blue tunic.

Su-fang seemed stricken with a heavy illness. She was consumed with fever, listlessly weak. Her right hand, a silvered bronze bracelet on its wrist and a yellow bronze thimble-ring on one finger, timidly stopped her uncle's descending big hand.

"Uncle," she pleaded, "we can't —"

"Sure we can," he sniggered.

"If my aunt finds out —"

Yao firmly shook his head, indicating that Su-fang's aunt would never know. By then, her insistent, daring uncle had already picked her up in his arms.

The mare continued plodding around the mill, very diligent, very serious. Outside, the little birds in the trees continued to sing. Meanwhile, twenty-three-year-old Su-fang, unfortunate girl, was being ravished for the second time since her birth into this noble world. That wretched waiter in Huangpao Town had been a lowly scoundrel; he simply wasn't human. But her uncle, both in manner and behaviour, was quite a different sort. What could she do?

Su-fang, like other girls, had been a darling little baby when she first came into the world. She could open her tiny toothless mouth and smile at the grown-ups when only a few months old. At the age of five or six, mischievous, adorable, she played happily all day with the other children of Huangpao Town. She became expert at making mud horses, preparing mud food, and steaming muffins of stone. She was unusually intelligent and clever for a child. Had she been born of different parents, she very likely would have developed into quite a remarkable girl.

But unfortunately Su-fang's father was a well-known loafer in the old society of Huangpao Town. Without the slightest regret, in the fumes of his opium pipe he dissipated away the prosperous business that had been left him. At the same time he ruined what had once been a strong constitution, together with his will-power and self-respect. He finally got to the stage that for a puff of opium, decency and propriety could go to blazes. Though he knew that opium gave his thin body comfort for only a little while, if he could get his hands on the stuff, he smoked it. Nothing else mattered, good or bad. He could close his eyes to it all and sleep. Man wasn't put into this world to suffer.

From as early as Su-fang could remember, her father kept a vegetable stall on the streets of Huangpao. He bought the

vegetables from peasants wholesale. At night he frequently didn't return to their backstreet home. When she was old enough to understand, Su-fang observed that her mother was tougher, more competent, than her father. Ma often flew into a rage, throwing things, swearing at him. But pa only stood there in silence. Later Su-fang discovered that ma wasn't fond of pa – she liked another man. Whenever this "uncle" came, he talked a lot and laughingly chucked ma under the chin. Then he would lie down on the *kang* and rest, as if he were in his own home.

Su-fang was mystified by his relationship with her mother. The bright little girl noted that whenever he came, ma sent her out to pa's vegetable stall – it became a regular rule. Humans have curiosity from the time they can speak. One day Su-fang learned what her mother and uncle did together after she left.

A mother is a child's first teacher. She is the one the child first respects. Her character and temperament seep into the child's consciousness by a thousand different ways. Other than death, no force can stop this influence. The effectiveness of moral teachings, law and education is limited by the child's age. From the time she was very small, Su-fang admired her mother's cleverness and ability. She saw that everyone in Huangpao scorned her father, so she also refused to respect him. Did pa tell her not to run around on the streets? She did it just to spite him. He couldn't control her. It wasn't very difficult for the vulgar, low, drab environment of this small Chinese town in the old society to corrupt her tender young soul.

When she was sixteen a waiter in a restaurant seduced her and she became pregnant. Her eyes red with weeping, she begged her mother not to marry her off to Shuan-shuan of Frog Flat. She wanted someone younger, livelier. Her mother said:

"Listen to ma now, Su-fang, and you won't go wrong. You can't be too fussy with your belly poking out. It seems to me you'll be better off with a husband who's a bit slow-witted.

Your mother-in-law's a fool, and the old man is blind in both eyes. With a family like that, you'll be able to do as you please."

Su-fang understood. Her mother was trying to teach her by her own example. My reputation is spoiled anyhow, she thought. Her mother was really too good to her. Not only didn't ma punish her for behaving improperly – she even found her a way out and defended her. When pa grumbled, ma said:

"Hold your tongue. A girl is only young once. What girl doesn't want a taste of pleasure? You're a fine one to talk. You've smoked away your family inheritance."

Pa didn't dare say a word. Su-fang was grateful to her hard, shrewd mother.

Not long after Su-fang moved into the tumble-down thatched cottage of old Blind Wang's family on the lower reaches of the Tang Stream in Frog Flat, she discovered that young Sheng-pao, who lived nearby, was quite attractive. Only a *mou* of poplar trees separated his thatched dwelling from her own. Sheng-pao's sickly child bride was pale and thin, and seemed to be in constant pain. For all these reasons, Su-fang wove herself a beautiful dream. It was simply a "Heaven-made match". Su-fang congratulated herself. She and darling Sheng-pao would be life-long lovers – and Shuan-shuan and Sheng-pao's wife would provide them with ideal covers. Su-fang was contemptuons of Corporal Pai's wife, Blue Moth, who gave herself to any fellow who came along. Su-fang was determined to be like her mother. She would be true to one man till the day she died. Since, like her mother, she had an unsatisfactory husband, her neighbours would not consider her behaviour a reflection on her character. They would treat it rather as a normal thing in that diseased society, and forgive her.

Lying on the *kang* beside the clumsy Shuan-shuan, she dreamed of raptures with her adored Sheng-pao. Every day she tried to meet him, to talk with him, to convey to him with her eyes the love that was in her heart. Su-fang would

take her sewing out to the clearing in front of the thatched cottage so that she could watch him working in the fields. When he returned, shouldering his farm tools, her eyes welcomed him. She was always seeking an excuse to strike up a conversation. "Sheng-pao . . . *ai*," she would croon. In her efforts to stir him, Su-fang deluged him with alluring glances.

But Sheng-pao's heart was like a stone. Not only was he entirely uninterested – he actually despised her. For doing her sewing standing out in the courtyard instead of seated on the *kang*, for running over to old Liang the Third's compound at every opportunity, Su-fang was beaten many times. But her ardour for Sheng-pao in no way diminished. It continued right up until 1950, the year after liberation. One dark winter night, when her blind old father-in-law was lying ill in bed, she waited by the roadside for Sheng-pao to pass by on his way home.

"Sheng-pao . . . *ai*."

"Ho," he replied, approaching along the withered grass road. Sheng-pao was then captain of the village militia.

"When are you going to a meeting in town again?"

"Day after tomorrow. What's on your mind?"

"I've knitted these woollen socks for you. Put them on. Your feet are liable to get frost-bitten when you go to town. It's terribly painful if the skin splits." Her tender hands pushed the socks into Sheng-pao's big hard paws.

He blazed with rage. Rudely, he advised her:

"You just stick to Shuan-shuan and behave yourself. Don't try any of that stuff you did before you were married. This isn't Huangpao Town. We don't go for that sort of thing around here. That's all I've got to say." He strode off angrily.

Su-fang feared her rough young neighbour from then on. For a long time, she didn't dare to face him, and stayed out of his way. One day, in his capacity as a village cadre, he openly criticized her. Stiffly, he recommended that she concentrate on doing her work honestly and being a decent, proper wife to Shuan-shuan. Su-fang wept. She said she had not yet been emancipated. Her father-in-law would not permit

her to take part in mass meetings and community activities. She pleaded with Sheng-pao, as a village cadre, to intervene.

Hardening his heart, Sheng-pao turned his back on his own ideals of freedom and democracy. He retorted flatly that he would not help her obtain her emancipation at this time. When she had improved her morals, they could talk about it again.

After this, Su-fang hated Sheng-pao. She hated him with an intensity that was stronger than her love had been before. Sheng-pao was a good fellow in all other respects, but to poor Su-fang he was much too strict. He wasn't sympathetic enough. After this, Su-fang abandoned all hope. Fate had evidently decided that she should never be anything but the child-bearing machine of a Shuan-shuan who could not satisfy her emotional demands. She dreamed no longer of finding another man.

But how inadequate it was just being Shuan-shuan's child-bearing machine. Life with him was so dull. Their sexual relations were joyless, mechanical, solely for the purpose of procreation. Su-fang was very frustrated. She longed for the pleasure of tight embraces, affectionate caresses. She felt she was entitled to them, as a woman. After Sheng-pao lectured her, Su-fang — always quick to bow to fate — grew resigned. She never thought there would come a day when her uncle would press her down in the side yard of the handsome compound and her heart would flame again. With only herself to rely on, she was unable to control her passion.

Physically a man and spiritually a male animal, Yao was enormously satisfying to Su-fang. When had the honest hard-working Shuan-shuan ever enfolded her so amorously? When had he ever kissed her so hotly? So there actually was a man who didn't scorn her, who was good to her. A man who didn't beat her, or curse her, or give her dirty looks. Instead he liked her, hugged her, kissed her. How could she do other than let her uncle have his way?

His steadiness, his planning ability, amazed her. Thinking back on the episode now, Su-fang remembered with a frightened heart, as if recalling a dangerous adventure, how he had appraised her mood when they were preparing the milling, how he

had shouted to her to bar the side door. Only later did she realize that he had done it deliberately to let his wife and superstitious old mother hear.

Even so, Su-fang was a bit tense that day, after she finished grinding the grain. She kept stealing glances at her aunt and the old lady. Only when she was convinced that they hadn't noticed anything and were not in the least suspicious, was she able finally to relax and act as if nothing had happened.

As to Yao, hey! — he hadn't changed a bit. He was as stern, as righteous as ever. His cough was still dignified, he continued to issue orders in an awe-inspiring manner. Su-fang's loftier instincts had been buried by her mother when she was only a child. But her organic structure — which was feminine in form — felt the deepest respect for her uncle's skill at dissembling.

Five days later, Yao's mother-in-law — Su-fang's grand-aunt — arrived to see her daughter. Sleeping together on the same *kang,* mother and daughter naturally had a number of private matters to discuss. They were not sure of Su-fang's ability to retain confidences, and instructed her to share the *kang* of Yao's mother for a few nights. But the superstitious old lady, who already had the company of two kids, thought this would be too crowded, and told Su-fang to sleep on the *kang* in the west-wing kitchen. Since Yao maintained an air of complete respectability, his wife suspected nothing and agreed to this arrangement.

When Yao stole over from the east wing that night in his bare feet, for Su-fang it was no longer a question of being forced, coerced or having no alternative. If she could have one encounter with a man, why not a hundred? It didn't put you any more in the wrong. That was how Su-fang looked at it. Not only was her poor body attracted by this wickedness, the act even took on a character of revenge. As she lay with Yao, she said vengefully in her heart to her blind old father-in-law: "I'll teach you to tell your son to beat me."

As Yao got ready to leave the small *kang* in the west wing, he put his mouth close to her ear and whispered:

"Su-fang."

"Yes?" the girl replied softly.

"Do you want to be here just for this month, or would you like to come often?"

"What's the difference?"

"If it's just for this month, then forget it."

"And if I want to come often?"

"Why was your father-in-law always telling Shuan-shuan to beat you a few years ago?"

"Don't ask that."

"I know the reason."

"Uncle, don't talk of the past."

"I must, Su-fang."

"Why?"

"Wasn't it because he was afraid that you and Sheng-pao —"

"Yes."

"That will make it easy."

Then, in a low voice, Yao poured into the ear of this girl who had lost her soul the scheme he had thought out while working in the fields the last few days. His tone was affectionate, sweet, beguiling. When he finished, the forty-year-old man put his bristly mouth against the soft cheek of the twenty-three-year-old girl and kissed her. He waited for her reply.

Su-fang's heart sank. She didn't know why she felt so frightened. *Aiya*! How lecherous he was. He wanted to possess a woman as completely as he possessed his property. But Su-fang didn't dare become involved in anything that went beyond an ordinary illicit affair. She was afraid. She could sense the danger.

"Uncle, why do you want to hurt Sheng-pao?" she asked timidly. "He and I never —"

"So that we can get together all the time," Yao cried recklessly. He smirked. "Otherwise, what excuse will you be able to give your father-in-law?" Yao kissed her again.

Su-fang felt as if she were wrapped in the coils of a venomous snake.

She remained silent for a long time, unwilling to aid Yao in his nefarious plan to incite Shuan-shuan and Blind Wang into withdrawing from Sheng-pao's mutual-aid team. That would be too cruel a blow at Sheng-pao. Nor did she want Shuan-shuan to end up like Tseng-jung — tilling the land together with Yao. That would make them too conspicuous.

In a depressed voice, she pleaded: "Uncle, that's too —"

"Too what?"

"Too harsh. Sheng-pao is a good person. But you —" Su-fang hadn't the courage to tell him to his face that he was evil. She only smiled miserably, worried over the risk of having anything more to do with this demon.

As the rich peasant was leaving, he tried to give Su-fang five yuan. He made it clear that this was in addition to her twelve yuan wages, which he would pay her openly. Su-fang refused the money. If she took it she'd feel low, dirty. She simply wouldn't be human. What she wanted was another man in her life, not to sell herself. What good would the money do her? Anything she bought with it would only arouse suspicion and soil her reputation. Her mother had never accepted any money from her lover. On the contrary, she used to make him cloth shoes, and knit him socks. Whenever she had anything good to eat, she always kept it for him. His real wife — a simple honest woman — and Su-fang's ma were on quite good terms.

In Frog Flat, Blind Wang knew less about what was going on than anyone. Although he wouldn't admit it, he was the dullest of men. His ideas, his emotions, his temperament, his attitude, were fundamentally at variance with the post-liberation new society. There were many old men like him in Hsiapao Township. They ate their food and took no part in anything, just living out their old age. Occasionally, they might make a few mild comments on national policy or affairs. Since their remarks did not evoke any strong reactions, no one thought much about them. But Blind Wang exercised complete authority over his family's work and daily life. The contradictions

between him and the new society, therefore, were strikingly apparent.

He didn't learn that Sheng-lu had sown his rice seed separately from the rest of the mutual-aid team until a week later. Immediately, his heart sank. So far as he was concerned, this was an extremely serious matter. What could be worse than for something affecting labour or food to go wrong?

He couldn't lie still on the pile of brushwood his son Shuan-shuan had cut for fuel. He grasped the staff at his side and struggled to his feet. Feeling out the familiar path with his staff, he went personally to Sheng-lu's thatched cottage compound.

In the abject voice people use for wheedling favours, he addressed Sheng-lu's father, Liang the Eldest:

"Your family is doing very nicely. Won't you give a hand to your blind old neighbour?"

"Ah?" bald-headed Liang the Eldest exclaimed pompously. "Nothing to eat again?"

"It's not that. I hear your family has sown its rice separately from the rest of the mutual-aid team."

Liang's triangular little eyes stared. "What's that got to do with you?"

"Plenty, Eldest, plenty. Are you planning to quit the team?"

"Not us," Liang retorted angrily. "And even if we did, it has nothing to do with your family. What are you yelling about?"

"My dear Eldest. If you want to quit, our two families ought to quit at the same time. My Shuan-shuan and your Sheng-lu can work the fields together. We have no draught animal, and you're short of manpower. But together our two families can manage fine—"

Bald Liang the Eldest burst into rage.

"Listen to the man babble. Humph. Trying to mislead my Sheng-lu, are you? Even if we leave the team, he won't work with your Shuan-shuan. We're not going to get ourselves accused of breaking up a mutual-aid team. That's a crime. Go on home. In this society it's better for everyone to attend to

his own business. We won't get you into any trouble, and don't you go involving us."

Very dejected, Blind Wang groped with his staff along the path back to his ramshackle thatched cottage. He sank down on the pile of brushwood at the front door with a heavy sigh. What to do? If Sheng-lu pulled out, who would give Shuan-shuan work?

Blind Wang was very unhappy. For three full days he didn't leave his tumble-down cottage. He lay curled up on his *kang* feeling miserable. He had long since decided that the Communist Party would never accomplish much. They used all such crude simple people. Who ever heard of officials who didn't beat or swear at people solving any problems?

Huan-hsi was terribly busy. The whole being of the young primary-school graduate was immersed in the sowing of the mutual-aid team's rice. After sunning the "Hundred-Day Ripener" seed of every family in the team for four or five days according to custom, he brought it all to Sheng-pao's courtyard. With the enthusiastic help of Sheng-pao's mother and his own, and under the friendly eye of old Liang the Third, Huan-hsi and Comrade Han, the agronomist, mixed a hundred catties of water with twenty catties of soil and dumped in the seed. Those that floated to the surface were eliminated. The remainder they sieved out and washed in Liberation Creek which flowed by Sheng-lu's compound. Then, chatting and laughing, they carried the seed back to Sheng-pao's yard and soaked it for half an hour in a hundred catties of water to which two catties of formalin was added. Next, the seed was piled on a straw mat and covered with rice stalks and gunny sacks. Comrade Han said this would kill any bacteria in it.

These simple measures added wings to seventeen-year-old Huan-hsi's dreams of the future. When all the land was tilled collectively with scientific methods there would never be any more grain shortages.

Unfortunately, Huan-hsi's happiness lasted only a few days. When his mother told him she had heard from Blind Wang's

wife that the old man was brooding over the possibility of Sheng-lu's leaving the team, Huan-hsi's brain went practically numb. To Blind Wang he was just a kid. How could he crack the old man's thick skull sufficiently to let in a bit of light from the new society? A man's mind wasn't the sort of thing you could dismantle and take down to the Tang Stream for a wash.

He decided to ask Comrade Han to lecture the old man, and see what kind of result that would produce.

After telling the young agronomist all he knew about Wang, he brought him to the old man's ramshackle thatched cottage.

"Comrade Han the agronomist has come to see you, grand-uncle."

"Ah, ah." The old man sat up on the *kang* in the low-ceilinged room and stared with his sightless eyes. "Have a seat, have a seat."

In spite of the dirtiness of the *kang*, the tall young agronomist sat down on the edge of it.

"Aren't you well, old neighbour?" Han asked in a friendly voice.

"It's nothing."

"Are you sure? I hear you haven't been out of doors for several days."

"Feeling poorly."

"What's wrong? Tell us about it and you'll feel better."

"Worried."

"Worried that if Sheng-lu leaves the team it will hurt your family's output and livelihood?"

"Yes," the blind man admitted. He gloomily rubbed the *kang* mat with the palms of his hands.

"Is that anything to worry about? Forget it. Your mutual-aid team has a bright future. Comrade Sheng-pao has taken the team members into the mountains to cut bamboo for brooms. We here at home are sowing rice. They're earning money; we're doing close planting. We have to put in as much effort on one *mou* this year as we did in the past on two. We won't have to work for well-to-do middle peasants any

more. You're worried that your son won't have any extra jobs? That your grain harvest won't give you enough to eat?"

"Every *mou* of land is going to yield two *mou* of grain," Huan-hsi, who was standing beside Han, chimed in.

"If you include the wheat crop we'll plant on this land next summer, an annual return more than double previous years' will be quite common," said the agronomist. "Quitting the team leads nowhere. Whoever leaves will want to return. The collective strength of the mutual-aid teams is going to beat the well-to-do middle peasants."

"Heh." Blind Wang cut him short with a snort of derisive laughter.

"What's the matter?" said Han. "Don't you believe me?"

"Talk doesn't make your legs stiff or put a crick in your back. It's not like work. Talk is easy."

"How can you say that?"

"Why not?" Blind Wang was very agitated. "I've tilled the land all my life. Maybe you can fool other people, but don't try that stuff on me — you're just wasting your time. I know the name and disposition of every kind of wild grass that grows by the stream, to say nothing of rice plants. Don't try to kid me. I know where the sun rises, and where it sets."

To such a stubborn old codger, what could Comrade Han say? All he could do was smile and depart with Huan-hsi.

Alone once more, Blind Wang again lay down on his small *kang* and went on feeling sorry for himself. If Sheng-lu did indeed leave the team, he didn't know whose fields Shuan-shuan could till. From the tone of bald-headed old Liang the Eldest, it sounded as though they were definitely quitting. Wang hated his blindness. If he could see, he'd go into Hsiapao Village and find Shuan-shuan a good employer. Everyone knew Shuan-shuan was a hard worker.

That afternoon Su-fang returned. Blind Wang sat up angrily on the small *kang* in the low damp room.

"What are you doing here, Su-fang?" he barked.

"I heard you weren't feeling well," she replied respectfully, "so I've come back to see how you are."

"There's nothing wrong with me. When you work in a man's house, you're supposed to do a good job. You eat his food and take his money; don't let him be displeased with you. Who told you to come back? Hussy, do you want us to lose face?"

He spoke so harshly, the young daughter-in-law couldn't raise her head. The hateful old man made Su-fang feel even closer to the uncle who held her in his arms and kissed her. Out of sympathy for her father-in-law, she had returned to see him, as was only proper. Who knew he would turn on her like that? She was grateful to her uncle for the warmth he gave her, for putting a little joy in her life. A girl with no class consciousness who still didn't realize the dignity of labour, from what other angle could she judge people?

Standing before him with enmity in her heart, she turned to go. The blind old man shouted sternly:

"Wait. Has Yao sown his rice seed yet?"

"Yes."

"Did someone do it for him, or did he do it himself?"

"He and Tseng-jung together."

"In mutual aid?"

"No."

"Tseng-jung worked for wages?"

"No."

"How then, you bitch? Spit it out."

Su-fang had to tell the truth:

"The two families have teamed up."

"What?" the old man cried excitedly. He suddenly had hope. "Tseng-jung can team up with a rich peasant — why can't my son do the same? Su-fang, tell your aunt to sound Yao out: If Sheng-lu quits the mutual-aid team, Shuan-shuan can team up with him too. All we want is to be able to borrow Yao's horse to work this little bit of land of ours."

The angry expression on Su-fang's face changed to one of alarm. She didn't want her husband and her uncle co-operating with each other. She had never expected that her blind father-in-law would propose it. Flurried, she asked:

"You mean Sheng-lu is leaving the team?"

"It's ninety per cent sure. You find out about Yao. Save me the trouble of travelling two *li*."

Distressed, Su-fang said nothing.

"Bitch, do something human for once. If you don't ask, I'll go myself."

Su-fang had no choice but to agree.

She felt terrible. Would the old man's fanatic stubbornness push her down a road of no return? On her way back to the handsome compound she worried that her relationship with her uncle, now that it had gone beyond the bounds of an illicit affair, would lead to an irremediable disaster. It wasn't the moral or ethical aspect of the matter that troubled her. She had stopped being a decent girl at sixteen — she didn't care about such things. Nor did she feel that she had in any way wronged her blind father-in-law or her dull husband. The old man often reproved her harshly and Shuan-shuan had beaten her so severely that she couldn't get out of bed for days. All she wanted was a peaceful quiet life, to bear children, to be a mother, right up until the time she became an old woman. She had nothing against the new society. She began to regret that she had ever gone to work in the handsome compound. Her uncle was too awful, too horrible!

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White cloth puttees from the knees down, woolly bindings and hemp sandals on his feet, a big blue turban upon his head — hey, the very picture of a competent, agile, bold young fellow. Dressing for work in the mountains, Sheng-pao put on the same kind of clothes he wore when hiding to avoid being grabbed and forced to serve in the Kuomintang army before liberation. He looked like a typical mountaineer.

Lowering his head, Sheng-pao emerged through the doorway of the thatch-roofed inn. He shouted across the meadow of withered grass into the ravine:

"Frog Flat neighbours. Assemble."

"Frog Flat neighbours. Assemble," the echo floated back from the groves of birch high against the blue sky on the slopes above.

To men from the plains, the echo was quite amusing. The band of poor peasants and former hired hands had arrived at Bitter Herb Clearing the previous night and put up in the South Millbase Ravine inns. Now, having finished breakfast, they were chatting in the meadow and smoking their pipes. They laughed, then gazed so appreciatively at the outfit of their bold young leader that he became embarrassed.

"I haven't been to the mountains in the three years since liberation," he said. "It seems very strange. Another world."

The others agreed. "That's a fact," they smiled. "It seems strange to us too. But we'll get used to it in a couple of days."

Everyone made some laughing comment: As soon as you entered Tang Stream Gap, you felt tiny compared to the lofty sides of the sheer gorge. The sky grew narrow and so did the earth.... But sound became much louder. It was like being in a huge cellar.

As they chatted, more Frog Flat peasants, also dressed for the mountains, came out of two other thatch-roofed inns. Others returned from a nearby grove of wild pear trees. Now, having heard Sheng-pao's call to assemble, all went back to their various inns and brought out their belongings, long since tied together in readiness. Each person carried bedding, clothing, a sickle, grain, cooking utensils, and an extra pair of sandals — as if he were moving house. Serious, they stood waiting for orders, spruce and neat, every one.

The morning sun, rising over the tree tops on Stout Fellow Ridge east of Bitter Herb Clearing, cast warm red beams into South Millbase Ravine, burnishing the sixteen men of the small expedition. When they had surrounded Sheng-pao in the moonlight the night the meeting for low-interest grain loans in Fifth Village, Hsiapao Township, failed, and begged him to lead them into the mountains, they had been only a few individual peasants. Now, gathered here, they were an eye-catching entity. Though still few in number, they were strong in spirit. Yesterday morning, entering through Tang Stream Gap, they had plunged into the high-walled gorge and followed a twisting path upstream, threading their way through boulders and brush. They crossed the stream a hundred and twenty-four times, over logs, stepping stones, wooden bridges and bridges made of chains. After passing Tiger's Lair and what was known as Forty *Li* Dragon's Cave, they climbed Aristocrat Ridge. In the bone-chilling mountain wind, they gazed back in farewell at their beloved Hsiapao Village. That same night they reached their objective on the other side of the ridge — Bitter Herb Clearing.

Located between the fairly moderate slopes of Aristocrat Ridge and Big Ridge (the main peak of the Chinling Mountains), Bitter Herb Clearing had a diameter of about thirty *li*. It was surrounded by desolate bluffs and ravines of yellow soil. The poor peasants and hired hands knew this place well. They looked at the abandoned rollers and millstones, at the smoke-blackened walls — proofs of previous human habitation. One said that about a hundred years ago the former residents,

unable to stand any longer the frequent bandit raids, had moved west to White Grass River Valley. Another said they had left much earlier than that. This place was fourteen hundred metres higher than Huangpao Town. All you could raise was potatoes, which couldn't be kept long enough to see you through the winter. That was why the residents had been forced to give the place up, although they had sweated blood to clear it.

Who cared which version was correct? They had come to cut bamboo not to study archaeology. They had only to remember that this was now the realm of tigers, leopards, bears and wild boars.

Every year during the third and seventh lunar months, when there was not much doing on the farms and poor peasants came up from the plains, the thatch-roofed inns were swept and cleaned to receive visitors. They provided only shelter for the night, a cooking stove and firewood. Price — twenty cents. Before liberation, on rainy or snowy nights these inns were host to gambling and drunken brawls. But after the people's government was established, the peasants' political consciousness were heightened in the various campaigns so that now no one drowned his sorrow in drink, or needed liquor to work off his depression. You could spend the night in peace and quiet.

One night was all Sheng-pao and his party intended to stay in the South Millbase Ravine inns. They wanted to get to where the bamboo was thickest and build their own thatched cottage. They knew that in North Grindstone Gap beside a small stream there was an old cottage foundation with ready-made low stone walls. What's more there was also a large grassy field where they could smoke their bamboo and tie it into brooms. They had already inquired. The place hadn't changed. Now they were assembling to set out for North Grindstone Gap.

Yu-wan had to have his little joke wherever he went. Luggage on his back, he brandished his rifle and shouted:

"Line up, everybody. Atten — tion!"

"Atten — tion!" the birch groves in the ravine threw back the echo.

The men roared with laughter. No one paid any attention to his command.

"You eat four big bowls at a meal to my three. You've got more strength than you know what to do with. Why not use it on serious business?" joked Jen the Fourth. "That's the truth. Except for you and Sheng-pao, we're all over thirty. Not a sturdy young fellow among us. That's the truth. You may be the militia captain, but you're here without your men. We won't listen to orders. What are you going to do about it?"

Again, they all laughed. Yu-wan had achieved his purpose. He observed their high spirits with satisfaction.

By now all the guests residing in the three inn buildings had come out to see this new phenomenon. Men going into the mountains in an organized group. That never happened before liberation. A number of persons hurried over and stared at the group with admiring eyes.

"Comrade Lu, their Communist Party branch secretary in Hsiapao Township does a fine job."

"This isn't his work."

"Whose is it, then — yours? Aren't these people from Fifth Village, Hsiapao Township?"

"Yes, but this still isn't Secretary Lu's work. I'm telling you. It's Secretary Wang of the Communist Party committee of Huangpao District who has to be thanked for this."

"How do you know?"

"Of course I know. Secretary Wang stayed at Frog Flat for half of the first lunar month, and this is the result. I'm telling you. These fellows are from Liang Sheng-lu's mutual-aid team. The team leader couldn't take them into the mountains so he appointed his cousin to do it."

"Oh — " his listeners nodded credulously. "What a good cousin Sheng-lu has."

Sheng-pao, who was about to announce his plan, waited a moment. He wanted to hear what the men were saying. Listening to this colloquy, the bamboo gatherers from Frog Flat laughed. Sheng-pao was very pleased. This was the work of the district committee Communist Party secretary. That

was a hundred per cent true. Unfortunately, the speaker was not entirely accurate. What he should have said was: Secretary Wang couldn't take them into the mountains so he appointed candidate member of the Communist Party Liang Sheng-pao to do it. Yu-wan wanted to correct this incomplete report, but Sheng-pao prevented him.

"Neighbours," the young leader began, "Yu-wan, Ta-hai and I have talked it over, and this is what we've roughed out. How's this: Yu-yi, Uncle Jen the Fourth and I will go first to North Grindstone Gap and get our cauldron going. Yu-wan will take Kuo Suo, Sheng-mao, Iron Lock Wang and Shuan-shuan to a place five *li* from the gap to cut saplings for rafters. The innkeeper says there are good poplars there. The remaining seven — I don't have to name you — will go with Red Face Ta-hai and cut thatch for the roof. Does that sound all right?"

"Fine," the men chorused in one voice.

"Fine." The echo from the birch-covered slopes boomed magnificently.

"Then let's go." Yu-wan handed his rifle to Sheng-pao. Swinging his arm, he cried: "Rafter cutters, come with me."

"Thatch cutters, come with me." The voice of Red Face Ta-hai was solemn and he spoke like a big brother.

Shouldering their gear, the men set out in groups. Sheng-pao, Jen the Fourth and Yu-yi, in addition to their luggage, were also carrying the vines everyone had cut the previous day. The innkeeper hastened out of the thatch-roofed hostel. Waving his hand as they marched up the sloping path, he called:

"Comrade Sheng-pao, if you can't get your hut finished by dark, come back and spend the night here. Strangers at first meeting, friends at the second."

"Right. Don't worry about us," Sheng-pao shouted back. By then, only his voice could be heard. He was virtually invisible, hidden by the wild pear trees and by his load of luggage, vines and the big cauldron.

With his two companions, he wound through the brush, treading on last year's fallen foliage. He could hear the voices

of Yu-wan and Red Face Ta-hai and their groups, but he could no longer see them.

How strange were the wooded Chinling Mountains! On the plain, by the time spring's Clear and Bright festival day had passed, the fields were onion green and the trees were shady. But here, although the many different kinds of trees and shrubs were burgeoning, they had not yet leafed. *Aiya*! Long icicles still hung on the high cliff faces. As he trudged along, Sheng-pao kept hearing chunks of ice drop off and crash into the ravines, startling the pheasants on the slopes into flight. Though he could hear water gurgling beneath his feet, he couldn't see it. Aha! The stream was flowing under a layer of thick ice that was covered by twigs and leaves.

Yu-yi and Jen the Fourth, as they walked ahead with their gear and vines on their backs, were discussing the differences between the weather in the mountains and the weather on the plain. This kind of conversation was an important part of the peasants' life. Although they chatted about it every day, and to the casual listener it sounded dull, peasants, whether walking or at work, never failed to exchange views earnestly on the subject. What else would you have them discuss? The Korean war, or the First Five-Year Plan? About these, the knowledge of forty- or fifty-year-old peasants was then still extremely limited. Their neighbours' shortcomings? That was gossip for old women, a bad habit and of no interest. An old peasant could talk for a thousand years, but he'd never say anything offensive.

Sheng-pao, laden with his gear, a bundle of vines, Tseng-fu's cauldron and Yu-wan's rifle, walked behind the two older men. He neither joined in their conversation nor listened to it. He was involved in his own thoughts, which to him were highly entertaining.

That badly informed fellow back in South Millbase Ravine was funny, really funny. He evidently had a lot of respect for Party leaders, and he quite correctly connected the organizing of the poor peasants and hired hands for an expedition into the mountains with the district secretary's stay in Frog

Flat when he was overhauling the mutual-aid teams. Where he went wrong was in saying that he, Sheng-pao, was leading the group at the behest of Sheng-lu, his well-to-do middle-peasant cousin. That was certainly comical. Sheng-pao couldn't repress a chuckle.

"What are you laughing at?" Jen the Fourth turned his head to demand. He added firmly: "I know what I'm talking about. Your father says so too: Almost three hundred years ago, during the reign of Kang Hsi, there were over a hundred families living on Bitter Herb Clearing."

"Right, absolutely right. He did say that," Sheng-pao replied placatingly. Jen the Fourth was very pleased. He resumed his research into the history of Bitter Herb Clearing with Yu-yi, who was walking in front.

Sheng-pao continued meditating. It didn't matter that the stranger obviously had little regard for him. Young Sheng-pao was determined to learn from the broad-mindedness of Communists with long-range spiritual goals. He wasn't thin-skinned. It didn't matter a bit whether people considered him important. But the thing intrigued him. Why? Secretary Wang had put his finger on it exactly during the Party rectification. The secretary said that in the great sea of the small peasant economy, the well-to-do middle peasant was the most respected. He usually had a fine horse, or a large household, or someone in the family earning a good salary as a middle-school teacher. His prestige in the surrounding countryside was high. But, Secretary Wang asserted definitely, in the socialist society of the future, the system of private property would be eliminated. In the villages, this ridiculous situation would naturally also change.

"How right Secretary Wang is," Sheng-pao thought in astonishment. Sheng-pao often noted practical proof of revolutionary theory in his daily life. Now, marching through a mountain forest, he had made a new discovery regarding revolutionary theory, and it increased the spring in his step. How fascinating life was! He loved it ardently.

From the position of the sun in the blue sky, Sheng-pao could tell it was about the time peasants usually ate their noonday meal. Together with Jen the Fourth and Yu-yi, he set up the cauldron and chimney in the area enclosed by the low stone walls in North Grindstone Gap. Then they swept the place clean of its rubble of leaves, twigs, stones and dirt. Covered with dust, Sheng-pao insisted on tying branches together to make a long bed platform. On this, he would heap thatch, so that the men could sleep warm and dry, off the damp ground. Jen the Fourth had brought an old dog-skin robe, but the others had nothing that could serve as a mattress. If exposed too long to the moisture, they would develop sores, their bones and ligaments would ache. In that case, how could they finish the job in the time planned?

When they had finished all preparation work before setting up the thatched cottage, Jen the Fourth, his pipe in his mouth, squatted before the cauldron and set some water on to boil. When the others arrived with the rafters and thatch they were cutting, they'd have a hot drink to wash down their dry muffins.

The never-resting Yu-yi took a mattock and went out to clear a path to the stream. Otherwise someone might trip, he said, when he went for water.

Because everything was progressing smoothly, harmoniously, Sheng-pao was very stimulated. He pulled out his short pipe and smoked it proudly, viewing the scenery of North Grindstone Gap with much satisfaction.

It was indeed a wilderness. Ten *li* from South Millbase Ravine, it was thirty *li* of mountain path to White Grass River Valley—the nearest human habitation. Desolate spot! A couple of abandoned old grindstones gave you your name.

Standing in a field of dry grass that faced the sun, Sheng-pao saw rising behind him wooded slopes of pine, dim and mysterious. Opposite was a mountain covered with an impenetrable birch forest. Who knew what lurked within? *Aiya*! And all around were bushes and wild pear trees. No wonder no one ever settled here. Only the suggestion of a path wound

down from the gap, passing through the narrow wooded valley and twisting away over the ridge.

As though he were the master of North Grindstone Gap, Sheng-pao asked the two older peasants grandly: "Not bad, eh? If you send a hundred men, this place could hold them easily."

"It's wide enough. You could set up three thatched cottages without any trouble," Yu-yi agreed, as he cleared the path to the stream with his mattock. "But who would be able to send so many?"

"I'm talking about after the mutual-aid and co-operative movement expands," Sheng-pao explained.

Jen the Fourth, tending the fire, asserted: "It depends on what's on the mountain. If there weren't enough bamboo, what would the hundred men do? Admire the scenery?"

Soon, Yu-wan arrived leading the sapling-cutters. Not far behind were Red Face and his men, with loads of thatch on their backs. In the twinkling of an eye, the field that Yu-yi and Jen had cleared of brush was heaped with piles of thatch and saplings. The fragrance of the wood and the dry dusty smell of the thatch pervaded the field.

Untying their head coverings, the men mopped their sweaty faces and necks. Everyone was smiling cheerfully. They were pleased with this place, pleased with the preparations that had been made for the erection of the cottage, pleased with the boiled water. Just see how pleased they are! As they examined the cauldron that had been set up and the bed platform Sheng-pao had constructed, North Grindstone Gap rang with their laughter.

In the nearby forest, the tigers, leopards, bears and wild boars were annoyed. Their round eyes burned through the undergrowth as they watched this band of strangers. When the first three outpost builders came and began readying the ground for the cottage, the bold brave clumsy denizens of the mountains had crouched quietly in the dense woods observing them contemptuously, perhaps waiting for one of them to wander off alone, so that they could bring him down in a

swift fierce charge. But now the wild beasts realized what the men were up to. They weren't merely three passers-by. They were part of a large strong group which had come to stay. Very irritated, the animals began leaving their disturbed North Grindstone Gap. Hark: in the surrounding forest they were stealing away, their paws and hoofs rustling the thick layer of fallen twigs and leaves that had accumulated over the years. Oho! A wild boar in the birch grove opposite as he departed kept turning his head to look back. His piggy eyes stared hostilely at the men of the expedition.

"So he doesn't want to go?" Spotting the boar, Yu-wan ran over and picked up his rifle. He took a cartridge from his pocket and shoved it into the breech. Dropping prone into the grass, he took aim, muttering: "You don't want to leave? All right, I'll keep you here. We'll put you in the pot for the celebration feast for our new home."

"Don't shoot. Don't shoot." A poker in his hand, Jen the Fourth dashed up and pulled Yu-wan's arm. "What do you think you're doing?" he yelled angrily. "If you don't kill him with one shot, he'll rush you. There are plenty of them in the mountains. They don't attack you if you leave them alone — thank heaven and earth."

Like an actor on the stage, Jen recited the words of a mountain song for everybody's benefit:

> Pity, oh pity the mountain dweller poor,
> His work for the year, oh, it never ends.
> The result of the seed which he sows o'er the ground,
> On heaven, on wild beasts, on them it depends.
> Guarding his crops all day and all night,
> His eyes go red, he shouts himself hoarse,
> But harvest brings only a famine year,
> One picul the bears steal and eight pint the boars.

"You see? The mountain folk shout themselves hoarse, but they never provoke them. Why should we outsiders? If you are such a glutton, better fatten your face with a few good resounding smacks. You have the nerve to talk about a 'celebration feast for our new home'. Now there's a phrase that's

really resounding." As he lectured Yu-wan, who was lying in the grass, Jen's anger cooled, and he ended up with a jest.

Everyone laughed. They agreed with Jen's policy of mutual non-provocation. By this time, the boar had disappeared. Grinning, Yu-wan rose and put his rifle back. The men proposed to Sheng-pao, who was busy inspecting the saplings, that the gun be used only to defend themselves against any marauding beasts which might raid the hut in the night. Their mission wasn't to hunt wild beasts.

Sheng-pao happily agreed. It hadn't been because he was looking for honours that he had organized all these people. Now, their collective approach warmed his heart. His confidence in the group's strength increased. Smiling affectionately, he said:

"Let's eat our corn-meal muffins and barley-cakes. Then we can start building our home."

All sixteen of them untied their bed rolls and took out their food and drinking bowls.

After the meal, they held a conference. It was decided to divide into two teams. One would tie the thatch into small bundles, the other would build the peaked roof frame. Then all hands would join in affixing the thatch to the frame with the vines they had brought.

The work proceeded simply and smoothly. No one tried to pick a light task, or pulled a long face if his job was heavy. All went at it seriously and diligently. Sheng-pao could see that the men attached great importance to this hostel they were building. Back in the village, there was never such collective spirit in constructing a home for any private individual. Even poor peasants and hired hands still behaved like peasants unless united by some common interest or ideal. No amount of wages could produce the frame of mind with which they work as their own masters for a common good.

There, Red Face Ta-hai was solemnly teaching his team how to select and tie the thatch. Here, Yu-wan was vigorously wielding his axe, cutting the silver-barked saplings into even lengths, sending chips flying in all directions. To improve

their appearance, he also trimmed them neatly. Like a couple of old master carpenters, Yu-yi and Jen the Fourth supervised the remaining men in building the roof frame. Under their orders was Sheng-pao untying the bundles of vines and delivering them where needed.

The men's warm mutual affection, their good cheer, stirred the young leader deeply. They were giving him a new understanding. He used to think it would take years to change the selfish individualistic peasant mentality, with long meetings every winter, running far into the night. But now he had caught a glimmering of something. Could it be that the main way to change the mentality was through collective labour? That you shouldn't wait for their mentality to change before organizing them, but rather you should organize them in order to bring the change about?

Stretching out the long vines, Sheng-pao cut them into sections and brought them to those tying the thatch. His routine job gave him time to observe these men, as well as those building the roof frame. Now a number of curious questions rose in his mind.

What makes them so unified? Why are they working so hard? Why some willingly listen to orders, and others issue them so righteously? What is the relation between these people?

Sheng-pao couldn't help smiling. It was really interesting. Just look at Sheng-mao and Iron Lock Wang over there, tying crossed rafters to the twenty-four feet long central roof beam with the other fellows. They were working face to face, pulling the vine-ropes tight, their teeth clenched with the effort. See how they grinned at each other when the rafters were tied firm. Apparently each was well satisfied with the way his partner co-operated. And Sheng-mao and Iron Lock were the ones who had argued so hotly over the boundary between their fields during the autumn sowing last year. To settle their squabble they had called out practically every cadre in the village. How they shouted at each other, faces flushed, ears red, neither willing to give an inch. Finally, they had to be sent to the township government to solve the matter.

After they had left, Sheng-pao – one of those who had tried in vain to make peace – had shaken his head and thought: "They've started a feud. They were good friends, but the fields they received under the land reform are making them enemies. And they're both poor peasants and hired hands! What a curse the private ownership of land is. Whatever goes wrong with a peasant, if you dig, you find that at the root." But here, only a few months later, they were great friends again. Remarkable!

"How did it happen?" he wondered. "People say that those who go into the mountains are all one family. That's it, of course. In the mountain depths men and wild beasts are divided into two hostile camps." But then he thought: "That can't be the reason. If they were able to earn a living, they wouldn't have come to these forsaken wilds in the first place. The government didn't urge them to come. I didn't drag them here. They came of their own accord."

Sheng-pao was sure there was something significant in all this. There had to be. He remembered how these men had surrounded him after the plan for low-interest grain loans for Frog Flat had failed to go through, how they had pleaded with him to lead them. He recalled the talks of Secretary Yang of the county Party committee and Secretary Wang of the district Party committee. Yes, the working class was the leading class of all China. And in the countryside the poor peasants and hired hands were the class the Party relied on. Secretary Wang had put it well:

"During the War of Liberation, the poor peasants and hired hands gave the sons they had raised with such difficulty to form the People's Liberation Army. They sent the grain their families had grown to feed this army at the front. They joined stretcher teams that carried PLA wounded from the front to the rear. In the common struggle to liberate themselves, they were able to forget whatever differences existed between them."

"Right," Sheng-pao said excitedly, smoothing out a vine and handing it to Yu-yi. "You've got to rely on the poor peasants and hired hands."

Jen the Fourth laughed. "Who are you talking to, Sheng-pao?" he asked curiously. "Yu-yi? Wasn't he classified as a middle peasant during land reform?"

"He's not talking to me," the honest Yu-yi said. "This leader of ours is a thinking man. While his hands work, his brain never stops. You're talking to yourself, aren't you, Sheng-pao?"

Sheng-pao admitted with a smile that he was. Jestingly, he said: "Everyone is concentrating on his job. I'm the only one whose mind is wandering."

"You go right on making plans for us. No one will say you're not putting your heart in your work," Jen urged him earnestly. "That's the truth."

All of the men building the roof were very satisfied with their young leader.

Before the afternoon was half over the roof frame was completed and the thatch tied on. Eight men standing on each side, shouting a rhythmic work chant, they raised it on to the low walls that were only half as high as a man. Then, laughing and shouting, they crowded into the thatched cottage and hung their ration sacks, clothing bags and pickled vegetables on the rafters.

That night Sheng-pao called a meeting. A detailed plan for division of labour was worked out. The experienced bamboo cutters gave the others some technical pointers. After breakfast the next morning, leaving Jen the Fourth behind to cook and prepare for the broom binding, fifteen men started up the slope, carrying ropes and sickles.

No work on Mount Chungnan was more arduous than cutting bamboo. With lowered heads protected by cloth turbans, the men climbed the slope and parted a path through the brush with their hands. The sharp branches tore their clothes, cut their hands and faces. But that was nothing. In their hands were sickles bright as snow, and the ground beneath their feet bristled with another kind of sharp knives – the

stubble of previously cut bamboos. Standing on the steep side of the mountain, you could reach up and touch the blue sky. And when you looked down you saw a valley so deep it made your head spin. While hewing, you had to beware of the leopards and bears which peered out from the nearby woods. Tigers seldom appeared, and the wild boars didn't attack humans as a rule, but the leopards and bears were a nuisance — one over fierce, the other over stupid. You had to be careful.

"Better to cut a little less each day and finish the job a few days later. Safety is the main thing, Comrade Sheng-pao," the district Party secretary had told him, his voice serious and concerned.

Their first day of work was very confused, really quite worrisome. So the next morning Sheng-pao divided them into two groups, led by Red Face Ta-hai and Yu-wan respectively. That was better. It was agreed that no one was to wander more than ten feet from his group. Under no circumstances was a man to get out of sight of the others. Kuo Suo was greedy. When he saw a clump of good bamboo he was always drifting over, alone, without a word to anyone. The men warned him never to forget that he was in the mountain wilds; he absolutely must stay with the group.

Shuan-shuan did everything slowly. When the men moved from one place to another, he invariably fell behind. Sheng-pao took on the task personally of looking after him. He walked in Shuan-shuan's rear, ready to help him on an instant's notice. Shuan-shuan was Blind Wang's one and only son. Sheng-pao dared not be careless for a moment. Can you blame the young fellow for acquiring a maturity and competence after being placed in this position of responsibility? His manner, his speech, his mood, were those of a man ten years his senior.

Shouldering the burdens of the masses of people and working for the collective cause so that they themselves had neither the time nor inclination to think about home and private matters was the reason an earlier generation of Communists had won the people's confidence during the twenty years of fighting.

Sheng-pao in his contacts with county Party Secretary Yang and district Party Secretary Wang saw this spirit in their manner, speech and mood. In the three years since liberation Sheng-pao observed that many leading comrades had this spirit, and he was determined to be like them. He didn't know what this conduct was called. He sought nothing for himself in the bitter struggle. He wanted no special benefits from the collective cause, nor had he any desire for others to make him a leader and respect him.

After three days of cutting, they delivered the first batch of bamboo brooms to the thatch-roofed inn in South Millbase Ravine. The bellowing innkeeper loudly informed them that the teams of two and three from Huangpao District who were going into the mountains all envied their method — setting up a camp, sticking together through thick and thin.

"*Tien*! The average poor peasant or hired hand never spends more than five days in the mountains on one trip. The bamboo he cuts on the slopes and ridges, he strips and smokes and binds into brooms in the mornings and evenings right here at the inn. When he carries them down the mountain and sells them in the Huangpao market, he's lucky if he gets twenty catties of corn meal to take home for gruel. There isn't a poor peasant cutting bamboo in Bitter Herb Clearing who doesn't admire the way the mutual-aid team from Fifth Village, Hsiapao Township, is operating. And when they hear what your team is going to earn on its brooms, their mouths drop open as big as bowls." The big-voiced innkeeper mimicked their gape of astonishment.

Was Sheng-pao happy to hear this? Of course. According to the original plan, only the mutual-aid team was supposed to go into the mountains. But later several peasants from the upper reaches also joined them. And now so many others admired and approved. Hey! It just showed how pleased the people were with the path the Party was pointing out. In the course of bitter struggle the approval of the people was the highest reward a Communist could desire. Seven hundred and fifty yuan — that wasn't what mattered most. Only vulgar

persons saw nothing but money. Sheng-pao felt vastly encouraged.

If our team's plan for a large output succeeds this year, the poor peasants and hired hands who've joined us to cut bamboo will be members of our team next year. Or maybe it would be better if we formed a federation of mutual-aid teams, like they did in Tawang Village.

But then Sheng-pao immediately corrected himself: Quit always thinking about next year. It's liable to make you careless about the present. Don't get a swelled head just because people say we're doing well. Keep your feet on the ground. Suppose you mess it up? It doesn't matter much to you personally. The whole township can still remember when you were just a kid called Little Treasure and never had any special ability. It isn't a question of whether you personally lose face. The main thing is this will have a big influence on the Party, because it's the road the Party's recommending.

When Sheng-pao realized how heavy his responsibility was, he calmed down. A sense of duty to a collective cause gives a man self-control. It doesn't necessarily have anything to do with age.

Sheng-pao admired Yu-wan's cheerful nature and stalwart body. Yu-wan joked and rioted with everyone. He was always singing local opera arias — badly but loud. It seemed to Sheng-pao that this cheerfulness was a great help to their life in the mountains.

On their way back to North Grindstone Gap after delivering the brooms, Sheng-pao walked together with him, purposely letting the others go on ahead. Thoughtfully he said to Yu-wan in a low voice:

"The men look kind of bored."

"Yes. As time passes they run out of words."

"That's no good. When a man doesn't talk, he gets homesick. I asked the innkeeper to tell Tseng-fu to bring us a set of chess."

"Fine."

"But before it comes, when we're not working see if you can make everybody laugh, will you? You know the art. I don't."

Yu-wan gave Sheng-pao a shove. "Who are you trying to kid? You call that an art? But if it will do any good, I'll make a fool of myself. It doesn't cost anything."

And so, when the men were resting after lunch one day, noticing Shuan-shuan was gazing abstractedly at the grove of birch on the opposite mountain slope, Yu-wan asked:

"Who are you thinking of?"

"Nobody," Shuan-shuan replied earnestly, turning his big head.

"I don't believe it," Yu-wan retorted loudly. "You were absolutely in a daze, you were thinking so hard. How can you deny it? Are you planning to sneak off and run home?"

Shuan-shuan gave an honest laugh. "Why should I do that?"

"To see your Su-fang. Right? Confess."

Shuan-shuan blushed. An embarrassed smile trembled on his thick lips. Everyone, except Jen the Fourth, roared with laughter.

Sheng-pao was examining the bamboo the men had cut. Anything not suitable for making brooms was consumed as firewood. He didn't know what the men were laughing about. It's fine if Yu-wan can cheer them up, he thought. Life in the mountains is too lonesome.

To enliven life in the thatched cottage he proposed that Jen the Fourth tell a story from the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms.* Carefree Iron Lock Wang could imitate the cries of horses, cows, chickens and dogs. He was best at rooster crows. At Sheng-pao's urging, he crowed lustily. While everyone was laughing, Sheng-pao checked over the brooms to see whether they were up to standard.

But in his idle moments, Sheng-pao thought of home. During the day, he climbed the slopes and scaled the ridges with the others. At night when, after a session of jollity, the fifteen men were snoring peacefully, Sheng-pao lay on his bed of boughs and grass listening to the wind moaning through the trees on the opposite mountain slope and wondering how Huan-hsi was doing with the rice sowing. Had the agronomist come yet? How was Huan-hsi getting on with Sheng-lu? The

sowing was another important matter in their life, Sheng-pao felt. As to the war in Korea and the armistic negotiations at Panmunjom, as to the country's industrialization, he didn't understand much about that. Anyway, we have Chairman Mao who would take care of such things.

Calamities happen in a flash. One afternoon Sheng-pao and the fifteen men were hauling bundles of green bamboo down from the ridge. Their faces to the sun slowly sinking in the western hills, the men descended the slope in high spirits. As the bundles were dragged rustling through the brush they stirred up a cloud of dust and fine bits of rotted leaves and twigs that had been dried by the sun after the snow had melted. This irritated the men's nostrils, making them cough. Sheng-pao who was walking behind Shuan-shuan, heard a sudden yelp. Quickly halting, he peered through the dusty haze. Shuan-shuan's tattered cotton-padded tunic was impaled on the sharp branch of an old pine tree, and Shuan-shuan was hanging in mid-air.

"Wait. Don't move. I'll get you down," Sheng-pao shouted. Tossing aside his bundle, he ran forward. He was afraid that when Shuan-shuan dropped, he might miss his footing and roll down the steep slope into the gorge. That would be terrible.

But just as he was running, Sheng-pao heard a thud. Shuan-shuan's heavy body had already hit the ground. The simple fellow began howling with pain.

"That does it," Sheng-pao muttered. "Wretch! I told you to wait. What was your hurry? Have you twisted your leg? Or have you sprained an ankle?"

Sheng-pao raced up to him. It was much worse than a twisted leg or a sprained ankle. Shuan-shuan was holding a foot in two big hands. Bright red blood was gushing through his woollen sock and hemp sandal. Shuan-shuan's body was powerful but his will was weak. Seated on the carpet of fallen twigs and leaves he was weeping loudly, tears coursing in rivulets down his dusty face.

"*Aiyaya*! *Aiyaya*! Mama," he bawled. His cries pierced Sheng-pao's heart like knives.

Sheng-pao viewed him with apprehension. By this time the others were far ahead.

Squatting beside him, Sheng-pao removed Shuan-shuan's sandal and sock. *Aiya*! Blood was flowing rapidly from the fleshy part near the centre of his foot.

"*Aiya*! How did you do that?"

"Oh! Oh! Stepped on the sharp stump of a cut bamboo! Mama, it hurts!"

"Don't cry. How deep is it?"

"Right to the bone! *Aiyaya*!"

"What rotten luck!" Little beads of sweat broke out on Sheng-pao's nose.

He felt around nervously first in this pocket of his padded tunic, then in that. Here it was! The first-aid kit the clinic in Huangpao Town had given him, containing iodine, mercurochrome and alcohol, the three bottles held together with adhesive tape. Hastily, the emergency nurse began cleaning Shuan-shuan's wound and applying medication. "Maybe a flesh wound will heal quicker than an injury to the bone or ligament," he thought hopefully.

By then the others, discovering their absence, came back. Because of the slope's terrain they couldn't approach the two, but stood in brush to their waists, staring up at them.

"What happened?"

"Stabbed his foot on a bamboo stump."

"Why didn't he look where he was going?"

"Got hung up on a pine tree branch."

"He should have called for help."

Everyone was talking at once. They were quite upset.

"Enough, enough. Quit the chatter. It'll be dark before long. Let's get him bandaged so we can move on down the mountain. Who'll hold the medicine bottles for me?"

Yu-yi, who was standing nearest, was very unhappy. As he squatted down, his horny hands gripped the bottles with a superstitious reverence.

Acting on the instructions he received from the nurse in Huangpao Town, Sheng-pao washed around the wound with cotton soaked in alcohol. Next he tore open a small envelope and sprinkled some of its contents on a pad of sterile gauze. After attaching this with adhesive tape, he put some cotton on the outside, then bound the whole thing with a bandage.

During Sheng-pao's awkward ministrations, poor Shuan-shuan, lying on his back on a bed of brown pine needles, groaned mightily. As soon as he lay down and raised his leg, the wound stopped bleeding. Shuan-shuan's face was very white, perhaps because he had lost a good bit of blood, or maybe it was due to fright. Although his eyes were shut, tears continued to well from the corners. He was a pitiful sight. There must have been a bucket of tears in that heavy body of his. If someone had told him honestly about all the things that concerned him in this world, three days and three nights would have seen no end to his weeping.

"Do you feel better now with the dressing on?" The good-hearted Yu-yi wiped his own tears as he handed the bottles back to Sheng-pao.

"It still hurts," Shuan-shuan cried, clamping his lips.

"Don't feel badly," Sheng-pao urged, putting the first-aid kit in order. "The doctor in the Huangpao clinic said a flesh wound heals in five or six days." Sheng-pao's tone was positive.

Actually, the accident made Sheng-pao miserable. But could he weep along with Shuan-shuan and Yu-yi? He had no right to be the same as the others, and display his weakness. He had to manifest complete staunchness, and thus arouse staunchness in Shuan-shuan.

But no matter how he tried, the dusty-faced Sheng-pao could not conceal his discouragement. He discussed with the men on the slope below — their faces also caked with dust — how to distribute among them the bamboo he and Shuan-shuan had cut and drag it down to camp. He would carry Shuan-shuan on his back. The others wanted to take turns, but Sheng-pao wouldn't agree. He was the youngest and healthiest. He wanted to make sure that the wound wouldn't start bleeding

again while they descended the slope. He would carry him high on his back, with Shuan-shuan's legs sticking up so that his feet were higher than his knees. Of course this position would be very tiring for Sheng-pao, but he said he couldn't feel at ease if anyone else carried him. The others finally had to give in.

Carrying the simple clumsy Shuan-shuan — he weighed over two hundred pounds — Sheng-pao started down the mountain. He was extremely sorry for the excessively simple fellow. Shuan-shuan worked like an ox, never tiring, as if he were born to labour. It was due to his goodness that no one bore him ill feeling. He gave the impression that he thought the whole world could be trusted. Of course his own father should be trusted most of all.

It was due to this goodness that Sheng-pao became so irritated when Su-fang made eyes at him. He wasn't such a heartless beast as to take advantage of a friend's goodness to fool around with his wife. On the contrary, he considered helping this weak fellow his natural duty. His only regret was that old Wang was blind in more ways than one, and actually warned his son to beware of their upright neighbour, Sheng-pao.

Step by step, Sheng-pao plodded down the slope, his hands behind him, supporting Shuan-shuan. He could picture the stubborn expression in the eyes of the irascible old Blind Wang.

"It's your own fault," he imagined Blind Wang saying. "Who told you to go running around with Sheng-pao? If your leg is crippled, you can go live with him. Let him support you."

The thought of the old man gave Sheng-pao goose pimples. When the Wangs joined the mutual-aid team, it had been a bit of an effort for him to accept the idea. If it were just Shuan-shuan, he would have been completely pleased, even if it meant working himself to death. But that wretched old man was too narrow-minded. He always imagined that people in the mutual-aid team were not being fair to his son. No matter how Sheng-pao looked after Shuan-shuan, Blind Wang was constantly suspecting that his family was being imposed upon. Whenever they met, he would say to Sheng-pao: "My

boy's a simpleton.... My boy's a fool...." As if he had a bellyful of doubts he couldn't voice.

Sheng-pao felt like saying, "If it worries you so much, your family can quit the team." But he remembered Secretary Wang's advice, and he patiently endured everything. Once his sister Hsiu-lan told him that Blind Wang had even tried to instigate Shuan-shuan to dawdle on the job. "Why sweat when you're working for somebody else?" Wang had said. "If you tire yourself out, will his family buy you medicine?" Sheng-pao nearly exploded when he heard this. That was the kind of education the old man was giving his son! He decided to have a talk with Blind Wang. But as he was leaving his thatched cottage, he changed his mind. "He won't admit it," Sheng-pao thought. "That blind old rascal. Why should I pay any attention to him? I'll just go on like Secretary Wang told me." He went back inside.

"Comrade Sheng-pao." Whenever his personal moods came in conflict with his good sense as a Communist, he seemed to hear the friendly voice of Secretary Wang. "Comrade Sheng-pao, it takes a lot of patience to lead backward peasants along the road to socialism. Without patience, you may bring your revolution right up to the threshold, but you'll never get it into the door. A lot of comrades after conferences in the county seat return to the villages full of determination. But the minute the busy season starts on the farms they bump their noses and they cool off. You must understand. This is going to temper you."

At one time Sheng-pao stated that if he could pick eight or ten families from along the upper and lower reaches of the stream, excluding people like Blind Wang, he'd guarantee to form a model mutual-aid team. Secretary Wang had laughed heartily.

"That's a fine idea! What would happen if every Communist wouldn't lead the people immediately around him but went elsewhere to choose his own masses? Chen-shan says he couldn't get a mutual-aid team going because the people in Kuan Creek Hamlet are backward. He says, 'If I lived on the lower reaches

like Sheng-pao, you'd see what a team I'd have.' And you? You want to pick through half a village. What about the people who are left? Blind Wang, for instance. Who's going to lead him? Shall we give him over to the rich peasant Yao? If all the old society left us was poverty, our Party could build communism in a shorter time. But it's left us something else — ignorance. That's the worst thing the enemy has bequeathed us. The backward elements among the masses, Comrade Sheng-pao, and the backward aspect of the common folk — these are the real burdens we Communists must shoulder. You must understand. The enemies who've run off to Taiwan, and those who are still here, are scheming in every way to utilize these burdens of ours. We must not shirk our responsibility, Comrade Sheng-pao. We must never let the enemy make use of these burdens."

Now, in the depths of the mountain wilderness, carrying Shuan-shuan on his back down the slope, Sheng-pao seemed to hear Secretary Wang's words once again. Have you ever had that experience: finding sustenance in the words of a Party leader whenever you run into a hardship or danger, the way a sick child thinks of its mother?

As he walked carrying his burden Sheng-pao thought: "What does the word 'hardship' mean? What is it, actually?" Then he understood — a ghost! Each time, every moment he kept his objective clearly in sight, there was no such thing as hardship. During the Party rectification, people spoke of the Red Army men on the Long March. That was how it had been with them. As they drew nearer their destination day by day, all of their hardships turned to joys. And each time they made camp at the end of the day, a new joy was added.

"Right," thought Sheng-pao. With peasants also, that's the way it was. The year he and his father rented eighteen *mou* of rice paddy from Miser Lu, his work hadn't seemed difficult. He had been quite cheerful, in fact, because he was intent on building up their family fortunes. Only when the autumn harvest was over and he discovered that this was impossible, did his labour, in retrospect, become a frightful hardship.

Today, he was striving for socialism. Although he had Shuan-shuan on his back he was happy.

When they reached the gently sloping meadow of dry grass at the foot of the mountain, Sheng-pao let the men hauling the brooms go on ahead, while he slowly followed with Shuan-shuan.

They were in a ravine which the rays of the dying sun couldn't penetrate. Hazy shadows of the mountain heights shrouded the valley. Rooks flew cawing overhead, returning to their nests.

"Sheng-pao," said Shuan-shuan.

"What is it?" Sheng-pao asked sympathetically.

"Rest a while."

"Having pain?"

"No. You're tired."

"I'm all right. It will be dark soon. We mustn't stop."

Sheng-pao trudged on. At a turn in the path, Shuan-shuan again called:

"Sheng-pao."

"Now what's wrong?"

"Rest a while. Your forehead's all covered with sweat."

"What's a little sweat to a peasant?"

"The road's level here. Put me down. I can crawl."

"What are you talking about? If your wound starts bleeding again, then what?"

Shuan-shuan said no more. Sheng-pao could feel his uneasiness. The honest fellow couldn't express his gratitude in words.

"Ho! Sheng-pao!"

As Sheng-pao, dripping perspiration, his head down, walked bending forward with Shuan-shuan on his back, he heard Yu-wan and Jen the Fourth calling him in the bushes beyond. Yu-wan wanted to take over his burden. Jen was also worried about his cousin Shuan-shuan.

Sheng-pao set Shuan-shuan down on a boulder covered with dry moss. As he stood beside him, his perspiration-soaked clothes sticking to his body, he felt very cold.

Needless to say Yu-wan and Jen had already heard what had happened from the men who returned first. Jen agitatedly patted the legs of his tattered cotton-padded trousers.

"You, oh you! You're never careful," he berated Shuan-shuan. "It's lucky you only got stabbed with a bamboo stubble. Suppose you rolled down the slope?"

"Forget it," Yu-wan cut him short, annoyed. "Is this a time to talk like that? Come on, Shuan-shuan. I'll carry you."

While Yu-wan was putting Shuan-shuan on his back, Jen asked Sheng-pao:

"Did he step on a newly cut stubble, or an old?"

"*Aiya!*" Wiping the sweat from his neck with his waist sash, Sheng-pao suddenly realized his omission. "It's certainly true, 'In a tight spot, brains go to pot.' I forgot to look."

"You'd better find out. If it's new stubble, he'll be all right in four or five days. If it's old stubble, the wound will probably fester. It may give trouble."

"Right. I know that. Let's go back up the slope and see."

As Yu-wan carried Shuan-shuan to the thatched cottage, Sheng-pao and Jen the Fourth, each with a gleaming sickle in his hand, started up the mountain through the dusk.

Bad luck! When they got to the old pine tree, they found that the stubble was of bamboo cut the previous year. They returned to the cottage just at dark, and Sheng-pao gave Shuan-shuan penicillin tablets, as the doctor had directed. Nevertheless, Shuan-shuan's injured foot swelled during the night. To Shuan-shuan the mental agony was much worse than the physical. He moaned and groaned and sobbed. What worried him was that his earnings would be small because he couldn't cut much bamboo and his blind father would upbraid him.

"You concentrate on getting well. The days you can't go up the ridge whatever I cut will count as yours," Sheng-pao said.

This generosity moved the good-hearted Yu-yi. He stared at Sheng-pao admiringly. A middle peasant in his forties, Yu-yi could easily have made a living working his own land. He joined the mutual-aid team only because of his fondness

for Sheng-pao. So far as he was concerned, the team was simply an interesting experiment in a new situation. If it failed, he would have no regrets. But every demonstration of Sheng-pao's spirit of self-sacrifice stirred him to support the team more firmly, more enthusiastically.

During those same dark nights when Shuan-shuan was suffering in the mountains with the pain of an infected foot, in the eastern wing of a handsome compound in Frog Flat, rich peasant Yao was sleeping with Shuan-shuan's wife Su-fang. Sheng-pao gave Shuan-shuan penicillin tablets at fixed intervals, boiled water for him to drink, comforted him. He also told him as much as he could remember of the history of the development of society, both to educate him and to take his mind off his pain. The infection wouldn't last ten days. Seven if the foot got better fast, eight if it were slower, nine at the very most.

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Tseng-fu had no fixed number in his porters' brigade. On the first trip he took fifteen poor peasants and hired hands. The next time, one of them was ill, so he took only fourteen. Because Sheng-pao and his team were gradually getting into the swing of broom production, on the third trip Tseng-fu went with seventeen men.

Most of them, naturally, were from Kuan Creek Hamlet. Occasionally he had someone from Hsiapao Village, or from Frog Flat—across the river from Huangpao Town. Some went on one trip but not on the next. Others travelled a long distance to come to the supply and marketing co-operative's broom purchasing station at Tang Stream Gap and ask that they be allowed to join the porters.

Although it was all very haphazard, our Tseng-fu wasn't the least annoyed. From Tang Stream Gap to Bitter Herb Clearing they had to cover a hundred *li* of mountain trails. For each broom they brought back the supply and marketing co-op paid a transport fee of thirty-five cents. "Any business run by our Communist Party of course gives a fair break to the hard-working poor," said Tseng-fu. "Whoever wants to, can come along." He managed the job very industriously.

There was no other work Tseng-fu could do. The world left him only one road—to go with the Communist Party. It was as obvious as that the Wei River flowed east, as definite as that the Chinling Mountains stood on the southern edge of the central Shensi plain. Tangible, physical roads might change, but this spiritual road—never.

Before Liberation, like other peasants in Hsiapao Village, Tseng-fu had been compelled to stand on the flat outside the big temple and listen to the lectures of the Kuomintang propa-

ganda officer for the ward: "The Communists kill people and burn houses. They communize property and wives." Although Tseng-fu had never seen a Communist then, he suspected that the fellow was lying. "So only the Kuomintang is any good," he said to himself. "You bleed the people white and you still have the nerve to talk about others killing and burning."

After Liberation, the Communist Party gave him land and loaned him money with which to buy an ox to pull his plough. Was there anyone in the world more loving and kind to Tseng-fu than the Communist Party?

Once he understood this, nothing could get our Tseng-fu down. Did his enemy, rich peasant Yao, think that by wrecking his mutual-aid team he could make Tseng-fu go soft? If so, he had another think coming. Although Tseng-fu had for the time being become a team leader without any team, he was neither frightened nor ashamed. Sheng-pao's bamboo-cutting expedition not only helped Tseng-fu out economically, but — more important — it gave him political and mental sustenance. It enabled him to feel that life was not empty, that he was not isolated spiritually. He organized porters to carry brooms for Sheng-pao and the others as a temporary means of doing his bit in answer to the Party's call.

To make the round trip from the broom purchasing station at Tang Stream Gap to the South Millbase Ravine inns and return took a total of three days. Starting from outside the mountains early in the morning, the porters reached the thatch-roofed inn beneath the lone pine at the far end of Dragon's Cave by evening. The following morning they climbed a steep stony trail up Aristocrat Ridge for twenty *li*, arriving at the lively South Millbase Ravine inns by mid-morning. There they ate and tied the brooms into bundles, then returned to the lone pine tree. The third day, by the time the sun's dying rays were crimsoning the peaks of Mount Chungnan, they delivered the brooms to the purchasing station in Tang Stream Gap.

Many of them spent the night in the Gap, but the more energetic ones walked the additional fifteen *li* to Frog Flat

so as to be able to sleep in the warm embrace of their wives and kids, rising again at daybreak and hurrying back. If anyone didn't want to go on the next trip, Tseng-fu sent him home immediately to find a substitute.

Tseng-fu himself did not return to Frog Flat. Why should he? His little son Tsai-tsai was being well looked after by Sheng-pao's ma. Going back would only upset the child, and it might make the old woman wonder whether he didn't trust her. Our Tseng-fu was a very reasonable man. He knew how to rear a son. When Tsai-tsai grew up he would be strong and independent, like his father.

Some people, although they join the Communist Party in name, don't join it in their thinking, or at least not fully. At the same time there are others who, although temporarily not yet in the Party, consider themselves Communists in spirit. Tseng-fu was one of the latter. He always measured himself by Communist standards. Chen-shan had told him he wasn't ready yet, that he wouldn't be of much use in the Party, and advised him not to be in too much of a hurry to join. Tseng-fu readily agreed. He respected Chen-shan's intelligence. It was absolutely true. He was just a thick clumsy peasant. His joining might affect the great name and prestige of the Party. Since he wasn't good enough, wouldn't it be pure selfishness to try and force his way in? All in the name of wanting to serve the people! Tseng-fu despised fakers of that sort.

But never a day went by without the widower in the tattered shirt continuing to prepare himself to join the Party. Voluntarily assuming responsibility for the transport of the brooms out of the mountains, he consciously began to develop his organizing ability. Tseng-fu hoped he could do a good job of the task his beloved Sheng-pao, a Communist Party member, had entrusted to him, so that all would go well. Determined not to let Sheng-pao down, he ran the porterage operations with great care. Although Sheng-pao had a better temper than Chen-shan and perhaps wouldn't glare at him if he made a mistake, Tseng-fu felt this way about it: While he wouldn't be angry if Chen-shan glared at him, neither would he slacken

on the job just because Sheng-pao wasn't the type who glared. Hey, a man couldn't do things any old way. Who were you fooling? Yourself?

When the porters' brigade went into the mountains they had their breakfast at the White Poplar Divide, twenty *li* inside the gap, and lunch at Stone Needles. When they came out, the process was reversed. Both meals consisted of a dry ration which the men carried with them, and one cent's worth of boiled water bought on the spot. Only during the two nights they spent in the inn beneath the lone pine were they able to put their millet and corn meal into a common pot and eat it hot, in gruel form. And even then, they couldn't do it the moment they arrived. The inn had only two cauldrons and the people travelling in the mountains were many. It was a case of first come, first served. By the time the porters reached the inn, they were weary. Everyone stretched out on the long *kang*. Heated from beneath, it was nice and warm. Tseng-fu, alone, played the "housewife". Squatting before the stove, he fed it wood, fanned the fire and cooked the food, blackening his face with soot in the process. When others tried to take over, Tseng-fu always refused, insisting that they rest.

"I'll do it," he would say banteringly. "You've all got wives. You're used to having your meals brought to you. I'm my own housewife. I can cook, and quickly too."

And if anyone still tried to relieve or help him, the thin but powerful Tseng-fu gave him such a shove that he practically somersaulted backwards. The more a person persisted the harder Tseng-fu pushed, and an angry expression appeared on his face. Who wanted to stir up bad feelings over a little thing like that? And so, the leader of the porters' brigade also became its self-appointed cook.

When the meals were over and everyone sat on the grass outside the inn and smoked, Tseng-fu quickly transformed himself from a cook to a political activist. In the darkness he told his poor-peasant and hired-hand followers the Communist Party's principles of mutual aid and co-operation in agriculture, and explained why they led to a glorious future.

He spoke very well. The previous winter during the rectification of the Hsiapao Township Communist Party branch, as a non-Party activist he had asked and been given permission to sit in on the lecture given by Secretary Wang of the district Party committee on the historical development of society. Tseng-fu was quite familiar with this subject now, for he had repeated what he had learned time and again to innumerable peasants while visiting relatives the first month of the year and also during the second month when he went to the market fair.

Today, in this narrow valley so like a storage pit in the depths of the mountains, in the midst of the primeval forests of the Chinling Range, he tirelessly reiterated his guarantee: Human society would advance to socialism and then to communism. That was definite, whether you like it or not.

To most of his poor-peasant and hired-hand listeners Tseng-fu's lecture on the historical development of society was stimulating mentally. But a few of them were not too impressed. As they sat on the grass, the fleeting smiles on their faces were enough to dismay any confident propagandist. They probably didn't want to say what was really on their minds: "Where does he come off to be preaching mutual aid and co-operation when his own team has been wrecked by a rich peasant?" It would be too embarrassing to say these discouraging words to the ardent leader of the porters' brigade.

Ai, ai, what a pity the understanding of these poor peasants was so limited. Actually Tseng-fu's keen eyes had caught their expressions — he knew what they were thinking. But he wasn't discouraged. What mattered was not that Tseng-fu's mutual-aid team had been wrecked by a rich peasant. The main thing was that after the team disintegrated, his faith in the future of mutual aid and co-operation was not shaken in the least. A good man isn't afraid of being misunderstood. Tseng-fu continued giving lectures, continued cooking for everyone in the thatch-roofed inn by the lone pine. His attitude was exactly the same to those who were unimpressed as to those who were impressed. Why should he get angry? Neither Chen-shan nor

Sheng-pao had given him the job of propagandist. He had taken it on himself. Impelled by an inner conviction, by his own emotions, he had to speak the truths that he had learned. But how could he demand that others accept his views?

The third time the porters' brigade emerged from the mountain gap Tseng-fu was in very high spirits. He decided that on the fourth trip he would bring the number of his porters up to twenty-five. The brooms that Sheng-pao and his men were making were piling up on the grassy flat outside the inns in South Millbase Ravine. *Tien*! Their bamboo cutting technique was getting better and better, they were growing skilled, more experienced. An innkeeper said Sheng-pao had told him that even Shuan-shuan could haul down eighteen brooms from the slope every day. Half the men could produce over twenty. Yu-yi was the best. In a single day he had turned out a record number of twenty-four brooms. *Aiya*, it certainly made a man feel wonderful to hear it. Tseng-fu simply had to find more porters. The strongest of them at best could only carry twenty brooms per trip. He had to get additional help.

Three men from Big Crossroads who knew that Tseng-fu and his brigade were coming back from the mountains today were waiting for them at Tang Stream Gap. They wanted to join. Tseng-fu also deputed five of the members who had to go home to "conscript" a "new soldier" each. The brigade definitely had to be expanded.

That night, after everyone went to bed, Tseng-fu couldn't repress his excitement. His friend Iron Egg Li from Kuan Creek Hamlet was sleeping on the floor on a pallet of wheat straw. Tseng-fu pulled him up and invited him to the grog shop diagonally opposite the broom purchasing station of the supply and marketing co-op. Tseng-fu had tossed and turned, unable to sleep, and now he thought of this splendid way to give vent to his emotion.

"Come on, Iron Egg, my treat. Let's drink, just the two of us. A crowd's too noisy."

"What's the idea?"

"I'm feeling fine. I've got to have a couple. *Tien*, this poor-peasant and hired-hand brigade of ours — what a spirit, what a battle posture!"

Iron Egg understood. This was no ordinary invitation. He couldn't very well refuse when such noble sentiments were involved. Although at the moment Iron Egg was more interested in sleep than liquor, he went along out of respect for the leader of the brigade.

Sitting down on a bench beside the counter of the grog shop, they ordered two ounces of sixty proof and five cents' worth of dried bean curd. Beneath the tattered cotton-padded overcoat thrown over his shoulders Tseng-fu was wearing only a thin singlet. After their third jug, Tseng-fu placed his arms on the counter and rested his head upon them. The hair on his shaven pate had grown quite long again.

"What's the matter?" thirty-year-old Iron Egg, his face flushed with drink, demanded.

An innocent smile graced Tseng-fu's usually stern visage. "I'm a little dizzy."

"A pretty thing. Here we are guzzling when neither of us knows how to drink —"

"I'll be all right. It's just that I was drinking too fast. You're supposed to sip the stuff."

"Shall I help you back to the inn?"

"There's nothing wrong with me. It'll pass in a minute."

And sure enough, in a short time, Tseng-fu recovered. They paid their bill and left. Although Tseng-fu was still a bit high, the tread of his hemp sandals was firm. This ordinary peasant had the air of a man determined to accomplish big things. He addressed the young winter wheat in the darkness.

"Wait till my boy Tsai-tsai grows up. You'll see what a place our China will be then."

Returning to the inn, Tseng-fu and Iron Egg slept soundly. Thanks to the three jugs of sixty proof, the leader of the broom porters' brigade didn't even turn once all night.

Early the next morning, before sunrise, twenty-five men gathered in Tang Stream Gap. Tseng-fu had received a bad

report from Frog Flat. His thin dark face was deathly white, his powerful hands shook, his cheeks trembled, and he ground his teeth. As he led his men into the mountains, Tseng-fu's shoulders sagged, his arms hung limply, his head drooped forward. Everyone was amazed.

He had heard that Su-fang, wife of Shuan-shuan, a member of Sheng-pao's mutual-aid team, had gone into Yao's handsome compound. This news was a severe blow. The rich peasant was tough. He dared to take on the team of Communist Party member Sheng-pao as his adversary.

Rage sapped Tseng-fu's vitality. Worry over Sheng-pao's team made him wretched. He was simply in no condition for a long trek into the hills. The leader of the expedition fell behind his men.

He walked with his head down. When they stopped to rest at White Poplar Divide and Stone Needles he said nothing about the history of social development. In the thatch-roofed inn by the lone pine he no longer did the cooking. As soon as they arrived he threw himself down and pillowed his head on his arms. His expression was downcast, dark, unhappy. Angrily pulling up handfuls of dried grass, he spoke to no one. The men asked whether he was sick. He shook his head. The lively porters' brigade became dull and flat. What was so terrible that the staunch Tseng-fu should suffer so?

At noon the following day in South Millstone Ravine although he helped the others tie brooms together Tseng-fu made no bundles for himself. To Iron Egg he said:

"You take this batch back to Tang Stream Gap, brother."

"What's wrong?"

"I'm too tired."

"All right, brother. Rest here a couple of days."

"I can't. I have to go to North Grindstone Gap and find Sheng-pao." Tseng-fu swallowed miserably. He told the men to go along and not bother about him. He said he would be better soon.

In North Grindstone Gap the bamboo cutters, their faces caked with dust, returned from the slopes to their thatched shelter on the withered grass clearing. As usual, after consuming the millet gruel Jen the Fourth had prepared, they settled down to watch three games of chess before trimming and smoking the bamboo.

A white cloth, marked to represent a chess board, was laid on the dry grass. On all sides were piles of cut bamboo and finished brooms. Solemn, ruddy-complected Ta-hai was playing the red pieces. Short, stout and cheerful Iron Lock Wang was playing the blacks. Smiling, each took his place.

Ready to contribute their wisdom, the highly-strung "advisors", who at times were known to grab a piece agitatedly and make the move themselves, lined up behind the players. Behind these, leaning forward, their hands resting on their knees, the "battle fans" formed a second tier — they were consumed with interest in the struggle about to be joined in this ravine in the wooded mountains. Still further to the rear, in the third tier, stood the pipe-smoking "appreciators" — these had come to amuse themselves and slough off the weariness they had brought back from chopping bamboo trees on the slope by observing the changes of Ta-hai and Iron Lock's facial expression during the course of the game. Except for Jen the Fourth who was scrubbing the cooking cauldron and Shuan-shuan who was nursing his bad foot, everyone had a place in one of the tiers, including Yu-wan and Sheng-pao. Yu-wan was an "advisor", Sheng-pao an "appreciator".

To the transformers of the world — the true labouring people, life is pleasurable in almost any environment.

Sheng-pao had learned chess when he was hiding out from Kuomintang conscription in the days before Liberation. But here in this wild ravine, surrounded by a dozen or more men, he had no desire to play. It wasn't that he looked down on the others' skill — he just hadn't touched a chess piece since the people's republic was established. He felt that chess at times was very trying. And when you got into a tight spot it was even irritating. But watching others play was always

interesting, relaxing, amusing. On a job you had only to glance at Sheng-pao to see that he was a leader. He took more pains and was busier than anyone. But ordinarily his appearance was in no way outstanding. He looked the same as everyone else. Today, wearing a tattered shirt, his head wrapped in a blue turban, a pipe in his mouth, his feet bound in felt strips and shod in straw sandals, he stood by quietly without the slightest hint of pride.

Red-faced Ta-hai and Iron Lock Wang played a hilarious game. If they were at Big Crossroads instead of in the mountain forest no one would have bothered to watch. Although Iron Lock often placed his chariots right beneath the hoofs of Ta-hai's horses, Ta-hai didn't have sense enough to trample them. Ta-hai made several illegal moves, but Iron Lock seemed quite unaware. Sheng-pao observed everything, but only pressed his lips together to conceal a grin.

It was plainly a momentous battle. Soon Iron Lock was favoured by fortune, and he cornered one of Ta-hai's horses. The cheerful Iron Lock grew more cheerful still. His face wreathed in smiles, his hands embracing his knees, he sat on a big rock, his short chubby body swaying as he gazed complacently at the birches on the opposite mountain and the white clouds drifting across the blue sky. Poor Ta-hai was more solemn than ever. Lowering his head, he racked his brains: How could he rescue his encircled horse?

Solemnity is an excellent quality to possess when coping with a situation. But Sheng-pao thought it was overdoing things to be so grave about a chess game. Ta-hai, obviously, was much too serious. He was afraid of losing men right from the start. The result was that he was always on the defensive. Perspiration stood out on the tip of his nose, and his ruddy face was flushed. Sheng-pao couldn't help laughing.

After being beaten two games in a row, Ta-hai was very upset. Yu-wan pointed out a few moves with his stubby pipe, and Ta-hai accepted his advice. Iron Lock's smile faded. As he confronted his dilemma it was his turn to be solemn.

Iron Lock was definitely in trouble. Both contestants were left with only one chariot each. Then, somehow, the shrewd Iron Lock took Ta-hai's chariot. Ta-hai wanted to retract his last move. Iron Lock wouldn't allow it. He was absolutely firm. The young fellow was evidently determined to win all three games, whether Ta-hai had Yu-wan for chief "advisor" or not. Sheng-pao urged Ta-hai to concede defeat and start again. They could add another game today.

"No. Iron Lock's retracted moves too. I'm not the only one," red-faced Ta-hai insisted stubbornly.

Holding the red chariot in his hand, Iron Lock leaned his cheerful face across the board and asked with a smile:

"Who's retracted the most, Ta-hai, you or me?"

"Have you retracted any moves or not? Tell me that."

"I have."

"All right then. Even one retraction is still a retraction. If you hadn't taken back any moves, I wouldn't say a word."

"Nothing doing," Iron Lock said adamantly. "You've got a horse to my horse and two cannons to my one. I can't let you retract that chariot."

Yu-wan joined the argument, "Shame, shame," he said to Iron Lock, scraping his cheek mockingly with his finger.

The chief "advisor" to the opposition also took part. "What was shameful about capturing a man's chariot?" he demanded. Yu-wan reached out to upset the chess board and Iron Lock's "advisor" grabbed his hand. The appreciative spectators, standing around, were highly satisfied. Holding their pipes, they laughed, their chests heaving with every delighted chuckle.

In the forest on the distant western mountain a leopard roared beneath the slanting rays of the setting sun. Ordinarily this would have attracted attention and aroused discussion. But now no one heeded the animal's menacing cry.

Everyone was concentrating on the dispute over the chariot.

"What's this all about?" a firm voice behind them queried.

The men looked. It was Tseng-fu. *Aiyaya*, the whole crowd, in clothes ripped by brambles, immediately rushed to Tseng-fu, who was wearing felt foot bindings and straw sandals

for climbing mountain paths, and surrounded him enthusiastically. All interest in the chariot was gone. Even solemn Ta-hai and cheerful Iron Lock forgot their dispute and rose hurriedly to welcome their good friend Tseng-fu, Iron Lock still clutching Ta-hai's chariot.

Good old Tseng-fu. He was a Frog Flat man. He came from where their parents, wives, kids, thatched cottages, land, draught oxen, pigs and chickens were. His appearance in the narrow mountain ravine was like the sudden arrival of an emissary from the world of men. He had come just at the right time. Happily smiling, everyone felt like embracing him and kissing his thin serious face.

"*Aiya.*" Seeing all his friends again, the dejected Tseng-fu couldn't help being a bit stimulated. "Who says it's ten *li* to here from South Millstone Ravine? If I were selling the distance, I wouldn't let it go for less than twenty."

Laughing, brows dancing, the others all answered at once: "It's different here than on the plain."

"In the mountains the roads all twist and turn like an old vine."

"And they've got plenty of branches. Ha-ha. What did you expect?"

Everyone wanted to know about the outside world: "How were the crops growing? Had the rice sprouts emerged yet? Did it rain again after Clear and Bright? Was the price of grain up or down in Huangpao Town? . . . Sheng-pao asked whether the agronomist had arrived. Ta-hai inquired whether his wife had any more stomach-aches. Yu-yi asked what kind of calf his cow had dropped — bull or heifer?

The steady Tseng-fu, holding in one hand the spear he had borrowed from an innkeeper in South Millbase Ravine, his tattered padded jacket draped over his other arm, answered each of the questions, calmly, unflurriedly, to the best of his ability. When he didn't know, he said he didn't know. Or he explained that he was only repeating what he had heard others say. After all he hadn't been back to Frog Flat since

he and his porters' brigade began transporting brooms. Everyone admired Tseng-fu's responsible attitude.

"You'd better put your padded jacket on," Jen the Fourth urged. "You're over-heated from walking. It's easy to catch a chill when you suddenly stop. These mountains here and our plain are not the same."

A grateful expression on his face, Tseng-fu took his advice.

Big clumsy Shuan-shuan, leaning on a stick, came limping out of the thatched shelter. His injured foot was swathed in gauze and bandages. He didn't dare touch it to the ground.

"What are you doing?" scolded Jen the Fourth. "Your infection has only just been cured. Is this what you call being careful?"

"Go back," Yu-wan, captain of the militia, ordered. "Tseng-fu won't be leaving tonight. You'll have plenty of time to talk. What's your hurry?"

Tseng-fu, knowing that Shuan-shuan's wife had gone into the handsome compound of rich peasant Yao, turned deathly pale. His thin serious face became waxen, his deep-set eyes filled with moisture.

Everyone assumed that the good-hearted Tseng-fu was touched at the sight of the injury Shuan-shuan had suffered here in the mountain forest. Who connected his reaction with Su-fang? Comfortingly, the men assured Tseng-fu:

"His wound's not septic any more."

"He'll be better soon."

"In another five or six days he'll be able to climb the slope again."

Taking a grip on himself, Tseng-fu asked Sheng-pao unhappily: "How is it the innkeeper in South Millbase Ravine told me Shuan-shuan was making eighteen brooms a day?"

"I started that rumour," Sheng-pao replied with a wry smile. "I was afraid word would spread to the outside. His father would be awfully worried if he knew."

Tseng-fu stared, open-mouthed. So that was it. He said to Shuan-shuan: "Go back inside and rest. Everything is

fine at home. Your parents are in good health. Su-fang is making shoes to sell."

The sturdy Shuan-shuan was delighted. His thick lips moving, he asked: "How's my ma? Are her eyes still watering?"

"She's a little better," Tseng-fu lied. "Once the spring dust storms of Clear and Bright are past, your ma is always more comfortable."

All the peasants on the grassy flat with piles of bamboo and brooms were very glad to hear this. Jen the Fourth wanted to prepare a meal for their visitor, but Tseng-fu said he had eaten before leaving South Millbase Ravine.

The trimming and smoking of the bamboo commenced.

"Sheng-pao, come over here a minute. I want to ask you something," Tseng-fu said cautiously.

Putting down his trimming knife, Sheng-pao walked off with him. These two peasants who were planning to control the fate of Frog Flat, their feet bound with felt strips and clad in straw sandals, crossed the flat of withered grass and picked a path through the brush to the secret depths of the ravine.

Their arrival startled the little denizens of the place — the squirrels and rabbits, who rustled off hurriedly through the undergrowth. Beyond a turn was a wild pear grove, not visible from the other side of the thatch-roofed shelter. Here the two men squatted down. Tseng-fu placed a hand on Sheng-pao's knee, swallowed painfully and told him the news about Su-fang. His deep-set eyes fixed on Sheng-pao's face, which was plainly thinner than before he entered the mountains, Tseng-fu demanded through clenched teeth:

"Is that Yao hateful or not? Is that blind old Wang infuriating or not?"

Sheng-pao lowered his head and sank into thought, his fingers snapping a twig to bits. Tseng-fu couldn't guess what was on his mind. Then Sheng-pao gazed at the endless mountain forest and cried:

"*Aiyaya,* Blind Wang, how could you have been so heartless? I was doing my best for your son and daughter-in-law.

I was trying to help your family over its hard times. But you had to ruin everything, you blind old devil. You're a disgrace to Chairman Mao. You're a disgrace to the Communist Party. You're a disgrace to me, and Shuan-shuan and Su-fang. You're a disgrace to everybody, you blind old devil."

Sheng-pao's twig-snapping fingers trembled with rage.

Misery clouding his eyes, Sheng-pao stared across the mountain valley towards the western peaks, encrimsoned by the setting sun. He thought and thought. Then he remembered the words of Comrade Wang, secretary of the Communist Party district committee, and his mind took another turn. Reflectively he said to Tseng-fu:

"I suppose the blind old devil is more to be pitied than blamed. When he was about twenty, they beat his backside to a pulp in the county magistrate's yamen. He wandered around central Shensi for two whole years before settling down in Frog Flat. For the next fifty years he was a faithful running dog of the landlords. It wasn't anything he thought out. He simply acted from habit. He flattered people who had money, feared those who had power, and looked down on the poor — those were the habits he had learned. We shouldn't expect too much of him, Tseng-fu. He's been lying on his bed for nearly twenty years with his coffin on the floor beside him, in case he needed it in a hurry. He just hasn't used it yet. He's given Shuan-shuan and Su-fang nothing but trouble. If only he'd crept into that coffin a little earlier, they'd still be a loving husband and wife."

Sheng-pao's bramble-scratched face was grave as he said this, and his voice was soft. Tseng-fu was very moved. He sighed.

"But that Yao deserves to be killed," he said angrily.

Sheng-pao shook his head. "We can't blame everything on him. Yao is a rich peasant who won't accept the government's policy. Of course he'll do bad things. It would be strange if he didn't. From his standpoint, he has to sabotage us."

This mocking comment left Tseng-fu rather confused.

"Whose fault is it, then?"

"Ours, for not doing our job well enough. We've got to work like blazes to get mutual aid and co-operation running smoothly, Tseng-fu. Secretary Wang says our biggest burden is the backward ideas in people's minds and the handful of backward persons among us. We've got to educate them — there's no other way. We've got to teach, and teach some more. Take your brother Tseng-jung. He's teamed up with rich peasant Yao. What else can you do except educate him — beat him up? Accuse him in court?"

Tseng-fu smiled wryly, then he said in a glum voice: "Su-fang's gone into Yao's compound — no good can come of that. My four-family seasonal mutual-aid team has broken up. Now, if anything should happen to your team —"

"Don't you worry about us." Sheng-pao flung away the pieces of twig he was holding in his right hand. His voice cut in as decisively as the chop of a kitchen knife. "Yao can't do anything to my team, Tseng-fu. Just let him try."

Sheng-pao's firm manner, his contemptuous attitude towards Yao, brought strength back to the plucky Tseng-fu. So that was the stuff Communists were made of. Tseng-fu was filled with admiration.

That night they shared a quilt in the thatched shelter. Tseng-fu rose at dawn the next day and returned to South Millbase Ravine. Usually he took back sixteen brooms on each trip. This time he carried only ten. Tied in a "V" with the handles to the front and the twigs to the rear, the brooms rested on his shoulders with his head in between.

"Why so few?" an innkeeper in South Millbase Ravine queried laughingly.

"I want to reach Tang Stream Gap before dark. That's a hundred *li*. I'd never do it with a heavy load," Tseng-fu explained. He strode off cheerfully.

He arrived at the broom purchasing station just as Iron Egg Li was delivering the loads brought in by the rest of the porters' brigade.

24

Spring in 1953 was exactly the same as the one thousand nine hundred and fifty-two springs that had gone before.

In spring of 1953 the Wei River rose but quickly fell again. The third and fourth lunar months seldom had much rain, and the river level dropped to the lowest point of the year.

In spring of 1953 the Chinling Mountains changed their snowy garments for a garb of deep grey. This was soon replaced by an alluring green bedecked with flowers of red and yellow and white. Now the range — bounteous wetnurse of the peasants south of the Wei — was at her most entrancing. By summer she would be dressed in a gown of blue-green jade, her majesty and grandeur arousing the admiration of all.

In spring of 1953 the peasants gazed at their mother the central Shensi plain. It was a time of sunshine and gentle breezes, of trees and shrubs bursting into glorious blossom. The hills, flats and paddy fields vied with each other in greenness, the land gave off an intimate earthy smell. Viewed from the loess plateau above Hsiapao Township, the plain stretches between two mountain ranges as far as the eye can see. Oh, fertile lovely fields of cotton and wheat, what clever craftsman fashioned you so vast and regular? You tombs of Tang and Han scattered on either side of the Wei, remnants of dynasties that existed one thousand, two thousand years ago, although you have a long impressive history, there is nothing stale and hoary about you. A charming land, this, in the precise centre of China's latitudes.

But in spring of 1953, people's feelings were very different from what they had been during the previous one thousand nine hundred and fifty-two springs.

What had they done, these historic personages sleeping in the tombs of Tang and Han? They studied and created many laws and rules and regulations. Dressed in helmets and armour, spears in hand, they fought many battles. They wrote dignified essays and beautiful poems. Some performed great deeds, some committed terrible mistakes. Some, although they did a definite amount of good, also did a certain amount of harm.

But not one of them ever had any connection with a Five-Year Plan.

Spring of 1953 was the first spring of China's First Five-Year Plan for socialist economic construction. After the frozen earth thawed, many were the big construction projects that began, the new railway lines that were started, the teams of surveyors who set forth. China, which had been in the merciless grasp of foreign capitalists and the Kuomintang government for years and years, was commencing planned construction at last.

In the spring of 1953, new building sites, surrounded by fences of wire and bamboo, appeared in the outskirts of Sian. Red merit banners floated above the competing work teams. The decrepit ancient capital began to regain its youth. Sewers were dug, streets were widened and paved. In the city and in the suburbs, vehicles laden with steel girders, cement, timber, sand and gravel jammed roads laid when Sian was the famed Chang An of antiquity.

In spring of 1953 how many army and local government cadres bid farewell to comrades with whom they had been through thick and thin together for years and shook hands with newly met comrades at factory construction sites? How many labouring men in town and country left their pedicabs, their hoes and mattocks, and came with workers' badges on their chests to where railways and large projects were a-building?

In spring of 1953 the sound of explosives did not mean war, trucks on the road were not an army supply convoy, a red

banner did not indicate a company, a crowd was not a rear-line gang of civilian workers, shouts did not signify a charge.

In spring of 1953 all China's vast land was a huge panorama, a symphony, collective dance, of the First Five-Year Plan.

Spring of 1953 — another turning point in history.

Kai-hsia, twenty-one-year-old student in the Hsiapao Village primary school, was full of dreams about China's industrialization and her own future. Today, in high spirits, she arrived at the county seat on the Lunghai Railway, where she intended to take the entrance examination for the state-owned Textile Mill No. 3.

At the south gate of the county seat, the Weiyuan Flour Mill on the left bank of the Lu River, and the Weiyuan Cotton Gin on the right bank of the river, greeted the country girl from the thatched cottage in the rice fields at the foot of Mount Chungnan with tall smokestacks belching thick black smoke and an ear-throbbing roar of machinery. At the north gate of the county seat the country girl who had her heart set on working in the city was greeted by the massive steel and cement structure of the railway bridge across the Lu River and the steam whistle of the locomotives in the Weiyuan station. Kai-hsia was very thrilled. Carrying a bundle of flat-cakes her mother had made, she had strode vigorously for forty *li*, her face perspiring. But she didn't feel a bit tired. Kai-hsia gazed with shining eyes at the city her forebears had built upon the great plain.

Determined to become an industrial worker, she walked excitedly through the south gate.

Like a drop of water fallen into the Wei, Kai-hsia was immediately swallowed up by the throngs of girls crowding the streets. *Aiya*, who knew how many had come? The streets, the lanes, were a mass of blue student tunics. Heads of black glossy hair, bobbed or in plaits, moved and undulated before Kai-hsia's eyes. From every neighbouring district, most of the girls were the same age as she. A few were a bit older, some were much younger — about the age she had been when she

took part in the conference of young land reform activists in 1950. Over a thousand girls and boys had attended that conference, but during recess the streets were never so crowded as now.

Kai-hsia proceeded towards the compound used jointly by the labour department and the industry and commerce department of the county people's government. She began to feel a bit doubtful. The first question mark rose in her intelligent mind.

A group of country girls were conversing softly beside a pole of a high-power transmission line in front of a draper's shop. What were they saying? They had come into the city early. Perhaps they knew something about the textile mill entrance exam.

Bundle of flatcakes in hand, her clothes covered with the dust of her journey, Kai-hsia drew closer.

Aiya, the quota for Weiyuan County was only two hundred and eighty girls, but over three thousand had applied. There were more than a thousand applicants from one district alone. Even girls who had never had any formal schooling poured into the city. Some came against their parents' wishes. Some came secretly.

Strength or weakness ordinarily have physical origins, but under special circumstances they may be psychological reactions. Because there were so many passengers, poor Kai-hsia had not been able to get on a cart that served as a bus at Huangpao Town. She hoped she would have better luck at other stops along the road – Lu River Bridge or Toupao Town – but she didn't. The stubborn girl had walked all the way, and as fast as the wind. A youngster hurrying towards a new life, she hadn't felt tired. But when she heard this disturbing news, the energy drained out of her. Kai-hsia's pretty feet went numb in her plaid-cloth shoes. Her shapely legs in her student-blue trousers began to ache. She wasn't used to walking long distances.

Kai-hsia sighed. On numb feet and aching legs she dragged herself towards North Street.

A troubling thought assailed her: Getting into the textile mill wasn't going to be easy. She had set out "with drums beating and banners flying" to take the entrance exam. But suppose she didn't pass? How could she face people in Frog Flat? What would Sheng-pao and Hsiu-lan think of her? "A progressive-minded girl, a Youth Leaguer, why isn't she taking part in the country's industrialization?" Kai-hsia's tender cheeks burned at the prospect.

But then she remembered the encouraging words of Chen-shan, chairman of the village deputies to the township council: "Communists and Youth Leaguers, both male or female, are welcomed and wanted in every part of the country. Why? Because, just like here in our village they're the bones, and the people the flesh. Don't you understand that?" Chen-shan's self-confident voice still rang in her ears. She knew that she would be accepted by Textile Mill No. 3 no matter how many girls were taking the exam. On her application form she had not only written that she was of poor peasant stock, but that she was in the Communist Youth League. What posts had she held? Member of her Youth League branch committee.

Squeezing through the group of girls into the still more crowded intersection, Kai-hsia proceeded north. In front of a grocery store, she halted. She began to wonder whether she wasn't being rather despicable in her thinking. When she and the chairman of the village deputies had been walking alone down the grassy path through the paddy fields of Frog Flat, his comment on the special advantages of Communists and Youth Leaguers in seeking jobs had sounded correct enough. But now, with so many girls, all wanting to work in the textile mill like herself, she sensed that it was selfish and out of keeping with her usual spirit. She hadn't joined the Youth League to be given an advantage over the masses. Suddenly she understood much more clearly than she had at the time why Chen-shan had agreed to being alotted A-1 paddy fields during land reform.

Aiyaya, chairman Chen-shan, when you were filling our Kai-hsia's head with noble ideas all spring, could it be that you mixed in a few vulgar ones as well?

An experienced person can decide by a little thought whether another person is correct or not, and to what extent. Unfortunately Kai-hsia had very little experience in life. At times she had to rely entirely on her emotions. Since her naive faith in Chen-shan was already habitual, only the emotional impact of some new circumstance could prove whether this faith was justified.

But besides having been influenced by Chen-shan, she had also been influenced by Secretary Lu, Sheng-pao and other Communists. Standing before the door of a photographer's shop, the pure but innocent Kai-hsia wondered. Not whether she could pass the exam, but whether it was a good sign for such a huge crowd of girls to turn out to take the exam. Was it an indication of progressiveness on their part? Now many questions rose in her mind.

Halting before a stationery shop, Kai-hsia regretted that she hadn't talked with Secretary Lu before leaving Hsiapao. She was very sorry. When he hailed her on the street, she had childishly avoided him. Ah, Kai-hsia, you're so young.

Be that as it may, carrying her mimeographed letter of introduction from the Huangpao District authorities and her preliminary physical examination certificate from the Huangpao Town health clinic, she went to register at the county labour office. They told her all the girls from Huangpao District were staying in a house the labour department had borrowed on South Street.

After registering, Kai-hsia felt a little dazed, as though she had lost something. Emerging from the office, she wiped her perspiring face with her handkerchief and pushed through a crowd of girls waiting in a courtyard shaded by a few locust trees. The usually progressive Youth Leaguer felt disturbed and rather downcast. Worry made her thirsty. She longed for a drink of water. But first she had to go to South Street and find the girls from Hsiapao and see what they knew about

the situation. Only then would she feel easy enough in her mind to go to a tea-house and buy some boiled water and eat her flatcakes.

Irritably, she elbowed a path through the streams of girls entering and leaving the compound gate.

"Kai-hsia, Kai-hsia, is that you?"

Kai-hsia looked around, her long braids swinging as she turned her head. Who was calling her?

A tall slim woman in a tunic and trousers came towards her through the crowd. She seized Kai-hsia's free hand in her long slender fingers, smiling fondly. Kai-hsia recognized her — Comrade Ya-mei of the Youth League county committee. During the conference of young land reform activists, she had joined the discussion group from Huangpao District. Later she had come to Hsiapao Township several times on various assignments. She was the wife of one of the county leaders — Kai-hsia couldn't remember who.

"I haven't seen you for two years. How tall you've grown. You're a real young lady. Are you here to take the textile mill exam too?" Comrade Ya-mei pulled Kai-hsia off to one side out of the way. As friendly as if they had never parted, she rested one hand affectionately on Kai-hsia's shoulder.

"Yes," Kai-hsia admitted uncomfortably. Her face coloured.

"Have you broken that engagement yet? I remember you saying your father and mother had engaged you to someone before Liberation but that you didn't want to go through with it. Is that right?"

"That's right. We called it off."

Ya-mei's motherly young face beamed. "When?" she asked, her eyes smiling.

"This spring, during the movement to carry out the new Marriage Law."

Comrade Ya-mei's two rows of pretty, even teeth gleamed in a laugh. "Alert little minx. You certainly know how to grab your chance. Have you got a new boy friend?"

Kai-hsia gave an embarrassed smile. "No."

"Aha, so that's your plan. Now that you've broken your engagement you want to go to Sian and be a factory worker, is that it?" Comrade Ya-mei asked teasingly. She tenderly patted Kai-hsia's shoulder.

The girl's large eyes searched her fair-skinned face with its sprinkling of freckles, trying to read her reaction to this possibility. But she couldn't tell whether Ya-mei approved or not.

"I want to take part in our country's construction," Kai-hsia stammeringly explained, still probing for the other's view.

But Ya-mei didn't want to talk about this. It was almost as if she didn't consider it worth discussing. The side of the street was quite crowded, and she led Kai-hsia further away, to the shade of a flowering locust. She warmly commended Sheng-pao for his bold acceptance of the challenge by Tawang Village at the county-wide meeting of mutual-aid team leaders in the first lunar month, saying that his courageous act had been a considerable incentive to the other delegates, and that several of the county leaders had thought him a delightful boy. Even she, Ya-mei, who had met many young fellows in her work in the countryside, found him particularly spirited. The enthusiastic county cadre remembered that Kai-hsia and Sheng-pao were from the same village, but she didn't know that they were secretly in love.

"How is Comrade Sheng-pao's mutual-aid team getting on?" she inquired.

Kai-hsia blushed.

"They've gone into the mountains to cut bamboo brooms."

"Been up there long?"

"About two weeks."

"How many are they?"

"A dozen or so."

"They're really all right," said Ya-mei approvingly. She gazed off at Mount Chungnan as if trying to fathom its mystery.

Comrade Ya-mei invited Kai-hsia to the Youth League county committee office. But Kai-hsia, uneasy and depressed,

excused herself, saying she had something to do. She promised to come later.

"All right, Kai-hsia, you attend to your business. I'll be at the office. Come when you have time," Ya-mei urged.

Kai-hsia took her hand. "Comrade Ya-mei—"

"What's the trouble?" The older woman's penetrating eyes swept Kai-hsia's unhappy countenance.

"Why are so many girls applying to work in the textile this year?"

"Of course industry needs a lot of people," Ya-mei replied seriously. "That's a fact. China's youth are eagerly joining our economic construction—that's also a fact. But it seems to me that most of these girls aren't satisfied with country life; they don't want to marry country boys. . . . The C.P. Central Committee and the State Council have instructed us to persuade the young people not to move into the cities blindly. The directive reached the county yesterday. But by then the textile mill's call for workers had already been issued. It was too late for us to do anything about that. We'll just have to charge it up to experience. Next time, we won't do it this way."

Kai-hsia blushed a deeper shade of red. She never thought she'd find herself among the non-progressives. Kai-hsia had always striven to excel, and was very sensitive. She hated herself for having believed the chairman of the village deputies. Chen-shan had been so extremely confident of his own eternal and exclusive correctness that he had fooled Kai-hsia completely.

Observing Kai-hsia's distressed appearance, Comrade Ya-mei assumed she was worrying that she might not pass the entrance exam. Soothingly, like a big sister, she urged:

"Don't feel badly, Kai-hsia. It won't be easy to be chosen this year; too many girls are taking the test. Also, the county Party committee has decided against picking a large proportion of Youth Leaguers. If we suddenly took a lot of Youth League girls off the farms, it would influence the work there. What's more, the other girls would be resentful. It's a ques-

tion of social employment. The Central Committee's directive orders us to give preference to town and city girls who haven't passed the qualifying exams for middle school and who have no jobs. As to country girls, we're going back to taking them into industry only in an organized way, according to plan. The directive says that our experience in a number of big cities shows that holding factory entrance exams in the various county seats has had a bad effect. I'm just telling this to you. You needn't spread it around. Keep your eyes open; see the situation as a whole. If you pass the exam, all right. If you don't, never mind. You're a Youth Leaguer. You can do your bit for the Party and the people wherever you are."

There, you see? Didn't the facts prove that Kai-hsia's instinctive reaction was right? All good Communists and Youth Leaguers have this instinct; it has nothing to do with age or political level. Their opposites are those who think only of themselves and care nothing about society.

"What does social employment mean?" Kai-hsia asked.

"It means jobs, living on wages. Right now industrial workers are earning more than peasants, so people from the country are moving blindly into the cities. Did you take part in the Party rectification studies, Kai-hsia? You did? Then you know that only after we wipe out the differences between town and country will we end discontent with country life among the peasants. Our society is complicated, and not everyone's political consciousness is the same."

"Thank you, Comrade Ya-mei." Kai-hsia said goodbye, and they parted.

After taking leave of Comrade Ya-mei, Kai-hsia was once more swallowed up by the crowds of black-haired girls dressed in student blue. Her feminine weakness again predominated. She wanted to cry. She felt such a fool. No wonder when she announced that she was thinking of applying to work in the textile mill that day in the vegetable field watchman's shed outside Huangpao, Sheng-pao had responded so coldly. He was absolutely right. He should have given her a contemptuous stare. The last time she came to the county seat, in

the winter of 1950, she had been one of over a thousand young activists. She had felt honoured. Today, in the spring of 1953, she had come again, but this time as one of thousands of girls dissatisfied with life in the country.

Of course when you analysed the matter carefully, it wasn't quite so simple. Her application to join the mill wasn't entirely due to her own desire. It was mostly because of someone else. At first she had been hesitant, reluctant. Only after she failed in her talk with Sheng-pao, did she finally decide. If he had said just one word against it that day, would she have come bumbling into the county seat? Sheng-pao was as straight as a young poplar on the bank of the Tang Stream, but she hadn't expected he'd be so brusque where their love was concerned.

She deserved her bad luck, Kai-hsia thought. Her emotional reactions and the impression she gave others all stemmed from her dissatisfaction with country life. Was it factory wages that attracted her, a daughter of a village widow? Did she want to marry a city boy? Did she care nothing about love in marriage? The money they would earn every month, the red leather shoes and the smart narrow-legged trousers she could buy — was that all marriage meant to her?

How cheap. How crude. To think she could give people such an impression. Was there no place in Weiyuan where she could be alone? She was dying to have a good cry. A big city like this, and nowhere to weep. It certainly was exasperating.

Yet at the same time Kai-hsia thought — she wasn't that kind of a person at all. It was Chen-shan who was crude. He had been urging her all spring to take the mill exam. He spoke very progressively — for the sake of national industrialization, Youth Leaguers ought to respond to the Party's call. But is that what the Party and government wanted him to do? When they asked him to lead the mutual-aid teams, to organize jobs for the peasants who were having a hard time so as to tide them over till the summer crops began coming in, his response had been cool. But when he came to her compound

every day with his big rice bowl and small plate of vegetables and orated about something that had nothing to do with his work — industrialization — then he was full of ardour. His attitude was enthusiastic, his words were revolutionary, his concern seemed heart-felt. The apparent sincerity and rectitude of this hard-working courageous older man did not permit Kai-hsia to doubt him. Yet actually Chen-shan's ideas and concepts were an enormous distance from the correct policies of the Communist Party. How Kai-hsia regretted her immaturity and ignorance.

Now she understood. The chairman might be a very good farmer, but he certainly wasn't a good Communist, as she had always believed. Youth Leaguers didn't take part in the township Party branch meeting at which Chen-shan was criticized in the winter of 1952. But Kai-hsia heard that this leader of the poor peasants in the Frog Flat land reform had received a bit of criticism, and she had felt sorry for him. Now she realized that the investigation of Chen-shan during the subsequent Party rectification movement probably had not been very thorough. Could it have been out of regard for the prestige he had built up in the land reform? Kai-hsia remembered Secretary Wang saying that the prestige of a Communist was not his personal property, it belonged to the Party. The Party utilized the prestige of its individual members to influence the masses. At the time, Kai-hsia hadn't caught the meaning of Secretary Wang's words, but now she understood. He had been talking about Chen-shan. If it hadn't been for the lesson of her personal experience today, she might not have seen through him for years.

Good. She was in no hurry now to visit the hostel on South Street. She had registered, but whether she took the test or not was another matter. Kai-hsia wanted to think it over. First she would drink some water and eat her flatcakes. She was terribly hungry and thirsty.

Having sorted out her ideas, Kai-hsia walked firmly into a tea-house on the corner. It was jammed with chattering country girls who had come to take the mill entrance exam.

Kai-hsia found an empty seat at the table farthest to the rear. She sat down, put her flatcakes on the table and wiped the perspiration from her red face with a handkerchief folded square. Here she could rest and cool off.

The other girls at the table looked shyly at this newcomer. Kai-hsia was quite well known. Mopping her face, she gazed around, not in the least embarrassed by their stares.

Suddenly she remembered the tea-house. She and Sheng-pao had been here the winter of 1950. They had sat at that table opposite.

It had been twilight in early winter. They had sat face to face, and heatedly discussed the Party's land reform policy, looking smilingly into each other's eyes. Sheng-pao had praised the wisdom of the Party's policy of relying on the poor peasants and hired hands, winning over the middle peasants, isolating the rich peasants, and attacking the landlords. The twenty-four-year-old peasant was tremendously impressed with the firm yet flexible, discriminating yet clear, tactics evolved from past experience and now used in the land reform movement. Kai-hsia, who was then only eighteen, listened round-eyed as Sheng-pao spoke admiringly of the Communist Party and Chairman Mao. She envied the good fortune of his sickly wife in having such an intelligent, robust young fellow for a husband. The craving for love was just beginning to bud in her, and she adored Sheng-pao. Were it not for the fact that both had a strong sense of social responsibility and were both of good character, they might very well have found a secluded corner in the city of Weiyuan and embraced and kissed. But instead they talked only of land reform. In their ardent revolutionary thoughts, there was no room for anything else.

It was a period of revolutionary storm. How many such experiences could a person hope for in one life-time? Recollections of those days were a perpetual encouragement to be daring and determined in the new situation today.

Now Kai-hsia wondered: "What brings these young peasants streaming into the city? What am I doing here? For one thing, there are too many applicants, for another, there's

a limit to the Youth Leaguers who'll be taken. If I fail the exam and go back to Hsiapao Township and be a girl just like all the others, I'll have lost my prestige. How will I be able to carry on my work in the Youth League?"

"Go back," she said to herself, speaking as a member of the Youth League branch committee. "Don't take the exam."

She took some flatcakes and drank some water. Her decision gave her strength. Kai-hsia started for home. If she could make Kuan Village before dark, she could spend the night with her married sister and go on to Frog Flat the next day.

A group of girls from Hsiapao Village were standing on the brick steps of a department store.

"Say, isn't that Kai-hsia?"

"Kai-hsia, where are you going in such a hurry?"

"All us girls from Hsiapao are living on the floor above this department store."

"Me, I'm going home," said Kai-hsia.

"What for?"

"I'm not taking the exam."

"Why not?"

"Too many applying."

The Hsiapao girls crowded around her.

"You ought to try."

"What have you got to lose?"

"Of all the girls from Hsiapao, you're the only one who's got a real chance."

Kai-hsia couldn't say that it was disgraceful to apply for work in a textile mill, nor could she reveal what Comrade Ya-mei had told her. She could only state that she didn't feel like taking the test. Breaking away from the girls, she walked on. She could hear their puzzled voices behind her:

"Now what in the world is wrong with Kai-hsia?"

Two years before, when Kai-hsia returned from the conference of young land reform activists in the county seat, she had been brimming with energy. Carrying her luggage on her

back, she had walked the whole forty *li* to Frog Flat. And even then, the persimmon tree compound couldn't hold her. She was burning to be out and around. Kai-hsia wanted to tell all the young fellows and girls in Fifth Village of Hsiapao Township everything she had learned about the Party's land reform policy immediately.

But today, though she had only walked from Kuan Village, she was quite listless. Her two braids hanging from her drooping head, she slipped soundlessly into the compound. Her mother, who was working in the vegetable garden outside the compound wall, looked up in surprise and called her name. But Kai-hsia didn't answer.

Entering the thatched cottage she tossed the cloth bag that still contained some flatcakes on the cupboard and flung herself down on the *kang*. She faced the wall, her back to the door. Kai-hsia was miserable. She should never have put on an act with Sheng-pao that day in the watchman's shed. She hadn't been fair to him, she really hadn't.

Her mother returned from the vegetable plot. Kai-hsia heard her leaning the hoe against the window-sill outside, then her familiar footsteps approached. Ma obviously had already seen from her manner that she hadn't passed the textile mill exam.

"Kai-hsia," her mother called uneasily.

The girl's long braids lay crookedly behind her upon the sleeping mat. She didn't reply.

"Are you hungry, dear?"

The head on the pillow shook negatively.

"Thirsty?"

Again Kai-hsia shook her head.

"Tired from walking too far?"

"Mm."

Ma sympathetically massaged her feet. Blinking, Widow Hsu tried to think of comforting words. With childish petulance Kai-hsia pulled her feet away.

"Leave me alone, will you?" the girl cried fretfully.

Ma sighed. She didn't know what to say or do. She wandered aimlessly about the room.

Lying face to the wall, Kai-hsia was angry at her mother. "It's all your fault," she thought. "You don't like Sheng-pao and you think I am just a thing to be bartered. I won't have you giving me to anyone else. I belong to Sheng-pao."

Kai-hsia felt much abused. She longed for Sheng-pao, struggling in the depths of the mountain forests. She had made him think that she didn't care for him. But she was sure he loved her, she had seen it in his eyes. Kai-hsia's tears began to flow — the tears she had been suppressing from Wei-yuan all the way to Frog Flat. She wiped them with her fingers.

Widow Hsu saw her weeping. At last she thought of something consoling.

"Don't feel bad, dear. If you didn't pass this time, you can take the exam again next time —"

Kai-hsia sat up abruptly. Her face was streaked with tears and her moist eyes glared.

"Who cares about next time? I didn't even take it this time. You and chairman Chen-shan urged me to go. You're also to blame." She plunged her head down on the pillow and wept. Kai-hsia's passionate outburst had nothing to do with the textile mill. It was Sheng-pao she was upset about. How could her mother, who spent her own childhood under the last of the feudal emperors, understand? Ashamed of her behaviour towards Sheng-pao, Kai-hsia sobbed aloud.

Widow Hsu was stunned by her daughter's violent response.

At dusk, when smoke from stoves cooking the evening meals drifted across the barley growing outside Frog Flat's thatched cottages, the peasants returned from their rice sprout beds. Hearing that Kai-hsia had come back from the county seat, Chen-shan put down his farm tools and walked over to the persimmon tree compound. He was eager to learn how she had fared in the textile mill exam.

"Is Kai-hsia home?" he trumpeted. Chen-shan was sure she would succeed before she left Frog Flat. He only wanted to confirm his opinion. The exam was merely a formality, he thought. Without it, girls who weren't members of the Youth

League would complain. Naturally the mill would pick as many Youth Leaguers as it could get. Then, if its quota were still unfilled, it might select a few non-members, but even these would have to be progressive in their thinking.

Kai-hsia's mother stopped Chen-shan in the middle of the courtyard. In a hurt tone she told him — Kai-hsia hadn't taken the entrance examination for the mill.

"I don't believe it," Chen-shan shouted. "I don't believe it. Those two girls from Hsiapao Village who went to work in a factory last year had less brains in their heads than Kai-hsia has in the heel of her foot."

He continued towards the cottage. "What's this all about? I want to ask her myself."

"She's gone to bed." Widow Hsu again blocked his path.

"So early?"

"She was so tired she wouldn't take a mouthful of food or drink. She's asleep now. The child's been travelling for three days. She's worn out."

The widow's agitated manner was quite persuasive.

"She really didn't take the exam?"

"Would I fool you, chairman? She cried when she came home."

Chen-shan's bristle-covered mouth opened wide. He was convinced. But that made him all the more anxious to learn the details. He wanted to hear everything about the mill exam. How could the situation turn out completely opposite to the famous Chen-shan's expectations? He just wouldn't accept it. The sky was still light. He refused to believe Kai-hsia had already gone to bed. Like the master of the household he commanded:

"Get her up. I want to criticize her."

"Good chairman —"

"Well?"

"It isn't wise to talk to her now."

"Why not?"

"She's very angry. Better wait till she gets over her stubborn temper." What could Widow Hsu do? She couldn't very well

say that Kai-hsia hated the whole world – the chairman included.

Chen-shan sucked his lips regretfully. He stared thoughtfully at the window of the thatched cottage. Obviously Kai-hsia's mother didn't want him to see the girl. Still sucking his lips, he walked away.

At the compound gate he turned around.

"Widow Hsu."

"Yes?"

"Did Kai-hsia cry because she couldn't pass the textile mill exam? Or was it –"

"She wouldn't tell me a thing," lied the widow. She believed in keeping peace with her neighbours.

"Ask her. Tonight, when it's dark, ask her," the chairman instructed. He was beginning to feel a bit uneasy. Who could have expected that so many girls would want to take the exam? He wondered if anyone in the county seat could have criticized the thin-skinned Kai-hsia.

The next morning just as it was turning light, a robin warbled in the persimmon tree, and Kai-hsia got up. Groping through the dark interior to the next room, she poured hot water from the thermos flask into her basin, added cold, and washed her face. Then she combed her hair, but without redoing her braids. By the time her mother hastily arose, Kai-hsia had already left with her school bag.

Kai-hsia hurried to Hsiu-lan's house. She was afraid she would miss her because she had got up late. She had to tell Hsiu-lan why she had gone to take the textile mill exam and then changed her mind. Kai-hsia wanted to explain what was in her heart, to win Hsiu-lan's sympathy and revive their close friendship. While Sheng-pao was still up in the mountains she was eager to make it clear to Hsiu-lan that her love for him was genuine. Kai-hsia didn't intend to say anything about Chen-shan's influence upon her. She didn't want to impair the relationship between two Frog Flat Communists. She would claim that applying to work in the mill was her mother's idea. She had only gone to please her.

Deep in thought, Kai-hsia walked down the grassy path through the morning dew. Before she knew it, she had reached the thatched cottage of old Liang the Third.

The compound gate was closed but not barred. Probably the old man was out picking manure on the road and had not yet returned. Comrade Han, the young agronomist who was using Sheng-pao's room, was still asleep.

Kai-hsia didn't go in. She walked around the compound wall to a point outside the window of the room where Hsiu-lan and her mother slept and called:

"Hsiu-lan. Hsiu-lan."

"Is that you, Kai-hsia?" Hsiu-lan's mother awakened. The grey-haired old woman held Tseng-fu's little son, Tsai-tsai, in her arms.

Her voice was friendly, kind, as if no coolness whatever existed between Kai-hsia and her daughter.

"Back from the county seat?" she asked joyfully. She said nothing about the textile mill exam.

"Yes," Kai-hsia replied, embarrassed.

"Hsiu-lan hasn't come home yet," the old woman said fondly. "She won't be going to the Hsiapao primary school any more. She's going to attend the school in North Poplar Village. She's transferring her Youth League membership too."

"What for?" Kai-hsia was surprised.

The old woman chuckled. "The only thing wrong with Hsiu-lan's future mother-in-law is worry. In the first place she's always thinking about her son. In the second place, Ming-shan was wounded in Korea and it's left his face scarred. She's worried that Hsiu-lan will call off the match. Well, you know Hsiu-lan. She switched over to the school in North Poplar Village and moved right in with her. That'll show her she's nothing to worry about," Hsiu-lan's mother laughed.

A delicious sweetness welled up in Kai-hsia's heart. Hsiu-lan, dear Hsiu-lan, you're pure gold. Your stubborn direct father, your loving virtuous mother, your courageous meticulous brother, have all contributed to the shaping of your noble

character. Kai-hsia realized more clearly than ever that her own mother was too materialistic. And Chen-shan, who had been her mentor, wasn't worthy of the respect she had given him so blindly.

Kai-hsia was not in the least ashamed. She was doubly pleased now that she had come back without taking the textile mill exam. It was right that she hadn't. Not only wasn't she ashamed — on the contrary she suddenly felt charged with vigour in this early hour of the morning. Hsiu-lan's behaviour inspired her. She ought to take Hsiu-lan as her model. Kai-hsia had become accustomed to listening to Chen-shan, but from now on she would do her own thinking. Why, she was twenty-one. Life was a serious proposition.

25

To Sheng-pao and Tseng-fu and the other poor peasants now struggling on the slopes of Mount Chungnan, the market had little appeal. In spring when supplies were low and grain prices rose, they had to go to market and buy. After the autumn harvest when grain prices fell, they went to market and sold. Otherwise, they stayed away. Why should they go? For one thing they had no time, for another they had no money.

It was easy enough for Pai, the loafer and former Kuomintang corporal, and his mistress Blue Moth. After a good meal of mutton and rolls in the market-town restaurant, they wandered about the streets till the sun was in the west, then swaggered back to Frog Flat. The couple seldom wanted for money, and they lived well.

No one had to ask why Blabbermouth Sun went to market: Aside from raising his scientific and cultural level at the public education centre, he rushed about looking for pretty girls. He could tell whether they were married or not just by the way they walked. What could you do with him? Every man has his own talents and tastes. But one thing was plain to all: The marriage problem of Frog Flat's civil affairs committee man was in urgent need of solution.

For Shih-fu, the well-to-do middle peasant, going to market was not so simple, although when he strolled along with nothing in his hand but his pipe, he seemed aimless. He seldom spoke or smiled, and appeared to be deep in thought. Shih-fu gave the impression of a man whose heart was heavy.

Actually, going to market for a prosperous peasant was even more important than his work in the fields. Shih-fu always kept a close eye on the prices of brushwood, rice, cooking oil and salt. As the ruler of a household of over

twenty, he was constantly issuing necessary warnings and instructions. Did you ever meet one of those owners of a big farm, living like a stick of wood? There never was a bigger fool. As flexible as Shih-fu was to changes in the market, that's how rigid he was towards his own immediate family. Wherever he could stint, he stinted. All the household's younger members hated him.

But Shih-fu didn't mind. He was doing it for the whole family — in accordance with ancient traditions and the old concept of collective good. He was determined that as long as he lived, the "tragedy" of dividing up the family property would never be enacted within the four walls of the compound he had recently enlarged. Shih-fu was going to devote all his strength, cleverness and patience to building a household of five generations under one roof. If he could take his leave of this world as the head of such an establishment, he didn't care whether his hair was streaked with grey in his fifties or whether it turned pure white. No one ever said it was easy to be a loyal exponent of the classic Confucian morality.

Sometimes he made a little soft money in the Huangpao market. Any man who didn't take easy pickings was a dolt. Shih-fu knew that except for a spell of drought, grain prices were higher in the morning than in the afternoon. Near closing time, many peasants didn't want to carry their unsold grain back home. If they had no friend in town with whom they could store it till the next market day, they sold out cheap. That was when Shih-fu wandered about the grain market. If he found something of good quality that he could put away for a couple of years, he bought it and left it in the back of the shop of his friend, the druggist, until his youngest brother could pick it up with a cart and bring it home. On the following market day, Shih-fu then disposed of some of his old grain that couldn't be stored any longer.

Of course, sometimes you might find a young mule or colt with good conformation and coat in the animal section of the fair. The owner would be someone who needed money badly and had to sell. Without a word Shih-fu would signal his



Kuo Shih-fu

bid to the broker. He would buy the beast, lead it home, and put it in with his other draught animals. He paid very little, and the young animal required no special care. In two or three years, before you knew it, the beast would be a fully grown horse or mule. Of the three well-known "shrewd" men of Frog Flat — the emancipated poor peasant Chen-shan, the rich peasant Yao, and the well-to-do middle peasant Shih-fu, who would you say was the shrewdest? In his heart Shih-fu would never agree that the other two outshone him. They looked more competent, but actually he was the trickiest. He didn't want to look like them — he preferred to have a benevolent, virtuous appearance, and get rich pleasantly, with a righteous air. He felt this was the only proper way to gain wealth and influence.

As long as Shih-fu could remember, the price of grain always rose in the spring Grain Rains period. At Slight Fullness, when barley started coming into the market and the average poor peasant was able to satisfy his minimum food needs, the price would fall a bit. After the summer harvest, when the poor peasant had grain to sell, the price always took a big drop. Every year, between Grain Rains and Slight Fullness, Shih-fu sold a portion of his grain. Why? He needed money to buy fertilizer — chaff and residue from beans pressed for their oil — for his paddy fields. In the years since Liberation, the People's Government had been extending credit to poor peasants, enabling them to buy chemical fertilizer — the quick effectiveness of calcium superphosphate and ammonium sulfide had become well established. Shih-fu decided that he too would use these fertilizers beginning this year, 1953. The careful prosperous peasant also made a thorough inspection of his farm tools and equipment. He repaired what needed repair and added whatever was lacking. You couldn't be petty in matters like these. *Tien*! Could you snare birds if you didn't spread a little rice as bait?

As he squatted in the courtyard writing on the ground with the small metal bowl of his long pipe, Shih-fu calculated the expenditures he would have to make. It wasn't that he couldn't

afford an abacus. He had one, but he didn't like the thing. His fingers, stiff and calloused from a lifetime of gripping farm tools, sometimes stumbled on the abacus beads. He was much more accurate with his pipe. And if anyone called unexpectedly, he had only to rise and take two steps forward, and his scratchings on the ground were obliterated. No one knew that he understood figures. They thought he was a dull clod, that there was no need for caution in dealing with him. His prosperity was just dumb luck. Learn anything about management and planning from him? Impossible.

After he finished his calculations, Frog Flat's leading well-to-do middle peasant was ready for action. He examined all of his stored grain. You couldn't scoop out just any old grain and sell it. Before Shih-fu disposed of a mere hundred catties of grain, he had to inspect every chest, bin and vat. The shrewd little demon in his brain told him that the first thing to get rid of was the inferior, somewhat smelly, wheat, corn and barley. He shifted some bins and chests from the two wings of his house to his new front building. These would hold the new grain that would be harvested in the coming summer. Shih-fu thanked Heaven and Earth that he no longer had to store it on the earthen floor. To any peasant the amount of grain he has harvested is a private matter. But for years Shih-fu used to set up his bins and chests on the floor. Why? He had a large family, a lot of land, and a lot of grain.

In the evening of the eighteenth of the third lunar month, 1953, Shih-fu, with the help of his simple-minded brother Shih-yun, started filling sacks, marked "property of Kuo Shih-fu", with grain. They were intended for the market fair at Huang-pao the following day. When grey-haired Shih-fu brought an empty sack over to the large chest where the good wheat was stored, the simple brown-bearded Shih-yun was amazed.

"Surely you're not going to sell this?"

"Don't worry," Shih-fu said peaceably. He couldn't read or write but he was very competent. "I know what I'm doing."

He put in a measure of good grain, then told Shih-yun to pull the sack over to the chest where they kept the inferior

wheat. Suddenly the light dawned on the younger brother. Actually they had done it this way every year. The simple fellow's memory was just too weak. There was no doubt about it — if the family property was ever divided up among the brothers and Shih-yun had to get along without Shih-fu's managerial skill, within a few years he would be a poor peasant. Hey, in a competitive world mere physical strength was not enough. You had to be crafty, or you were bound to suffer.

They poured a measure of good wheat in the bottom of one sack, then filled all the sacks with inferior wheat, except for a measure of good wheat on top of each of the others. Shih-fu worked smoothly, nonchalantly, very relaxed. He had no qualms of conscience. His wrinkled face bore a serious yet kindly expression. It was as if he was doing something of benefit to mankind, not preparing a swindle.

In the past Shih-fu certainly would never have sold wheat in spring when grain was scarce. The best the miserable paupers could afford then to keep their families from death's door was corn or barley — stuff he fed to his draught animals. But this year he was selling wheat. He wanted to compete with Sheng-pao's mutual-aid team. To get a bigger profit, he had to invest a bigger capital. Corn and barley sold cheap — there wasn't enough money in them to satisfy him.

Besides, wheat comprised nearly ninety per cent of his stored grain. Most of his corn and barley had been consumed by Frog Flat's poor peasants and hired hands in '50 and '51 during the "Low-Interest Grain Loans" campaign. Of course everyone promised to pay him back, but very few had the grain to do it; and even when they did repay, it was only to borrow again immediately. Shih-fu wasn't as displeased with this as he pretended. In fact it gave him just the chance he was looking for. If anyone came to him for more grain, he reminded him of his unpaid loan. If the man didn't ask for a loan, Shih-fu said nothing. He liked having people in his debt. When they sought favours he could confront them with it.

But none of these were the main reason Shih-fu was selling his wheat. *Aiya,* in the fifty and more years of his existence he had never seen wheat go so fast in springtime. No matter how much was placed on the Huangpao market, it was all disposed of. The illiterate economic expert of Frog Flat was puzzled. It wasn't normal. Previously the coarse grains sold quickly in the spring; only after the summer harvest did you have a rapid turnover of the fine grains. But this year any kind of grain was snapped up. Rice and wheat went particularly fast. Not only Shih-fu, all the illiterate rural economic experts at the Huangpao market fairs — the rich and well-to-do middle peasants — were astonished.

And what do you think was behind it? The private grain merchants were competing with the State Grain Company for business. Dressed in simple blue tunics and trousers, red armbands with white letters pinned around their sleeves, the Company men wandered in and out among the peasants, shouting through tin megaphones, exhorting them not to demand too high a price for their grain. Sell to the State Grain Company, they urged, and support national construction. Although it was hot and dusty, the Company men, their brows streaming perspiration, explained through their megaphones that this would be a patriotic action. Workers and peasants are brothers, they said, it's to the peasants' advantage to support the workers. If the cost of grain is high, the peasants will have to pay higher prices for the manufactured goods they buy. They'll only be hurting themselves.

The State Grain Company agents addressed the peasant sellers intimately as "old fathers and brothers". "You're making a mistake," Shih-fu thought sarcastically. "These 'old fathers and brothers' you're trying to reform are well-to-do middle peasants and rich peasants." He couldn't help laughing at the agents' ardour. Who ever heard of doing business like that? He noticed however that some peasants seemed quite moved by their words. They had come to buy coarse grain to see them through till the summer harvest. In their hands were a few crumpled yuan; the grain belonged to others.

Completely at ease, all smiles, Shih-fu thought to himself: "Where business is concerned, you Communists are really amateurs. You talk as if you were at some big meeting. Take a lesson from the professional merchants — see how they bargain, hands in each other's sleeve or under a straw hat, exchanging finger signals." It certainly was funny. Even as the agents were shouting, merchants from Weiyuan and Sian, paying no attention, had squatted down and were bargaining with the peasant sellers by means of the traditional finger-signal method. Free enterprise!

Although the Company agents weren't openly urging the peasants to refuse to sell to the professional grain merchants, the shrewd Shih-fu caught the implication. "How stupid," he thought. "Do you really expect us rich peasants and well-to-do middle peasants to support your Communist Party? You're dreaming. If you hadn't said anything, I might have taken my grain down to your Company purchasing station just to get rid of it quickly. But now that you've reminded me what you're up to, I'll sell only in the open market, just for spite. Let's see what you can do about it! You nearly scared the wits out of me during land reform."

Early in the morning of the nineteenth, Shih-fu's youngest brother, tall strapping Shih-hua, had driven his rubber-tired cart, laden with wheat, down the main street of Huangpao Town. Outside the West Gate, on the large open area east of the big bridge, prosperous peasants were gathering in the light of the rising sun. From the northern plain, the eastern plain, from Frog Flat, they were bringing their grain to market. When relatives met here in Huangpao, the political, economic and cultural centre of a district embracing 108 villages, mutual greetings, inquiries after the health of each other's old folks, and invitations for the women to visit their kin were inevitably exchanged. The well-to-do peasants surreptitiously swapped bits of information they had picked up concerning trade conditions in the towns and in the country. Obviously not agreeing with the spirit called for by the government they nodded and winked and gave meaningful glances. All of this could only

mean that the State Grain Company, which was responsible for the control of market prices, had again been careless or left some loophole. And so the prosperous farmers smiled; they were happy and gay.

Shih-fu borrowed a large wicker tray and emptied into it the sack that had a measure of good wheat in the bottom. Excellent. The poor quality grain spilled towards the rear, while the measure of good wheat slid to the front. Even if the buyer plunged his hand into the very bottom of the deep long tray he wouldn't grab any of the poor quality wheat. Shih-fu sat down on two other sacks, his expression serious but kindly, and calmly stroked his beard with hard calloused fingers. Then he filled his pipe. Although the rubber-tired cart could easily have carried five or six *tan* of wheat, Shih-fu had only brought two. He was no callow beginner. Even if he had wanted to dispose of ten *tan*, he would have done it casually, on several different days, so as not to attract attention. He had never acted hastily in his entire life, Shih-fu reflected. He guided himself by what he called the "three slowlys and one fast" principle — walk slowly, talk slowly and think slowly, but work fast.

Around breakfast time the fair began in the market-town on the plain.

Asking his neighbour to keep an eye on his wheat, Shih-fu wandered through the lanes of sellers, counting the sacks and trays. His calculations showed that over a hundred *tan* of grain had been placed on the market.

"Ho-ho, they all want to ride the buying wave," he thought to himself.

He went out and bought a few hot griddle cakes, before returning to the grain section. Pedlars were selling tasty cold delicacies, but he wouldn't touch them. They might upset his stomach. A man in his fifties has to be careful.

Trade in grain was already lively. Shih-fu, munching a hot griddle cake, observed the activities with interest.

See, the merchants from Sian and Weiyuan were all over the place. Their clothes were not sweat-dyed, but clean and neat; they wore new hats of fine wheat straw, their faces had not

been blackened by the sun, their teeth were extremely white. The prosperous peasant grain-sellers were glad to see them. They brought joy to the local economic experts and sorrow to the poor peasants. Shih-fu liked this situation. He wished still more grain merchants would come.

Today, the moment the fair opened, agents of the State Grain Company appeared. Most of them wore white-lettered red armbands, but one did not. People said he was chief of the Huangpao purchasing station. A Shangpao Village man, he had been made leader of Shangpao Township shortly after Liberation. During land reform he served for a time as assistant head of Huangpao District. Later he was transferred to the county government. He had returned only recently as the chief of the grain purchasing station — to strengthen the work in this line, it was said.

The station chief borrowed a galvanized tin megaphone from one of the men with a red armband. He asked everyone to please quiet down. He wanted to say a few words.

The grain market became silent. Everyone listened.

This time the representative of the government agency did not exhort the well-to-do peasants who were selling grain. He addressed the professional merchants who were the buyers. He urged them not to bid up the prices, warning them not to ignore the prices the State Grain Company had set. These price maximums were not mere decorations, placed at the Company's gate to improve its appearance. The station chief reminded the merchants of the lessons of the campaign against the "five poisons".[1] These had been eliminated. The merchants shouldn't create a sixth, now that the country had started its Five-Year Plan.

"No person, of whatever class, should put his own interests above those of the nation," he said. "We are now a government of the people, not a government of bureaucrat capitalists — let everyone understand that clearly."

[1] A campaign was launched in 1952 against capitalist bribery of government employees, tax evasion, theft of state property, cheating on government contracts and stealing economic information for speculation.

Shih-fu noticed that the grain merchants with untanned faces looked a bit embarrassed.

Then the station chief spoke to the brokers. He reminded them of the pledge they had given at the meeting called by the grain purchasing station — to behave like decent citizens of the new society and display their patriotism. They should increase their incomes by increasing business, not by raising prices. They shouldn't think that only the state and the labouring people in town and country would suffer if prices went up; it would be to their own disadvantage as well. The brokers were the middlemen between the city merchants and the country grain sellers. The station chief advised them to think over well what their attitude should be. He didn't say much, but his meaning was profound.

"What the hell!" Shih-fu was furious. "What is the world coming to? Free enterprise? What's free about it?"

He noted that the faces of all the sellers and buyers darkened and fell. They were thinking the same as he. The Communist Party made no bones about it. They spoke openly about the city merchants and the country grain sellers. Shih-fu was very irritated. He could understand now why his wealthy friend Yao reacted to the slogan "isolate the rich peasants" with such distaste. Prior to today Shih-fu had always been treated as a man the government was trying to win over. Except for two months during the land reform, he had never been conscious of any pressure.

An uneasy silence pervaded the grain market. Finally, off in a corner, business gradually resumed. Fear of legal consequences or the power of a people's mass movement might have some effect, but could an ordinary appeal to reason influence the business of the merchants, the rich peasants and the well-to-do middle peasants?

A tall middle-aged grain merchant squatted down before Shih-fu's tray of wheat. He picked up a handful and inspected it.

"Just look at that quality," Shih-fu urged him pleasantly. "See how big and round those kernels are. I used pig and human manure on that wheat. No manure from any grass-

eating ox ever came near it. Of course that's obvious to an expert like you."

Apparently quite satisfied with both the quality of the wheat and the attitude of the seller, the merchant shoved his hand deep into the tray and pulled out a fistful. This too he examined. It was also first-rate wheat.

"The same," cried Shih-fu with a merry laugh. You're right to be careful. Pick up a handful anywhere in the tray. You're getting full value, measure for measure."

The merchant glanced at Shih-fu. He saw a man who had done hard physical labour all his life, a man with a lined face, grey hair and crinkly eyes — plainly a simple honest person. If you couldn't trust the fellow, there was no one in this world worth trusting.

The merchant examined the three standing sacks of wheat. The grain on the top of each was good.

"Don't worry. No inferior stuff here," Shih-fu assured him cheerfully. He was very friendly.

The merchant was ready to bargain. Happily, Shih-fu extended his hand to the broker beside him — a short thin man with a long drooping moustache in a straw hat. His name was Kao Ta, and he was a native of Hsiapao Village. His thin lips could talk a stone to dust. Rare was the shady transaction his persuasive words couldn't put through. Without that ability, how could he earn the money to buy his drinks after the fair?

Kao Ta removed his straw hat and placed it over Shih-fu's hand and his own. Shih-fu pressed with his fingers.

"That's what I'm asking," he said.

The balding broker's scalp shone in the sun through his thinning hair. He turned his short wiry body towards the merchant. This gentleman also placed his hand, agile from years of manipulating abacus beads, under the hat.

"He wants this," said the broker, indicating upon the merchant's palm the price Shih-fu was demanding. His mouth, from which two teeth were missing, expanded into a smile.

The merchant was shocked. He hadn't expected this honest-looking peasant to be so ruthless.

"Didn't you hear what the comrade from the State Grain Company just said?"

"Of course I did," Shih-fu retorted placidly. "But this is good wheat. You're getting full value, measure for measure."

"I know it's good wheat. I wouldn't be bargaining with you if it weren't. You saw the prices the Company fixed, old uncle. Ever since the movement against the 'five poisons', we merchants have been much more ethical. Don't you go letting government policy flit by like a breeze."

Shih-fu was completely unimpressed by this pious cant. Naturally the merchants would utilize the station chief's appeal to keep prices low when it was to their own advantage. He knew what traders were like — crafty, every one.

He laughed softly and said in an amiable voice: "It sounds pretty, the way you put it. If these birds were willing to sell at the Company price, they wouldn't be standing out here in the hot sun. You want to buy grain at the Company price?" Shih-fu asked pleasantly with a mocking grin. "Go ahead and try. If you can't get what you want, come back and we'll talk some more."

At this, the merchant weakened.

"In a free market the parties can agree on any price they like," he agreed. "But shouldn't they take the Company price into consideration?"

"Make him an offer," the broker advised, smiling his gap-toothed smile. The merchant had obviously lost the argument's opening round. "The seller can ask a sky-high price, the buyer can make a down-to-earth offer. That's business. If there were no bargaining, there'd be no trade."

Tilting back his head, crowned by a hat of fine straw, the merchant gazed at the blue firmament over the central Shensi plains. After a few moments of deep thought, beneath the big straw hat he pressed a signal with his fingers against Kao Ta's hand.

"Quite a bid," said the broker, without the shadow of a smile. His voice was very serious.

He relayed the signal to Shih-fu. The grey-haired middle peasant shook his head.

The broker thought he'd better knock some of the wind out of Shih-fu's sails.

"Is your mouth gold and your teeth jade that you won't bargain? Even in the bureaucratic Kuomintang society there had to be a certain amount of give and take in business. Can we do less in the people's democracy we have today?"

It was then that the kindly-looking old scoundrel decided to abandon his unyielding manner and permit his first drop in price.

The short alert Kao Ta skilfully manipulated both sides, causing Shih-fu to lower his price three times and the merchant to respond with an equal number of rises. The difference remaining between them Kao Ta simply halved, and the deal was closed. At that moment, only the three of them knew how much money Shih-fu would be paid for his two *tan* of wheat. To the rich, doing business this way was a pleasure. As for the brokers, they dealt in secrets all day long, and led an intoxicatingly dramatic existence.

The grain section of the fair east of the Huangpao Bridge was about fifty paces long. Everywhere, men were bargaining. You could hear vows of sincerity, protests against unfairness, hearty laughter, sighs over being misunderstood, shouts, whispers. You could see claps on the shoulder, fingers signalling bids and demands, shaking heads, stamping feet — in short, a bustling noisy market.

But was all this truly necessary? The activities were dishonest and evil. Injuring others to benefit themselves, hurting the public for private gain — in the parlance of the merchants this was called "good" business. The poor peasants, seeking a few measures of coarse grain in the retail section, found no joy in the market. To them it was a place of misery. How hateful the prosperous peasants were. When the Party asked them to make low-interest grain loans, they claimed that

they had no reserves on hand. Now, at market time, they suddenly had plenty. They were selling their wheat to the grain merchants, thus squeezing the city workers and their families who could get food only by paying for it out of their wages. Black-hearted devils!

Another argument erupted between Shih-fu and the merchant while the wheat was being weighed. Grabbing the broker's thin wrist, the merchant said:

"Never mind weighing this stuff."

"Why not?"

"It's not uniform in quality. More than half is second rate."

"What do you mean?" Shih-fu demanded angrily.

"Just look at this." With one hand the merchant picked up some good wheat, with the other he picked up some poor. "These kernels are large and round; those are small and long. This wheat is bright; that wheat is dull. These are heavy; those are light. This wheat is the Big Head variety; that looks like ordinary 6028. You can't charge a first-rate price for mixed quality grain."

"Are you buying wheat or gold, that you're so fussy over details?" the broker queried with considerable irritation. "A man has ten fingers, but none of them are the same length. Can a field produce wheat with all exactly the same size kernels? I thought you were a man of sense."

"I'm paying for good wheat. I don't want inferior stuff."

"Who says it's inferior?" Shih-fu bore down hard on the grain merchant. "What's inferior about it? You tell me."

Wordlessly, the merchant showed him the small oblong kernels of the dull light-weight wheat.

"Nonsense," Shih-fu said contemptuously. "You may know more about business than I do. But when it comes to grain, you're an amateur. You say this is Big Head and that is 6028. Let me tell you — it's all Pima Number One. A big merchant shouldn't pick fault in order to beat the price down. Taking advantage of an honest old peasant. Why be so petty?"

"Can you recognize any variety of wheat just by looking at it?" the broker sarcastically inquired.

A trifle embarrassed, the merchant thought a moment, then said hesitantly: "Even if it is only one type, this is much inferior —"

"How much inferior? Do you want to weigh it on a jeweller's scale, or to take a handful to grind at the miller's?" Shih-fu didn't say much, but he was very biting. "A business man ought to use his eyes. Why didn't you look carefully before you made me an offer?"

"Let's get it over with." Kao Ta again adopted an intimate tone with the merchant. "Don't waste too much time on this deal. Finish the weighing, and you can go on to more business elsewhere."

The merchant sniffed the wheat. It hadn't any bad smell. He sifted through it with his abacus-trained fingers. Only a few wheat-borer holes. All right, get it over with. He wouldn't be eating the wheat himself, anyhow. It would be mixed in with a lot of other wheat when it went to the miller's. No one would know the difference.

"Weigh it, then." To Shih-fu the merchant said nastily: "I'll remember you from now on. You can give me lessons."

Four empty sacks marked "property of Kuo Shih-fu" were soon deposited in the shop of Shih-fu's druggist friend. After drinking a cup of strong tea, the prosperous middle peasant patted his filled money belt, put on his straw hat, and set out for the supply and marketing co-operative. He wanted to order chemical fertilizer. Last year much of it remained unsold, but Shih-fu heard that this year, now that the peasants recognized its value, you had to order in advance.

He walked slowly through the market crowds, well satisfied with his business acumen. It didn't pay to let your toughness show. Mentally, he addressed himself to Sheng-pao, cutting bamboo near Bitter Herb Clearing:

"We'll see which of us is the better man, young fellow. You want to run? Go ahead and run. I'll just amble along, but I'm going to leave you behind. Does the sun shine on your mutual-aid team crops? I'm a go-it-aloner, but it shines on mine too. Does it rain in your fields? It also rains in mine.

The Communist Party may favour you, but the weather plays no favourites. Heaven rewards the deserving."

Shih-fu entered the co-op. He assured the sales-clerk of his approval of the agricultural techniques the government was propagating — better seed selection, reasonably close planting, the use of chemical fertilizer. . . . Some poor peasants and hired hands, he said, in spite of the kindness the state had bestowed upon them, were not responding to the Party's call. He had no patience with ungrateful people. Who would benefit by an increase in production, after all? Could you draw such a sharp line between what was good for the state and what was good for the private individual?

"Ah, yes, and here's my money. You'd better count it," he said in a most amiable and affectionate manner.

A new development occurred towards the end of the third lunar month which Shih-fu could not immediately comprehend. On the twenty-third not much grain was placed on the market; on the twenty-sixth there was even less; on the twenty-ninth it was just a trickle. Hadn't 1952 been a bumper year? And this spring of 1953, didn't the prosperous peasants and those fairly well off usually sell some of their stored grain to raise money for tools and fertilizer for spring planting and summer crops? *Aiya*, this new society posed all sorts of puzzles to our illiterate economic expert. Carefully he queried, carefully he listened, carefully he pondered. Shih-fu was sure that with his "three slowlys" plus his "three carefullys" he wouldn't make any major blunder.

Aiya, so that was it. As the number of industrial workers increased in the cities, the need for grain was also increasing. And it wasn't only temporary; it would last for a long time. The Five-Year Plan had just begun. People said that even the Five-Year Plan itself was only the first. After this one there would be a second Five-Year Plan, and a third. . . . The portion of the population which did not till the soil but which had to eat was growing steadily. The demand for grain would not lessen. In fact, one man whispered in Shih-fu's ear, in

Sian and Weiyuan, people with money were all rushing to stock up.

"This year after the summer harvest, grain prices are going to rise," he predicted. "Understand?"

"Oh, yes, yes." Shih-fu nodded repeatedly, grateful for the information. The strangest things happen in a new society. There's no war going on, and no famine, but grain is selling like the wind.

The grain section of the Huangpao market had shrunk to a mere dozen paces in length and was offering only expensive, rare grain. Parts of the pig department and firewood section had moved over. None of them was very crowded. Grain merchants now went from village to village on their bicycles, poking their heads into the gateways of the more affluent private compounds. Shih-fu observed with some astonishment that the Huangpao government grain station was selling the peasants grain at reasonable prices. With smiling faces they trooped in and out of the station, making their purchases.

"This government really looks after its common folk," thought Shih-fu. "There's no grain on the local market so it opens its official stores."

Shih-fu knew all too well what grain meant. To peasants, it had often been the equivalent of currency. When money was worthless, or when its buying power fluctuated — from the third year of the War of Resistance Against Japan to 1949, for example, a ten-year period — country people did all their trade in terms of grain. Shih-fu remembered perfectly. Only an idiot mentioned money then.

The result of his thinking the matter over "slowly" was that he decided not to compete with Sheng-pao's mutual-aid team yet. Rich peasant Yao was egging him on, but he couldn't blindly persist in selling grain and buying fertilizer. Shih-fu had more than twenty mouths to feed. He would let young Sheng-pao blunder on another year, then he would see.

26

The rice shoots young Han, the agronomist, and Huan-hsi were raising, were already an inch high. Han had become more familiar with the situation in Frog Flat. The peasants in Sheng-pao's mutual-aid team by now regarded him as one of the family. He was no longer formally addressed as "Comrade Han". The women and kids all hailed him as "Old Han". The young agronomist knew that when the people called a cadre the Party or government assigned to a village "Old Chang" or "Old Li" or whatever his name might be, it had nothing to do with age or rank, but meant that they understood, liked and respected him. It seemed to Han that although his material surroundings might be a bit crude, his spiritual fare was excellent. Who said environment couldn't influence a man, that character was purely hereditary? Nonsense. Environment was a stimulus. Living among these forthright labouring people encouraged a man to make higher demands on himself.

Han had heightened the scientific and cultural atmosphere of Sheng-pao's room by tacking on the earthen walls some coloured charts of rice borers, wheat weevils and corn borers which showed their development from eggs to larva to fully grown pests.

His quilt was laid out on Sheng-pao's small *kang*. He had converted an old table he borrowed from Huan-hsi's family into a desk by pasting several layers of newspaper over its pitted surface. On this desk he had placed several books on agronomy, a few theoretical texts for low-ranking cadres, a bottle of ink, and a drinking cup.

Remember that cloth-wrapped glass case he was carrying the day he arrived which Huan-hsi tried to take from him and which he firmly refused to surrender? This case also now

rested upon the desk. In it were specimens of major harmful insects.

From the settled appearance of Han's quarters it was plain that he intended to carry out the instructions the Weiyuan Communist Party committee gave to agronomists it sent into the rice producing area: "Live in a key mutual-aid team; take charge of propagating agricultural technique."

Every day, when the young agronomist went out, Sheng-pao's ma carefully locked the door of his room in the thatched cottage. What if neighbours' mischievous children got in and damaged Han's things? His books and glass case were something sacred to her. He had brought them to help her son to advance the noble cause advocated by Chairman Mao. Sheng-pao's ma treated Han's possessions with more veneration than any religious object.

Han was pleased beyond words to meet a mother who was so completely in accord with her son's mutual-aid team efforts. It was more as if the few families comprising the team had invited some "veteran" to help them raise their grain yield rather than that the government had sent an agronomist to Frog Flat to stimulate the development of mutual aid and co-operation. The old lady was very solicitous of his welfare, repaying him a thousandfold for every little thing he did. Han was very moved. In fact he was often quite embarrassed.

Returning to his room one day, he discovered that the towel he used for a pillow cover had been washed spotlessly clean by Sheng-pao's mother. On another occasion, when he went to bed one night he found that the socks he had stuffed beneath his quilt not only had been washed — they had been patched as well and put back in their original place. Han thanked the old lady. What else could he do?

But when, a few days later, she again prepared wheat flour noodles only for him, Han felt that this was a question of principle. He couldn't just let it go by. Poor peasants were short of grain in spring. Old Liang the Third couldn't eat any noodles; little Tsai-tsai at most might get a bowl of Han's left-overs. As to the old lady herself, noodles never even

touched her lips. Han was very disturbed. He would have been much happier sharing corn meal mush, barley cakes or millet gruel with the others.

He came home at noon after spreading straw ash on the rice sprouts with Huan-hsi all morning, and saw that the table had already been laid in his room. When he went into the kitchen for water to wash his face, he noticed that Sheng-pao's ma had again cut noodles. He frowned.

"Really, old mama, you're going too far."

"What do you mean?" she replied, a smile on her thin wrinkled face.

"Are you trying to make trouble for me?" Han demanded unhappily.

"Giving you a little something good to eat — is that making trouble?"

"How many times have I told you?" Han helplessly inquired. "When the county government sent us agronomists into the countryside we were instructed to eat and live and work the same as the peasants. It's a rule. Why are you forcing me to break it?"

"Such a fuss." Sheng-pao's ma was unperturbed. "You go and wash your hands. When the water boils, I'll put in the noodles. You didn't ask for any special treatment, did you? The county may have made rules for you fellows, but they haven't made any for us peasants, have they? You just stick to serving the people, and don't worry about these small details."

Han could see he wasn't getting anywhere. "I'm moving out," he announced brusquely. "Today."

"Where to?"

"To the primary school. The teachers have rooms. I'll eat with them."

Wiping her hands on her apron, Sheng-pao's ma appeared to think this over carefully.

"That might be better. You pay us forty cents a day for your meals, but what can poor people like us feed you? We don't want your money, but you insist. Every couple of days

we try to make you something a bit special, but you refuse. What can we do? Oh well, never mind. Today, eat these noodles. Starting tomorrow, move in with the teachers and eat with them."

Then she added thoughtfully, keeping a straight face: "Or maybe you'd better still live here, and just go up to the school for your meals."

Han burst out laughing. She was simply too much for him.

They talked it over and came to an agreement. In the future she would not make any noodles for him exclusively; if she felt she definitely had to give him noodles, they would all eat them together. . . . Sheng-pao's ma promised to comply.

But as Han was washing his hands in the opposite room, through the open door he heard her mutter dejectedly: "In town he gets meat and vegetables; here the only thing he'll eat is corn and barley. But isn't he doing everything for us poor peasants?"

The young agronomist was moved. She gave whole-hearted support to the son who was fighting to promote mutual aid and co-operation in farming, she lavished loving care on little Tsai-tsai whose father Tseng-fu was at the head of a porters' brigade transporting brooms made by the mutual-aid team, she permitted her daughter Hsiu-lan to move in with her future mother-in-law so that the girl could look after the lonely old lady — all this Sheng-pao's ma did naturally, as a matter of course, a remarkable woman. From her behaviour, Han could imagine the character of her son and daughter. Although Han had never seen Sheng-pao, and the day Hsiu-lan came home for a visit he was away on the plain east of Huangpao checking on wheat midges, he felt he knew them well.

He often mentioned Sheng-pao's ma in his diary. The evening of the day he spread ash fertilizer on the rice seedlings, he opened the diary and, in the light of the glass-chimneyed oil lamp which he had bought in Huangpao Town out of office expense money, penned an entry in praise of Sheng-pao's ma — then sleeping in the building opposite with little Tsai-tsai in her arms.



Sheng-pao's mother

"She wears the patched clothes of the typical poor country woman," Han wrote. "Her hands are worn from a lifetime of toil, the wrinkles on her face are marks of her hardships in the old society. She is ordinary in appearance and sparing in speech. But she has a great and noble heart. If her son were on the Korean front and had to lay down his life, he undoubtedly would die like a hero. If her daughter were compelled to fall in the course of some fierce class struggle, she undoubtedly would go down like a heroine. I am more and more convinced that Sheng-pao's ma is that kind of mother. . . ."

Han was not only moved – he was deeply aware of his responsibility. Living with a family of a key mutual-aid team, he would be letting down the Party and the people if he couldn't bring about a marked advance in production. Even if his superiors didn't criticize him, he himself would feel ashamed, to say nothing of the fact that before leaving for the countryside he had indicated to them his intention of applying for membership in the Communist Party. Han was hoping he could attain that honour after proving himself in the mutual-aid and co-operation movement.

He had decided to concentrate on the new type rice seedlings he and Huan-hsi were raising. Keeping a strict watch on time and frequency of irrigation, Han thoroughly eliminated any weeds, and refused to tolerate even a speck of moss in the seedling bed. At the same time he bore in mind his superiors' instructions: "Don't be one-sided. While propagating new agricultural technique, devote a little effort to strengthening and improving the mutual-aid teams."

Han was fascinated by Liang the Third. He noted the old man's behaviour, his manner, the way he talked. Discovering that the old fellow had a bellyful of dissatisfaction, Han tried to learn what was behind it.

Every morning Liang went out on the highway, picked a load of manure and returned before the young agronomist rose from his bed. Then he fed the horse, the pigs, put fresh earth down in the pen, swept the courtyard, cut faggots for the stove . . . he was on the go all day long. The old man didn't

smoke. His only respite was to squat down with his back to the compound wall and solemnly rest, his hands clasped together. After a few minutes of this, he would again rise and go on to another job. A mocking smile on his bearded lips, he would mutter:

"Doing another fellow's work."

"Whose work are you doing?" Han asked him one day, interested.

"Representative Liang's."

"Who is Representative Liang?"

The old man gave a snort of laughter. Sticking up his thumb in a sarcastic gesture of admiration, he replied: "Our very own people's representative. The great official."

Han laughed uproariously. Pounding the legs of his grey twill trousers, he was convulsed with mirth. Finally he wiped his streaming eyes with his handkerchief. The old man meant Sheng-pao.

"You needn't work for the great man," he said jestingly.

"If I don't work, what *will* I do?"

"Eat and rest, rest and eat." Han pretended to be stirring up trouble between father and son.

Liang chuckled from the depths of his honest heart. Narrowing his eyes, he admonished: "Don't take me for a simpleton. I know you and Sheng-pao are two of a kind. You needn't try to fool me."

To Han the old man's naiveté was enchanting. He had the same purity of heart as his son. The only difference was that years of old thought habits had congealed in his mind. It wasn't easy to melt them away. Han believed Huan-hsi when the boy said that Liang was actually devoted to the mutual-aid team. Several times at dusk the young agronomist saw him standing alone, secretly peering at the team's seedling bed. Sheng-pao's ma told Han the old man had been the same after he received his share of land in the land reform. Suddenly Han understood him.

But old Blind Wang and Liang the Eldest, on the other hand, were quite a headache. Han had already been given a

sample of what Blind Wang was made of. Several people told him that as long as Liang the Eldest and his son Sheng-lu remained in the mutual-aid team the crotchety old blind man would not pull out. Han approached Liang the Eldest several times and drew him a rosy picture of the future of socialism, explaining that the mutual-aid teams were socialism's baby teeth, saying that everyone ought to work together and make Sheng-pao's team function well. Of course the enthusiastic young agronomist tended to over-simplify, and he spoke with somewhat of a bookish air. Liang the Eldest smoothed his grey-streaked beard and laughed coldly.

"You're right. Mutual-aid teams are not only socialism's baby teeth, they're its molars — just waiting to crunch the bones of us middle peasants."

What more could Han say to this man so many years his senior?

Han changed his tactics and went to work on Sheng-lu. The day he arrived in Frog Flat, Huan-hsi had told him that Sheng-lu was preparing his own seedling bed. "Let him," he had replied thoughtlessly. "He'll do it in the old style. People will be able to compare it with ours."

Not long afterwards Han decided that he had been jumping to conclusions. Huan-hsi was obviously an emotional lad; he seemed prejudiced against Sheng-lu's entire family. Himself the son of a well-to-do middle peasant Han knew that whether during the land reform, when the middle peasants stuck with the poor peasants, or during the mutual-aid and co-operation period, when the poor peasants sought unity with the middle peasants, a contradiction — at times latent, at times out in the open — existed between them. He marked Liang the Eldest down as an "old die-hard", but he wasn't at all sure that middle-aged Sheng-lu was as black and hypocritical as Huan-hsi painted him, and he observed him carefully. Han wanted to carry out Party policy without being influenced by the prejudices of any strata of rural society. When he heard that Sheng-lu's younger brother Sheng-jung was a Communist and an officer in the People's Liberation Army, the distance between himself and their family at once seemed to shrink. He became more determined than ever to win Sheng-lu over.

One day Han suggested to him that he clear two paths, each a foot wide, through his seedling bed to facilitate tending the sprouts. In some embarrassment, Sheng-lu agreed. Greatly encouraged by what he considered a manifestation of friendliness, Han helped him with the path digging.

But when he talked of Sheng-lu's progress to Huan-hsi, the boy shook his head.

"Where's the progress? He sees it's to his advantage, why shouldn't he agree?"

"Comrade, you're too 'leftist'. A boy who wants to join the Youth League should discard his peasant narrowness. You can't expect a middle peasant to have the same understanding as a poor peasant. For a peasant to accept new agricultural technique is not so easy as you think."

"That depends on the new technique." Huan-hsi was Han's student in agronomy, but he wasn't taking any lessons from him politically.

Han was a bit annoyed with this stubborn youngster.

"What new techniques will peasants readily accept, tell me that."

"Any kind they can see a profit in. Chemical fertilizer, for example. Before, the Huangpao supply and marketing co-op couldn't sell it. Later, when the peasants saw that was good, they all bought it. Even old Shih-fu is using chemical fertilizer. Would you call him progressive?"

"Mm." Han had to admit Huan-hsi had a point. "Anything else?"

"Sure — the new type seedling bed. There had been some talk about it before, but no one had seen it. Then you came and gave a field demonstration. Shih-fu saw it was a good thing, so he adopted that too. Why shouldn't Sheng-lu do the same? He's no fool."

Han couldn't help admiring this seventeen-year-old farm boy. He had a quick mind, and he spoke well. But he didn't see the whole picture; he didn't realize the importance of win-

ning Sheng-lu over. A key mutual-aid team for the entire district, a team that was being helped by a government agronomist — how discouraging if two families decided to quit.

Han proposed that he and Huan-hsi give Sheng-lu a hand with weeding his seedling bed as a gesture of goodwill. Huan-hsi flatly refused.

"You help him if you want. I won't."

"Why not?"

"When we were spreading manure on our team's seedling bed, I toted every basket. Sheng-lu worked only on his private plot. When he finished, he took his pipe and strolled off to town. Though my shoulders were swollen from carrying, Sheng-lu didn't lift a finger to relieve me. He was the high and mighty well-to-do middle peasant who couldn't demean himself to help us poor peasants. Well, I'm not going to lower myself to help him. Our mutual-aid team can get along without his horse and cart."

"Comrade," Han sympathized with Huan-hsi, but he had to be objective, "do you understand the policy of winning over the middle peasants?"

"Oh, yes," Huan-hsi replied confidently. "When Secretary Wang was down here overhauling the mutual-aid teams, he told us: 'Winning over the middle peasants means the mutual-aid teams shouldn't attack them or hurt their interests. But that isn't to say we should pamper them or let them have their way.' Secretary Wang is right. The more you pamper them, the more you let them have their way, the harder it is to win them over. That pompous Sheng-lu. Just ignore him. Let's see how much he can do."

Han's heart sank like a stone. *Aiya*, how could the secretary of the Huangpao district Communist Party committee be so rash and say such unprincipled things? Han had taken detailed notes at the talk given by Comrade Tao Kuan, secretary of the county Party committee: "In China's agricultural society, the proportion of middle peasants was very large. It became even larger after land reform, when many poor peasants rose to the ranks of the middle peasants. The middle peasants had more

land, farm implements and draught animals. Without their participation, the mutual-aid and co-operation movement in agriculture could not succeed. The determining factor in any movement was the attitude of the middle-of-the-road elements. Mutual aid and co-operation would come to nothing if the middle peasants didn't take part."

Han had complete faith in Secretary Tao. A man in his thirties with thinning hair, Tao was often seen, through the window of his room in the county Party committee compound, seated at his desk diligently examining Party documents and telegrams from higher Party authorities. Tao's face was pallid from frequently working till well after midnight; two of his fingers were stained yellow from smoking too many cigarettes. Every cadre in the county respected him. Who wouldn't admire that spirit of complete devotion to the Party and the people? Han couldn't understand why the district secretary was spreading a viewpoint so distant from that of Comrade Tao. Why was he encouraging the mainstays of the mutual-aid team to relax their efforts to win over the middle peasants? In Han's mind a lurking suspicion was forming that the affairs of Huangpao District were in the hands of an extremely careless and perhaps even dangerous individual.

But although this was what he thought, could he, an ordinary non-Communist cadre, discuss the shortcomings of the secretary of the Communist Party district committee with an infant like Huan-hsi?

The day Sheng-lu weeded his seedling bed, Han helped him. Huan-hsi, a believer in mutual respect and brotherhood, sure enough didn't appear. Was it due to traditional peasant narrowness, or had the young fellow just seen too little of the world? If Sheng-pao were at home, would he take the long view?

Bare-footed, his pants legs rolled up, Han squatted in the seedling bed from which the water had been released, pulling weeds. With circuitous questions he tried to feel Sheng-lu out.

"When did your brother Sheng-jung join the army?"

"Right after Liberation in 1949. Instead of going to the county middle school, he joined the military academy."

"Where is he now?"

"In the Northwest Military Area."

"A company officer?"

"Platoon."

"I hear he's a Communist."

"That's right."

Actually, these things Han already knew. But his unsuccessful talks with Sheng-lu's bald-headed father had taught him a lesson. He was now trying a casual approach, leading the conversation around gradually to the point he wanted to make. Approvingly he said:

"It's a great honour for you to have a brother like that."

"What honour?" Sheng-lu laughed as he searched, head down, for weeds in the seedling bed. "In this society every man's on his own. It's not like in the old days when if you had someone in an official position it gave the family prestige—"

"Naturally," Han interrupted, "naturally it's different from the old days. What I mean is just the opposite. I mean because your brother is a Communist you ought to do him credit by your actions here in the village. Huan-hsi tells me in every letter Sheng-jung writes home he asks how the mutual-aid team is getting on."

Sheng-lu's face flushed, as if some secret valve in his body had suddenly been opened.

"I've found his weak point," Han thought. "Nobody likes having his shortcomings exposed."

To clear the air, Han changed the subject.

"Do you know what this is called?" he asked, hold up a weed.

Turning his still red face, Sheng-lu looked, then said in an offhanded manner:

"Many kinds of weeds grow in the rice paddies. We peasants don't know the names of them all."

"This isn't paddy weed. Look closely. This grows in dry fields. It's called Ram's Horn Creeper. Horses eat it, but they

can't digest the seed. When you spread horse manure on your rice seedlings, you're planting weeds at the same time. Understand?"

"Yes. We peasants live blindly," Sheng-lu mumbled, but it was plain that his mind wasn't on the weeds. Gradually, the blood receded from his cheeks. "I'll bet what Huan-hsi has been pouring into your ear about me hasn't been good."

"Don't be super-sensitive," Han advised earnestly. "He hasn't said anything. Except that your father has a bad temper."

Sheng-lu heaved a long sigh. "What can I do? You can't choose your own father. If it were up to me, of course I'd be all for co-operation. Don't I want to be a credit to my Communist brother?"

And he proceeded to repeat to Han the story of how his father had ripped up the honour certificate he got when he was leader of the mutual-aid team.

Han smiled. "The old people are backward. Sheng-pao's father is a drag on him too."

"You can't say that, Comrade Han," Sheng-lu expostulated. "The whole village knows that my uncle's nickname is 'tin knife'. Though he looks fierce, he's made of soft metal. But my father, hey, you should have seen him that day — smashing bowls and dishes. What could I do? A minister can't go against his king, a son can't go against his father."

"That isn't strictly so. In our new society, the question is who is right. Fathers and sons must also be reasonable. According to your line of thinking, Sheng-pao shouldn't have joined the mutual-aid team, he should have listened to his father and worked to build up their family fortunes, right?"

Sheng-lu blinked. For the moment, he had no reply. After a pause, he smiled awkwardly and murmured:

"Sheng-pao . . . Sheng-pao. . . ."

"What about Sheng-pao?"

"I'd rather not say."

From the tone of his voice Han gathered that Sheng-lu preferred not to mention that Sheng-pao was not Liang the Third's own flesh and blood. Since this was a painful subject,

Han did not press his inquiry any further. He only urged Sheng-lu to go along with the poor peasants, and not cause any distress to his brother, Comrade Sheng-jung, in the People's Liberation Army.

Sheng-lu crushed a handful of weeds he was holding and flung them into the mud of the seedling bed. In a very sincere though somewhat ambiguous manner, he assured the young agronomist:

"Don't worry about me, old Han. I'll never change."

The sleeves of his white shirt rolled up to his elbows, Han sat beneath the locust tree, eating lunch. He was in high spirits. Also seated around the low table were Liang the Third, Sheng-pao's ma, and Tseng-fu's little boy Tsai-tsai.

Because this was the first time both their son and their daughter were away from home for any length of time the old man and woman, although outwardly smiling and cordial to their guest, were not very happy. Han did his best to cheer them up. He told them what was going on in other parts of their vast country with its population of six hundred million. Han read the newspaper regularly, and so he was also able to relate recent developments in other socialist countries. While broadening their outlook, it also took the old folks' minds off their worries.

Munching a barley cake and sipping his corn-meal gruel, from time to time Han picked up with his chopsticks bits of pickled vegetable Sheng-pao's ma had made, and popped them in his mouth. Delicious. He was really very satisfied with the food. During the first twenty years of the revolution, China's progressive intellectuals trod the same road as the labouring people; since Liberation tens of millions more intellectuals had also joined them. Han was sure he had a bright future ahead. And he was delighted with the way his work was going in Hsiapao Township. He had persuaded Sheng-pao's ma not to make him any more special dishes and had obtained Sheng-lu's earnest guarantee. His only unfulfilled

desire was the one he had expressed to the chief of the rural department before he left for the countryside: Let the Party judge him by his accomplishments in the mutual-aid and co-operation movement; when he proved worthy of being called a Communist, please accept him into membership.

Today the young agronomist explained to the old couple how the Soviet Union used machines to plough the land, to shear the sheep, to milk the cows. Some of the machines burn gasoline, he said, some are electrified. When he offered as examples the big trucks that passed through Huangpao Town and the plane that flew over Tang Stream every day on the Sian-Peking run, they knew he wasn't just inventing things. They weren't too clear on this electrification gimmick, but in a vague way they also accepted it.

From these discussions, Liang the Third learned that the world was an interesting place. He forgot his depression over his children's absence. His moustached lips grinned.

"Do they have machines that give birth to babies in the Soviet Union too?" he demanded.

The young agronomist and Sheng-pao's ma burst out laughing. Old Liang also laughed, embarrassed by his own joke.

A tapping stick was heard approaching across the clearing outside the compound gate, accompanied by wheezing breaths.

"Blind Wang," Sheng-pao's ma said uneasily. "Can he be coming to our place?"

"Don't pay any attention to him," Liang the Third said indignantly. "Shuan-shuan and his wife are a pair of tender young cabbages, and he's a plant louse. He won't die till he's sucked all the juice out of them."

But whether louse or locust, or any other kind of insect, Blind Wang felt with his staff over the threshold and into the compound.

No sooner had he entered the yard than he flopped himself down on the ground and began to cry like a baby.

"That's what we get . . . for listening to . . . your Sheng-pao . . ." he sobbed.

Han and Sheng-pao's ma quickly put down their bowls and raised the blind man up a bit. Hurriedly they asked him what was wrong.

"I'm going . . . to move in . . . with you. . . . You'll have to . . . take care of me. . . ."

Each holding one of his arms, Han and Sheng-pao's ma didn't know what to say. They were very upset. Had Shuan-shuan been carried off by a tiger, or mauled by a bear, or gored by a wild boar? Or had he tumbled into an abyss? *Aiya*, poor fellow. He had been so strong and vital, a man who would carry two hundred catties on his back or shoulders with ease.

The mother of the mutual-aid team leader who had brought about this calamity, could only moan in commiseration. Liang the Third collapsed in a faint beneath the locust tree, his corn-meal gruel spilling all over the ground, his bowl landing behind him. Poor little Tsai-tsai was so terrified he bawled at the top of his lungs.

Oh you wooded mountains, how can you toy with mankind thus? Sheng-pao's ma, born on the plain, had been driven by famine to this region at the foot of Mount Chungnan. When would Fate stop tormenting her? She wept soundlessly.

Huan-hsi and his mother hurried over, tears in their eyes, their faces drained of colour. Holding the blind man's arms, they led him through the gate. They wanted to take him home.

"Why haven't you come to us?" Huan-hsi's ma remonstrated. "We're much closer relatives than they."

"It's all the fault of their Sheng-pao. Even if there were pure gold to be had for the picking on Mount Chungnan, Shuan-shuan wouldn't have gone if it weren't for him. Quit pulling. I'm going to die in his bed."

Sympathetic and irritated at the same time, holding his blind great-uncle by the wrists, Huan-hsi hauled with both hands. Gritting his teeth, he said:

"Mama and I will look after you. Move in with us."

They pulled him away, his long tattered coat trailing on the ground.

In the compound, Han was massaging the temples of Liang the Third. Sheng-pao's ma brought a basin of water and Han soaked his clean white handkerchief in it and made a cold compress for the old man's forehead. Finally, Liang's eyelids fluttered, and he opened his eyes again upon this complicated world. Han was amazed at the unreasonableness of Blind Wang — that old ghost from the last of the imperial dynasties.

Who could eat now? Even if they didn't touch a bite of food for another three days, they wouldn't feel hungry.

Han and Sheng-pao's ma helped Liang the Third on to the *kang*. Huan-hsi returned to ask Han whether he wanted to go with him to Bitter Herb Clearing to find out what actually had happened. Han said he did.

They set out at once, not even pausing long enough to cook the corn flour they had taken along. They wore their every-day cloth shoes, since they had no felt leggings and straw sandals, intending to buy these on their way through Huangpao Town. Liang the Third weakly admonished them: "Be sure to change into straw sandals, whatever you do. They're the only things that will grip on those stony mountain slopes."

Sheng-pao's ma left without washing the dishes. She took little Tsai-tsai and went to see Secretary Lu in the Hsiapao Township office. Lu came back with her across the stream. He advised her and old Liang to keep calm. No matter what had happened, the Communist Party and the people's government would be completely responsible. He urged them to wait patiently until Han and Huan-hsi returned. It couldn't be anything to get so alarmed about.

At dusk, Huan-hsi and the young agronomist came back — and they were smiling. They had only gone as far as Tang Stream Gap. In the broom purchasing station they had met one of Tseng-fu's porters. He was resting there because he was ill.

It wasn't anything very serious, the porter told them. Shuan-shuan had cut his foot on a bamboo stubble and it became infected. But he had already recovered.

It seemed that a man from a neighbouring village, who was with another bamboo-cutting group, had dropped in on the thatched cottage Sheng-pao and his group had built in North Grindstone Gap and discovered Shuan-shuan. Though the young peasant was already better, the visitor was intrigued by the fact that Sheng-pao and his brigade had kept the secret so well. It made a fine bit of gossip, and eventually word got back to Shuan-shuan's father. But by the time the story reached the blind old man, all that remained of it was that Shuan-shuan had been injured and that his mates were not letting anyone know.

But the following day, even though by then he had learned the truth, Blind Wang announced that his family was quitting the mutual-aid team; when Shuan-shuan returned he would team up for ploughing with rich peasant Yao. He had no wish to enjoy the fruits of socialism, Wang said. He was afraid. "In choosing a staff, choose a long one; in choosing a partner, choose a strong one," as the old saying goes. Why, Yao had more strength in one finger than Sheng-pao had in his entire arm. . . . Blind Wang went on and on, babbling nonsense.

Next, bald Liang the Eldest announced that he too was leaving the team. He went into Hsiapao Village to find a ploughing partner. He stopped everyone he met and announced with satisfaction:

"Wait a minute. I've got something to tell you. Shuan-shuan is quitting our team. That means it won't have enough manpower. I need people to help me. I let them use my draught animals in exchange. Without manpower, what good is the team to me?"

The young agronomist sought out Sheng-lu. His hands supporting his drooping head, Sheng-lu assumed an air of profound dejection.

"Ah, old Han," he sighed, "my pa has such a rotten temper. I don't dare provoke him. Socialism's a long way off. Can I stir the whole family into a tempest just for the sake of a government matter? I'm afraid my Communist brother wouldn't approve. We couldn't stand a split between father and son, like in Sheng-pao's family."

Han glared at him. Enraged, he left this fickle fellow. The nerve of him calling the mutual-aid teams a "government matter". As if they weren't the personal affair of each and every peasant.



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Irrespective the events ensuing among the members of Sheng-pao's mutual-aid team, the rice seedlings continued to grow. They carpeted the field with a tender onion green that glittered in the sun like precious jade.

The seedlings, rippling in the breeze, were unaware of men's joys, sorrows, loves and hates. But young Han, who loved the seedlings like his own children, could not help feeling distressed when he thought of the split among the team's members.

Han squatted alone on the grassy ridge bordering the seedling bed, his straw-hatted head almost between his knees as he pulled weeds.

Secretary Yang is right, he thought. The experience of the past few years since Liberation proves that you can't push new farming techniques on a large scale among a lot of individual peasants all working on their own. Even if you could, without mutual aid and co-operation as your base, you'd only be developing selfish private enterprise. That's not the road for China. But you can't increase agricultural production without new techniques. For thousands of years, whether China's peasants had enough to eat or not has depended half on hard work and half on the whims of nature. They can't even begin to think of raising output unless they follow the example of the mutual-aid teams. But why is it so hard to make these teams function?

The young agronomist aimlessly tossed a weed into the ditch behind him. The water swiftly carried it away. Going back to his weeding, Han thought about Blind Wang and bald Liang the Eldest.

Aiya, why are they so stubborn? Why do they insist on sticking to the old path? Queer birds. Isn't it to their own good if we increase the grain yield?

Han felt very badly — both because of the setbacks in his work, and because of Sheng-pao, the friend he had not yet seen. Afraid of what the reaction might be in Frog Flat, Comrade Sheng-pao had tried to keep the secret of Shuan-shuan's injury from leaking out of Mount Chungnan. How disappointed he would be when he returned to find that in spite of all his efforts the mutual-aid team had been split. Even a man with a will of iron would be shaken severely.

Whenever he wasn't busy Han sat with his elbows on the desk gazing at the family picture on the cottage wall. They were all there — Liang the Third, Sheng-pao's ma, Sheng-pao, his poor child-bride now deceased, and his sister Hsiu-lan. Han was trying to judge from Sheng-pao's bushy brows, smiling eyes and square face just how staunch the young Communist was. How downcast would he be after he returned? Would he become completely dejected? To tell the truth, Han was not at all sure Sheng-pao could meet the test.

The young agronomist went to the township government and reported the situation to Secretary Lu. He was hoping the Party secretary would go back with him across the Tang Stream and mend the split. But Secretary Lu was tied up in the fight against the wheat weevil that was attacking the northern plain. What with mobilizing great masses of people, organizing them, preparing sprayers and distributing insecticide, he couldn't get away. Besides, he didn't consider the split as serious as Han did.

"Don't feel too badly about it," he consoled him. "Two families have pulled out. The rest are waiting for Sheng-pao to come back before deciding anything. Most of the team members aren't home, so fretting is no use. Can you leave

your seedlings for a little while? I'd like you to help us with the wheat weevils. What do you say?"

Han smiled wryly. He said he couldn't leave the seedlings, that if he could, he would go looking for District Secretary Wang, who was travelling around in the dozens of villages of the wheat-growing eastern plain, to tell him about the mutual-aid team. This wretched split was affecting both his appetite and his sleep.

"Why do that?" No matter how tense the situation, Secretary Lu always had a cheerful smile. "The eastern plain is a major battlefield in our war against the wheat weevils. Secretary Wang is taking command personally. It wouldn't do any good, talking to him now."

Secretary Lu led the young agronomist out into the yard. Halting beneath an ancient cypress, he informed Han in a low voice: "The mountain villages around Rocky Gap aren't doing so well. All our efforts to rouse them to use insecticide against the wheat weevil have failed. They say some peasants are even worshipping it as a spirit. So Secretary Wang has moved his weevil-fighting headquarters from Shangpao to Rocky Gap Township. Perhaps you'd better go to him, after all. He may need you there."

Han thought it over. Then he said: "I'll stay here. This is hatching time for all kinds of insect pests. Rice caterpillars may develop in the mutual-aid team's seedling bed."

Disappointed, the young agronomist returned to Frog Flat. As he walked along the sandy bank of the Tang Stream, he thought: "That Secretary Wang has plenty of spunk. No wonder he spoke so firmly about middle peasants to Sheng-pao's mutual-aid team. Maybe he's right. Their attitude to mutual aid is certainly questionable."

Son of a well-to-do middle peasant, Han was extremely irritated by the well-to-do middle peasants. Their aims and Han's were in direct opposition. In theory, he believed entirely in the words of Secretary Tao of the county Party committee. Tao was probably quoting them from some deep Marxist treatise. Emotionally, the idea of the mutual-aid team striving

to get middle peasants to join no matter how demanding they might be was now hard to take. "But, of course," thought Han, "a revolution involves many hardships."

Although Secretary Wang didn't approve of the Frog Flat mutual-aid teams straining too hard to bring the middle peasants in, he spared no effort in fighting the wheat weevils on the eastern plain, moving right among the superstitious peasants who were worshipping the pest. That district Party secretary was quite a man. Never having worked under his direct leadership before, Han couldn't as yet comprehend such determination.

Now, whenever Han saw the childish face of Huan-hsi it was clouded with anger. And Sheng-pao's ma looked perpetually distressed. Ever since the two families had quit the mutual-aid team she seemed to be in constant pain. It was as if she felt apologetic to the young agronomist for the team's sorry condition. Liang the Third, still hesitant about mutual aid, was in a complicated state of mind. Although he wasn't convinced as yet that co-operation was the right path, he was annoyed with Liang the Eldest and Blind Wang. Han noticed that the old man, as he wandered in and out of the compound, kept shaking his head. Was it over mutual aid? Or was it over his two neighbours? Han once asked him what he thought about the mutual-aid team, but the old fellow only snorted and said in a mocking yet affectionate tone:

"Wait till our great man comes home. Then we'll see."

Within two days after Sheng-lu and Shuan-shuan's families quit the team, the wives and mothers of the other members called on Sheng-pao's ma. They were worried about the team's future. What would their men think when they got back? The women felt it would be shameful to disband. "After making a production plan and announcing it before the whole village, can we break up without even transplanting the rice shoots?" they demanded sorrowfully of Han and Sheng-pao's ma.

The third day after the split, in the afternoon, Han received a letter forwarded by the Hsiapao Township government. He opened it and read:

Dear Comrade Han,

According to my calculations the seedlings of Sheng-pao's mutual-aid team must be just about big enough for transplanting. I'd like you to pack your things and join me here at once to take part in our fight against insect pests. You'll find me in the Rocky Gap Township government office.

Our work here in the past hasn't been done too well, but we can't let superstitious ideas cause a serious drop in production in a large section of the wheat fields. Secretary Tao wants us to beat superstition with science. The county authorities have given our district 3,000 catties of insecticide and twenty sprayers, and sent us two technicians. But because they have no leader who is experienced in this work they have wasted a lot of insecticide. Therefore, thinking it over, Secretary Tao has told me to transfer you temporarily. When we've finished spraying you can go back to Sheng-pao's mutual-aid team. Please get ready immediately and report here tomorrow morning.

Salute,

Wang Tso-min

May 16, 1953

Han gazed out of the window at the trees outside the compound wall and thought. It was a pity. This was very near the time caterpillars might appear among the seedlings. Han re-read the letter. Then he again looked at the trees near and far, and pondered. The endless concern for the people's welfare of Secretary Tao of the Weiyuan County Party committee; of his assistant, Secretary Yang; of Huangpao District Party committee's Secretary Wang; of Hsiapao Township Party branch's Secretary Lu; gradually permeated into the young agronomist's spirit. He was sure that Secretary Tao had also gone to Rocky Gap. Because he suffered badly from arthritis, Tao ordinarily couldn't spend much time in the damp countryside. But today he too would be there, fighting against the insects..

Han was suffused with warmth. He must go at once to where the work was tensest. Carrying the letter, he went to see Huan-hsi. He put a hand on the boy's shoulder and said:

"The seedlings are two inches high. We've pulled out the weeds and spread the ash fertilizer. The water doesn't have to be changed very often now. All that remains is pest prevention."

"Are you going back to the county office?" Huan-hsi asked, seeing the letter in his hand.

"No. Secretary Wang is transferring me to Rocky Gap to work on their insect control. I'm leaving first thing in the morning."

"Are you coming back?"

"Of course. The job won't take very long. Let's have a look at our seedling bed. I'll show you what to do next."

They walked together to the edge of the field where the rice sprouts were glistening in the light of the westerly sun.

The young agronomist told Huan-hsi to stir the sprouts lightly with a thin bamboo pole every day. If any small moths flew out, he was to inspect the place they came from for insect eggs on the ends of the leaves and pick them off gently. Some time ago, pointing out specimens in the glass case, Han had explained to Huan-hsi all about the size, shape and protective covering of the eggs. Now Huan-hsi listened carefully, and repeated back Han's instructions. From the expression on the boy's face, Han could see that he had a new agronomist in the making.

Han decided not to wait for the next morning but to arrive in Rocky Gap around sunset that same day. If you were going into battle, you ought to have a fighting posture.

Not only Sheng-pao's ma, but Huan-hsi's mother and Jen the Fourth's wife, gathered in the thatched cottage compound to say goodbye. The women admired Han's hard work, his ability to rough it, the fact that he didn't look down on poor peasants. Old Liang the Third stuck up a thumb approvingly and said:

"Naturally. He's a Communist."

Han was quite embarrassed. He wasn't a Communist, actually. Since explaining to the old man would be difficult, the best thing was to behave like a Communist ought to act.

As he rolled up his bedding, Han was sorry he would miss Sheng-pao. He had lived in this thatched cottage for nearly a month without meeting its host. But now, as Sheng-pao was about to return, he had to go. What a coincidence.

What would be the fate of the mutual-aid team when Sheng-pao returned, Han wondered, wrapping his bedding in a cotton coverlet. Would the young peasant be able to pull the team over the hump? It would be quite a haul. Han hoped the team could retain its remaining six families, that no more of them would be influenced by the two pulling out. The leader? Han hoped that in a few days, after Sheng-pao recovered from the distress, he was bound to feel, he would regain his original drive.

Han heard someone come in the compound gate and thump something heavy down on the steps.

"Comrade Han," a strange voice hailed him excitedly.

In the thatched cottage opposite, Sheng-pao's ma cried in a happy voice: "Is that you, Sheng-pao? Old Han is in your room."

Even as the surprised Han was turning around, Sheng-pao rushed in so hurriedly, the two nearly collided. The young agronomist was completely unprepared for the team leader's powerful hug. Sheng-pao lifted him right off the ground. Setting him down, Sheng-pao gripped the young intellectual's arms with his strong peasant hands. Brows dancing, grinning delightedly, he exclaimed:

"I hear you raised the best seedlings in all Huangpao District for us while we were in the mountains. That's wonderful, Comrade Han. We've got to do a good job, now."

Looking him over, Han was astonished. Could this be Sheng-pao? His felt leggings hanging from his belt, his bare feet in sandals, his clothes torn to shreds by the brambles, he was the picture of an impoverished mountaineer. His thin but animated ruddy face had been badly scratched by thorns and

branches – his forehead, his cheeks, his ears, even his eyelids, bore cuts. Although Han had never been to Mount Chungnan, seeing Sheng-pao, he could imagine what it must be like.

Han had never been so moved. His heart pounded in his chest, moisture filled his eyes. For the sake of the people, that was how a Communist threw himself into his work.

After gazing at her son a moment, Sheng-pao's ma turned away and wiped her tears with her fingers. Then she turned back and said:

"While you were risking your life for the mutual-aid team, Shuan-shuan and Sheng-lu's families were quitting."

"I heard all about it," Sheng-pao replied casually. "I didn't want them originally, but Secretary Wang insisted. Now that we've got rid of those two burdens we'll move ahead faster."

When the old mama saw her son's cheerfulness, her tears changed to laughter. Han's mind was in a whirl. His thoughts and emotions had been so shaken, for the moment he couldn't say a word.

"If I didn't know what I was doing, this might bother me," Sheng-pao continued smilingly. "But since I do, why worry? They're pulling out themselves. Have I asked them to go? All right. The next time they want to join our team, we'll be able to do things properly. What do you say, Comrade Han? Is that right?"

"Right, absolutely right," Han agreed fervently.

Noticing that the young agronomist had wrapped up his bedding, Sheng-pao asked: "What's up? Are you leaving?"

Han told him about Secretary Wang calling him to Rocky Gap.

"Go tomorrow morning," Sheng-pao urged. "We two have got to have a long talk first. I thought about you so much when we were up in the mountains I could hardly swallow my barley cakes. Come on, let's take a look at our precious seedlings."

Side by side, they went out the gate and walked to the seedling bed. Han was beginning to get a good mental grasp of things. Although he had been in Frog Flat less than a

month, he felt his comprehension had taken another big stride forward. "So that's how it is: It doesn't matter how much or little formal education a man has, as long as he's not always calculating how to make personal gain, he's capable of astonishing courage and determination." Discovering this had not been simple for Han.

Walking with Sheng-pao, he thought: "How many outstanding people there are among the unlettered masses. In the old days they were submerged by an unreasonable social system, scrambling all their lives for the sake of their wives and children, only to die unknown and unsung in the end. But every mass movement in the new society brought another batch of them to the fore and put them in positions of leadership."

Previously it had been difficult for Han to understand some of the comrades who came out of the old liberated area in northern Shensi. The organization secretary of the county Party committee had once been a hired hand. The secretary of the county Youth League committee had started out as a shepherd boy. Theoretically Han believed this, but emotionally he couldn't really believe that they could make the change from peasants to leading cadres.

Now he believed it. Like the Sheng-pao at his side, the organization secretary of the county Party committee and the secretary of the county Youth League committee had also been peasants at first. In the War of Liberation and the construction of the revolutionary bases, the Communist Party had raised them from little saplings to sturdy trees.

Han's desire to join the Party was now stronger than ever. The sight of "Liang the Great" walking by his side consolidated his determination to win his way into the Party by his accomplishments in the mutual-aid and co-operation movement. He just had to get in. Everything depended on himself.

28

A week or ten days before Summer Solstice, the "busy summer season" began for the peasants in the area of the Tang Stream. That was when they harvested the barley, soaked the paddy fields, transplanted the rice shoots, spread fertilizer, cut the wheat, planted the autumn crops, weeded the fields. Most farm work was concentrated in the fourth, fifth and sixth months of the lunar year. During the first three, in those days before agricultural production became highly organized, there was virtually nothing to do. This was the "spring idleness" period, and the better-off peasants put on their big straw hats and wandered about the neighbouring town fairs — then known as mule and horse marts; after Liberation, people started calling them products exchange fairs. Some went mainly to listen to the operas; some hung about the eating stalls and restaurants. After enjoying their fill of food and song, they strolled back to their villages in the rosy dusk.

But what poor peasant or hired hand could see an opera then? There weren't so many days when you had no farm work. Besides keeping their kids alive in those three months, they had to get out and earn money for fertilizer for the rice, money for repairing and replacing farm tools, and buy an ox if possible, or perhaps sell a small one and buy a big one.

By the beginning of the fourth lunar month all the peasants of Hsiapao Township who had been away returned home — the men who had been toting timber, boards and bamboo brooms out of Mount Chungnan, the ones who had been doing odd jobs in the cities along the main railway line, the itinerant carpenters who had wandered with their tools about the villages, the small pedlars who carried their wares in boxes sus-

pended from either end of a shoulder pole. . . . Former Kuomintang corporal Pai, who had been collecting for his junkman friend in Sian, also returned to harvest his barley, soak his paddy field and transplant his rice shoots.

The large sum Sheng-pao's broom-cutting expedition earned astonished all Frog Flat – no, all Hsiapao Township. Everyone was talking about it. The obvious superiority of mutual aid to independent effort aroused great interest among the more badly-off peasants. It would have provided a big stimulus to the growth of mutual-aid teams in Frog Flat, but Shuan-shuan and Sheng-lu's families pulling out had a bad influence. Tseng-fu had been thinking of forming a mutual-aid team with a few of the men who had been in his porters' brigade, but when he approached them, they said:

"Forget it. People are divided about this thing. You mean well, Tseng-fu, and we appreciate it, but we don't want to get involved. Some families are leaving Sheng-pao's team."

Rich peasant Yao was happy. His appetite improved, he slept soundly, and his face wore a perpetual look of satisfaction. Yao believed in Fate. When a man was running in luck, even things he had no right to hope for, came his way. Shuan-shuan hurting his foot in the mountains, for example. Simply miraculous. Now, no one could claim that he, Yao had sabotaged Sheng-pao's mutual-aid team. Blind Wang had come to him of his own accord. Only because they were relatives and out of the goodness of his heart had Yao consented to work together with Shuan-shuan in certain farming operations. Of course this formed an ideal cover for his relations with Su-fang. But Yao never let his wife and mother, or Su-fang's husband and father-in-law, suspect anything the least untoward. To further cement poor Su-fang's adherence to him, after the two families agreed to team up Yao slipped three yuan in Su-fang's pocket. Over-riding her objections, he forced her to take the money.

One day at dusk, looking very stern, Yao had called from the courtyard in a harsh voice: "Su-fang, where is the broom for sweeping the trough? I want to feed the animals some hay,

but I can't find it anywhere. Who's taken the thing?" He quickly shoved some rolled-up bills into her pocket.

A water bucket in each hand, Su-fang had no way to stop him. She wanted to refuse, but she was afraid someone might see them. So she merely said in her usual docile voice:

"I think it's in the centre room of the main house, uncle."

"It's here," the superstitious old lady shouted from the west wing. "I took it to sweep the floor."

Thus, no one was aware of anything unusual in the handsome compound. Thus, unknown to man or demon, Yao pulled the unfortunate Su-fang step by step deeper into the pit of tragedy. Yao could see that the new social atmosphere was making his niece uneasy; a sense of guilt was dampening her affection for him. Their illicit relationship tended to frighten her now; her acceptance of him was a bit forced. "But who cares?" Yao thought. Having once been corrupted, she couldn't escape him. Su-fang had not yet acquired the self-respect a working person develops in the course of labour; he could utilize her as an instrument to smash Sheng-pao's mutual-aid team. Yao didn't give a hang about Su-fang's future. Could the situation in Shuan-shuan's household affect the growth of the Yao family crops? Could it influence his big roan horse's fondness for hay? Nonsense.

Yao considered himself the most intelligent man in Frog Flat. He had a better brain than all the poor peasants and hired hands put together. He had the utmost contempt for the thatched cottage dwellers. It was his belief that if people weren't ordered into the mutual-aid teams, if they could continue to enter and leave them freely as they were doing today, China would never get to socialism in a million years. Tending the animals in the front yard, or working in the vegetable garden in the rear, Yao often laughed mockingly and, in his mind, said to Chen-shan, chairman of the village deputies to the township people's council:

"So you want to restrict me? So you won't let me join a mutual-aid team? Heh-heh! I can get along – I've got grain. I won't operate like a mutual-aid team, either. What are you

going to do about it? Is there any rule that says a rich peasant can't exchange the use of his animals for the labour of a poor peasant? I'm increasing production. Isn't that what you Communists are calling for?"

After teaming up with Shuan-shuan, Yao regretted more than ever having tried to bribe Tseng-fu into concealing his true status during the land reform. His scheme had been exposed to the entire village, and he was the object of ridicule for a long time after. Actually the only reason he had wanted to be classified as a middle peasant was because he feared that rich peasants would be treated the same as landlords. But when the land reform ended, he still had his land and grain and animals. Wasn't he as big a power in Frog Flat as before? His enemy Chen-shan ignored him when they met on the village street, or glared at him angrily, but that was the worst he could do.

Yao called at Shih-fu's newly improved compound and was told that the well-to-do middle peasant had gone to his seedling bed. Yao found him tending new-type rice sprouts in the manner the government agronomist had recommended.

"*Aiya*, uncle, your political sprouts are growing fine," Yao said mockingly, with a sly glance at the middle peasant squatting by the edge of the seedling bed.

Shih-fu raised a wrinkled face that was covered with smiles.

"They sure are." Shih-fu stood up and filled his pipe. "Comrade Han says that weed seeds are carried in the manure we spread for fertilizer, and that's the truth. You can pull the weeds out. That's the advantage of the new-type seedling bed. His other ideas don't amount to much. Have a smoke." Shih-fu offered the filled pipe respectfully, with both hands.

Yao shook his head. "I just finished," he retorted loftily.

As Shih-fu was striking a match, Yao gazed with obvious contempt at this prosperous landholder who wavered so.

"Why not try close planting, next?" he proposed sarcastically. "If it doesn't work, you don't have to worry about going hungry. If it does, you're sure to do better than those paupers

in Sheng-pao's team. We can't let him do all the boasting. This is something that affects the whole district."

Pipe in his moustached mouth, Shih-fu took off his straw hat with one hand and scratched his shaven pate with the other. He thought for a moment, then removed his pipe and said with obvious enjoyment:

"There's no need for me to compete with them."

"Why not?"

"It looks like their team is going the way of that jingle some fellow invented: *Organize in spring, in summer collapse; then next year start again, perhaps.*"

"You mean they're breaking up?" Yao's eyes gleamed with delight.

"It hasn't come to that yet. But when those two families pulled out, some of the others were badly shaken."

"Which ones?" Yao demanded eagerly. It was as if he wanted to rip the words out of Shih-fu's slow moving mouth.

Shih-fu couldn't be hurried. A gleeful expression on his face, he drawled:

"Don't you know? First of all, Jen the Fourth. He's timid from being poor so long. He doesn't dare take the few dozen yuan he earned in the mountains and invest the money in the rice crop. He's afraid he'll lose it. Every year he's short of grain and has to borrow. He owes a *tan* to me alone."

"Ah. Who else?"

"There's Kuo Suo. I hear he wants to sell a calf and add the money he earned in the mountains to what he gets for the calf and buy an ox. He doesn't want to risk his cash on close-planted rice either. And Feng. He's a simple fellow who goes with the tide. He says if Jen the Fourth and Kuo Suo don't close-plant according to plan, he'll use his money for something else too. Heh-heh! That's the way things are going. That young Sheng-pao has his hands full."

Yao was delighted. The Old Lord of the Sky was really helping him get back at Sheng-pao. Suddenly, a savage expression contorted his visage.

"This is your chance, uncle," he grated. "Ask Jen the Fourth to pay up. Do you have the nerve?"

"What?" Shih-fu was startled.

"Why not? He ate your grain last spring and the spring before, but when autumn came, he couldn't repay. Well, now he's got money. Why shouldn't he return what he owes you? You ask him: You've money to put into a rice crop, but no money to pay your debts, is that it? Just see what he says."

"*Aiyaya,* what are you telling me to do?" Shih-fu exclaimed in fright. "Are you trying to push me into an abyss?"

Yao laughed. "What do you mean?"

"I won't do it. I wouldn't dare force a showdown. Just think — what sort of world are we living in today? If anyone questioned me, what would I say?"

The prosperous middle peasant peered at Yao warily. He wasn't going to let himself be made a fool of.

Yao could sense this. He laughed quickly and said he was only joking. For a few minutes more he chatted idly to vitiate the impression that he had been trying to instigate something. Then, scorning Shih-fu inwardly, he walked away.

Yao was greatly encouraged by the fact that Sheng-pao's mutual-aid team was faced with a new problem. He liked nothing better than to hear that a project sponsored by the people's government and the Communist Party had run into difficulties. His step became lighter, his appetite increased, his heart was immeasurably soothed. Some of the men in Sheng-pao's team were vacillating over close-planting, just as Yao had anticipated. It only proved how good his judgement was. Yao felt that his shrewdness was equal to his property holdings. No mutual-aid team would out-do him. While waiting "for the world to change", he unquestionably would retain his position as the wealthiest peasant in Fifth Village, Hsiapao Township.

On entering his handsome compound, Yao suddenly flew into a rage. Swearing furiously, he yelled:

"Who let that pig out, eh?"

"*Aiya,*" his superstitious old mother called. "Ma went to the outhouse in the side yard and forgot to close the gate. Who are you swearing at? Buddha preserve us."

Embarrassed, Yao softened his tone. "That pig dirtied all over the front yard. The stink is terrible." He turned and entered the stable below the front building.

The new difficulties of Sheng-pao's team helped Yao decide a question he had been mulling over for some time: He would not sell his three-year-old mule. He had no immediate need for money. This year the mule and its dam — the red mare — could both plough the paddy fields. Tseng-jung's family, Shuan-shuan's and his own, together had several dozen *mou.* That was too much for the mare to plough them alone. "Keep the mule," he thought, "and lighten the labours of the old mare. Exchanging animal power for manpower can't be considered exploitation. It's allowed even in the mutual-aid teams." This was because at present there wasn't enough animal power in the countryside — the township chief had said himself. "Well then," thought Yao, "I'll let my two animals do the work for me."

He scooped up a measure of green beans and put an equal amount for the horse and the mule at each end of the trough. Formerly he had given the mule little or no fodder, feeding it mostly on hay, since he had been planning to sell it. Why fatten an animal that would soon belong to someone else?

Now he patted the eagerly gobbling brown mule and said with a laugh:

"Eat hearty. This year, you and your dam are going to do my work in other people's fields. If they work for me and I pay them wages, that's exploitation. But if I let you plough their fields in exchange, then it's not. Ha-ha, you great booby, what's your hurry? From now on, I'm going to feed you fodder every day, I won't skimp on you any more. Don't eat so fast." He rubbed the mule's forehead affectionately.

Yao felt fine. It seemed to him that even the people's democratic dictatorship was nothing to worry about.

At dusk that same day when he went to fill the lamps, he discovered that the oil jug was empty. Carrying the jug, he set out for Hsiapao Village to buy more oil. After crossing Tang Stream, he walked along the bank. A man in a white shirt came towards him. When the man saw Yao, he started leaving the path as if to avoid him.

"Who's there?" Yao called to the murky figure.

"Me," ex-corporal Pai replied weakly.

Yao understood. "The bird's afraid I'll ask him to repay. Borrows my grain and money, but when it's time to pay back he stalls and stalls. He has no intention of repaying. That's Pai for you. No shame at all. Peddles his wife to pay off his debts."

"Make a lot of money this trip, Pai?" Yao asked with a smile. "It sure looks like it, the way you stride along."

A servile smirk on his face, Pai halted on the stony path.

"Please wait a little longer for those two measures of grain I owe you. I want to use my money to chip in with someone and buy an ox."

"Are you serious?" Yao was surprised. "You really want to till the land? Aren't you going to collect junk in Sian any more?"

"The city police are very strict. Unless I become a regular resident of Sian, I can't do business there. But if I give up my residence here, I won't be able to keep my land. I'm not a landlord or a counter-revolutionary; why should I make the police suspicious? Anyhow for earning a living it's always better to have a solid basis. If I move to Sian, I can't plant the streets, can I? How will I eat if I run out of money?"

"That's right. You should have returned home and become an honest farmer long ago," Yao lectured him. "Quit running around. There'll never be another land reform."

Pai smiled shame-facedly, then walked on.

Remembering that Shih-fu had told him that Kuo Suo wanted to buy an ox, Yao turned around quickly and shouted:

"Pai. Pai."

"Eh?"

"Who are you chipping in with on that ox? Or are you buying it alone?"

"*Tien*! How could I ever buy an ox alone? I'm looking for a partner."

"I can suggest one."

"Who?"

Yao pursed his lips and pointed with his chin at Kuo Suo's thatched cottage.

"That would be fine," said Pai. "But isn't he in Sheng-pao's mutual-aid team?"

"I don't know. I hear he wants to quit. But I only got the news second-hand. You'd better ask him yourself." Yao disclaimed any responsibility.

Pai departed with a twist of the body. Yao continued on towards the village. He was quite pleased with himself. If Pai and Kuo Suo can come to terms, he thought, that will make things good and hot for Sheng-pao.

29

In 1935 a detachment of Red guerrillas was surrounded in the mountain village of Lichia in Ansai County, northern Shensi, by a battalion of Kuomintang reactionary troops. To surround and be surrounded — it was a common enough occurrence in battle. Don't blame the comrades of the guerrilla detachment for not being sufficiently vigilant. The question was how to fight their way out.

At dawn the firing began. The Red detachment charged to the west. No use. They charged north. Also no use. Every possible route was covered by the enemy's heavy machine-guns. In the entire detachment they had only two light machine-guns and four tommy guns; the rest of the weapons were just old rifles. But the guerrillas were determined to break out. They'd never become prisoners. They'd fight till they flowed rivers of blood, until their bodies covered the slope, but they would not surrender. As long as they held weapons in their hands, as long as they could still fire, would soldiers of the great Red Army cease their struggle?

From the opposite mountain, an enemy officer yelled:

"Red Army brothers. Lay down your arms and live."

From the guerrilla position, the fighters shouted back:

"We're going to shove them up your behind."

A heavy exchange of fire followed. Machine-guns, rifles and hand-grenades shook the heavens and earth. The White attacks were fierce; the Red resistance was stubborn. It was a battle to the death with no quarter given.

At noon, the Whites smashed into the village. But they couldn't find a single Red Army man. Furious, they slaughtered villagers and burned their homes. Late in the afternoon, leading the donkeys they had purloined and carrying their loot, they returned to their base.

At dusk, eighteen Red Army men emerged from the storage pits in which they had been concealed. When they saw the bloody corpses of the villagers and their comrades, some of them wept bitterly. But then one of their leaders shouted:

"Don't feel too badly. Let's bury our companions in battle with the help of these good people. Next year at this time we eighteen will be an army."

In the dark of night they buried their comrades. Among the dead was the distinguished political instructor Yang Mao-lin — father of the present assistant secretary of the Communist Party committee of Weiyuan County, Secretary Yang.

The eighteen men left Lichia Village, Ansai County, at dawn the following day. From then on they operated in northwestern Shensi and eastern Kansu. A year later, in 1936, the unit returned to Ansai County. From eighteen men they had grown into a brigade of two regiments and a mortar company. It was this brigade which had been the right flank in the attack that captured Yenan. . . .

A leader of the Shensi provincial Communist Party committee was reminded of these events in 1952 when he came to Weiyuan County and saw the son of Yang Mao-lin, and he related them to the comrades present. Sheng-pao, leader of the Frog Flat mutual-aid team, heard the story from Comrade Wang, secretary of the Huangpao District Party committee, during the Party rectification campaign. The young peasant had listened avidly and, when Comrade Wang had finished, rolled up the ends of his sleeves as if getting ready to fight and exclaimed:

"*Hai*! How can our little troubles today compare? Secretary Wang, the seas may go dry and the stones may crumble, but my heart will never change. If the Party points east, I go east. If the Party points west, I go west."

This was the splendid spiritual nourishment the Communists who fought to free the land had passed on to the Com-

munists who were endeavouring to build a thriving economy upon it — a nourishment that was inexhaustible.

When Sheng-pao was eight, he always greeted adults politely. Some people were surprised. Where had the child learned grown-up courtesy? He seemed too old for his age; he wasn't mischievous at all. He and his mother had come to Frog Flat as famine refugees from the northern plain. Perhaps fearing that they would be resented, his ma had told him to play up to the local residents. That was the guess of some of the villagers. Actually she had done nothing of the sort. Sheng-pao was just learning to be a decent person.

When he was eleven he earned three dollars during the summer watching the peach orchard of a rich peasant in Hsia-pao. The owner instructed him:

"If anyone wants to pick a peach, curse him. Curse him loud and strong, and he won't dare."

Sheng-pao took up his post in a three-sided lean-to covered with thatch. But when he saw a man picking a peach in the distance at the edge of the road, he didn't curse. His ma had told him that good children don't do such things. Instead of following the orders of the rich peasant owner, he acted according to the dictates of the mother with whom he had once gone begging. Running up to the man, Sheng-pao said politely:

"Those aren't your peaches, uncle. The owner is paying me three dollars to watch them. If he finds out you've taken any, he'll beat me."

The man reddened with embarrassment and walked away.

But another man, when Sheng-pao spoke to him in the same polite manner on a subsequent day, did not leave. It was in the heat of summer and the passer-by was ill, burning with thirst. Pleading, he offered to buy a few peaches.

"I'm supposed to be watching them, uncle. I can't sell you any. The owner's not here."

"What's the difference? You sell me a few peaches now. When he comes, you give him the money."

Sheng-pao couldn't bear to see the man suffer. He thought a moment, then sold him eight peaches at the prevailing market price. Thanking him profusely, the ill man left.

But the pitiful Sheng-pao had no pocket in which to put the money. During the summer, to save wear and tear on his meagre clothes, he went naked. So Sheng-pao dug a hole beside the lean-to and hid the money there. When the owner arrived, he dug it up and handed it to him, explaining what had happened.

The rich peasant was astonished by the honesty of this impoverished child. He blanched.

"*Aiya.* What will you be like when you grow up?" The boy really frightened him.

And what was Sheng-pao like when he grew up? As everyone knows, he worked as a hired hand, became a tenant farmer, sought extra earnings on Mount Chungnan, learned to be a good person of the old type. An insatiable desire to learn to be good and honest — that was one of Sheng-pao's essential traits. All of the Frog Flat peasants could see it. That was why every ordinary peasant, regardless of what he thought of mutual aid and co-operation, was sorry when a split occurred in Sheng-pao's mutual-aid team. They discussed it in the paddy fields. Some said: "He'll probably be quite disheartened." Others said: "At the very least, he'll take to his bed for a few days. You'll see. Secretary Lu or Secretary Wang will come and try to cheer him up."

"Don't be discouraged, Comrade Sheng-pao," they'll say. "A Communist doesn't fear difficulties."

But you're wrong, peasant neighbours. You shouldn't judge Sheng-pao by the usual standards. From the day the young fellow joined that great political party with its history of powerful and glorious struggle, he began learning how to be a good person of the new type. What use was life if you didn't do a few good deeds? If all you did was to consume a lot of grain and wear out a lot of cloth, you were living in vain.

The mutual-aid team members who returned from bamboo cutting on Mount Chungnan found a host of urgent farm

tasks awaiting them. Other peasants had been able to take advantage of the softness of the soil after the rains to level their threshing-grounds; Sheng-pao's team members had to carry water from the stream and moisten the earth before they could level theirs with a stone roller pulled by a horse. As a precaution against the Tang Stream running low, they had to clear the weeds and mud that had accumulated after last year's storms from all the ditches leading from the wells to their paddy fields. On Sheng-pao's land, his good-hearted step-father had already done this work. But the team leader couldn't very well let other members, who had no help at home, perform these tasks unaided, could he?

What was due for the brooms delivered had to be settled with the purchasing section of the supply and marketing co-op, every man who had taken part in the bamboo cutting expedition had to be paid, Sheng-lu's withdrawal had left the team short of draught animals, a special loan had to be negotiated with the bank so that the team could buy another — all of these matters were Sheng-pao's responsibility. At this critical juncture could he, a Communist, just lie on his bed and sigh? What kind of a Communist would he be if his mind couldn't control his emotions? Was that the way to advance a world-shaking cause?

Although he noticed that Jen the Fourth, Kuo Suo and Feng were wavering, Sheng-pao picked up Yu-wan and Huan-hsi and went to clear the ditches the very next day after his return from Mount Chungnan. *Tien*! There was such a pile of work waiting. The thing to do was get at it.

Sitting in the shade of one of the two prickly locust trees that flanked a well during a rest break, Sheng-pao, who had changed into the usual summer garb of the peasants of the plain, offered a word of advice to Yu-wan and Huan-hsi. Both young men were furious.

"Better keep your tempers," he said jestingly. "If you get sick with rage, who's going to buy you medicine — Sheng-lu, or his quarrelsome old father? You might get so mad you

burst. Then I'll have to rush into Huangpao and find a leather-worker to stitch you up again."

A smile on his scratched face, Sheng-pao tried to infect his comrades with his optimism. The slender Huan-hsi burst out laughing. But Yu-wan did not respond.

"How can you take it so calmly?" he growled. "Why don't you get tough? Pretty soon there'll be just the three of us left. I never thought you'd be such a softy. I'm always being aggravated, working with you."

Sheng-pao's smile faded. It was replaced by an expression of fierce anger. A hopeful look came into Yu-wan's eyes. Had his attempt to prod Sheng-pao succeeded?

The young team leader ground his teeth. He looked as if he wanted to get tough. But all he said was:

"If there's only the three of us, then the three of us will do it. Three families can still carry out our plan."

Yu-wan sighed. He shook his head sceptically.

"You don't believe it?" said Sheng-pao. "That's the key to the whole thing. I'll tell you a story. Listen."

He related what had transpired in the mountain village of Lichia in 1935 from beginning to end. How the Red Army men had been surrounded, how they had fought, the enemy's wildness, the Red Army men's staunchness, and how eighteen survivors developed into a large army. At first, Sheng-pao spoke very quietly. But the more he talked, the more aroused he became. By the time he ended, his voice was trembling and his eyes were moist. Deep in the midst of the golden sea of Frog Flat's ripe barley, he cried:

"If we don't learn from the spirit of those who died for our liberation, won't we be letting them down?"

Huan-hsi lowered his head and wiped his tears. Emotion began to register on the stony face of Yu-wan. He had been an orphan since childhood. Could any story make him weep? Pepper could bring tears to his eyes more easily. His early life first as a beggar boy and then a hired hand had not inclined him to feel grateful to anyone. Everything he possessed he owed to his large powerful body. His wife had married

him for his massive strength and virility. He hadn't had to pay a cent in gifts, either. On the contrary his mother-in-law had made wedding clothes for him and stitched a new quilt for the marriage bed.

But this tale of the Red Army soldiers moved him. He realized that he was not the toughest fellow on earth. Men who could expand again after being compressed, who could persevere when the going was hard, they were the really tough ones. He gave Sheng-pao a shove.

"*Aiya,* how can you be so selfish? Keeping a wonderful story like that to yourself — why haven't you told it to us before? A fine friend."

Sheng-pao grinned. "I hadn't thought of telling it before. It was only now, when your ideas got sick, that I recalled it. I figured it might be a good cure."

They all laughed. Then Sheng-pao explained the importance of holding their position. Ever since the spring of 1953, he said, the wealthier peasants refused to make low-interest grain loans, many middle peasants had been leaving the mutual-aid teams and the grain market was unusually tight. But he wondered whether the arrogance of the rich peasants and well-to-do middle peasants hadn't gone to their heads. Surely Chairman Mao knew of the change taking place in the countryside. And since he realized how serious it was, wouldn't he do something about it? How long would he let the private enterprise gentlemen keep running with the bit between their teeth? Would the government simply concentrate on construction in the cities? No, certainly not.

"That's why I say: our team is like a tender sprout in a dry spell. If only we can keep it from dying, one good rain and it will thrive. Whatever we do, we three mustn't give in. If we stand firm, Jen the Fourth, Feng, Kuo Suo and the others will probably stay with us. If we relax, they'll waver even worse. Right?"

Huan-hsi, who took Sheng-pao as his mentor, gazed at his teacher in admiration. Yu-wan, smiling at last, said:

"Good. We'll see what kind of prophet you are. Now let's get to work on those ditches."

When they were back at clearing the well channels again, Sheng-pao asked Yu-wan for a song. Let everyone in Frog Flat hear how cheerful the three young men of the mutual-aid team were. But Yu-wan wouldn't oblige. He said:

"Let's see how your prediction turns out first."

A night in May. Frogs in the irrigation ditches and the water-filled seedling beds began their booming chorus. Peasants, finishing their evening meal, sat outside their thatched cottages and enjoyed the coolness of dusk. From every courtyard came the sound of men and women discussing family affairs.

In Feng's beancurd mill, Sheng-pao's mutual-aid team was reckoning its accounts. The members also wanted to determine how much chemical fertilizer each of them would need. Sheng-pao was going to Huangpao Town the following day.

Aside from the team members, Tseng-fu was also present. Anything he did without them now didn't seem to have much point. Part of the community of poor peasants and hired hands from the day he was born, Tseng-fu simply could not exist away from a collective. His little Tsai-tsai was still being looked after by Sheng-pao's ma and pa. The child loved the old couple, and they cherished him like one of their own. Tseng-fu was so grateful he wanted to declare them his foster parents and assume all the duties of a son. But Sheng-pao was opposed. He said it was an old feudal custom, we didn't need such things in our new society.

The accounts settled, the men began to talk about the fertilizer to be purchased. Shuan-shuan, who had quit the team, said he had to be going. Yu-wan waved a hand contemptuously.

"Run along. Hurry, your woman's waiting for you to take her to bed."

Poor simple Shuan-shuan. His stubborn blind old father had disgraced him so, he couldn't say a word. He plodded towards the door.

Sheng-pao felt he ought to make his own attitude clear.

"Shuan-shuan," he called, "wait a minute."

The big hulking peasant halted and turned around.

"Are you really going to team up with the son of Iron Claw, the grandson of Money-bags?" Sheng-pao's voice was both sympathetic and sorrowful.

"Yes," Shuan-shuan admitted. "I can't convince my pa."

All eyes regarded him pityingly. Everyone knew that he and Su-fang were not a very fond couple. If they worked with rich peasant Yao for any length of time, could any good come of it? Of course, people could tell from appearances what was going on between Yao and Su-fang. But extra-marital relations were a private affair. Even if you saw something with your own eyes, how could you say anything to him about it? Many's the time an idle word dropped about such matters resulted in the taking of a human life. The men hated Shuan-shuan's blind old father. For most of his seventy-three years he had been exploited. Yet, though his days were numbered, he still considered it an honour to have friendly relations with an exploiter.

Sheng-pao only asked: "When you hurt your foot up in the mountains, did the mutual-aid team treat you all right?"

"Fine," Shuan-shuan replied sincerely, "really fine." He didn't know how to express his gratitude. His pa hadn't prepared him for this before he left the house, and he himself couldn't think of the proper words.

"You tell your pa this," said Sheng-pao. "We don't want him saying bad things about our team. If he has no conscience, if he makes up stories about us, we're not going to let him get away with it just because he's blind."

"Right. I'll tell him. I won't let him say a thing."

"Don't be in such a hurry to leave. I'm not finished. What's your rush? We're not going to put any pressure on you. You joined the team voluntarily, you're leaving it the same

way. But tell this to your pa: When your family wants to join us again, just speak up. No matter how backward he is, we're not going to hold it against him. He's still one of us — poor peasants and hired hands. Chairman Mao wants us to be patient with people like him, to wait. Understand?"

"Yes — "

"All right, then. Now you can go."

Shuan-shuan stopped over the threshold. Everyone was looking at Sheng-pao in surprise. They hadn't expected this young man to speak so open-mindedly, to adhere so strictly to Party policy. Many a team leader would have been ruled by his emotions if one of his members quit.

"Shuan-shuan will be sure to spread the word for you," cried Tseng-fu excitedly.

"That fellow's too simple-minded," said Feng. "Nearly thirty, and he still listens to his pa like a kid."

Jen the Fourth, who ordinarily liked to offer a bit of comment on whatever was transpiring, now squatted in silence by the wall, his head down. What was troubling him? Was he unhappy because his uncle Blind Wang was behaving shamefully? Or didn't he like the plan for close planting of the rice crop? Wearing a newly washed white shirt his wife had neatly patched and old padded blue trousers she had cut to knee-length, he squatted there like a mute. Speak up, for heaven's sake. If people knew what was wrong, they'd try to help you.

"Have you decided yet, Uncle Jen?" Sheng-pao asked him affectionately. "Some folks worry because they're broke. You've got thirty to forty yuan — what are you worrying about? Before Liberation when I was in my teens I went with you up Mount Chungnan nearly every year. Now we've got our own mutual-aid team and you want to pull the props out from under me. That's pretty rough."

Jen raised his head abruptly. There was an apologetic expression on his face. "Don't say that," he pleaded. "I'm not leaving the team. It's just that close planting. I only —"

"You only want to wreck the production plan," Huan-hsi inserted angrily.

"Call me a counter-revolutionary and be done with," Jen retorted hotly. "Arrest me, why don't you?"

The others hastily intervened:

"He shouldn't have put it that way."

"The boy means well."

"A single word shouldn't get uncle and nephew all red in the face."

Jen swallowed and glared at the primary-school graduate. Then, in a soft voice, he explained:

"It's hard for me to say this, but you can see for yourselves — I've got a whole houseful of kids, all with mouths waiting to be fed. When they're hungry if you don't give them a little something, they cry. I'm scared, I've been poor too long. And that's the truth. When we made the plan, I didn't have a penny. If you said storm the heavens, I'd have mounted a cloud. But now I've got a few yuan in my hands. I can't bear to spend them. I say to myself — suppose the close planting doesn't work? All that money will be wasted."

"No wonder you're poor," Yu-wan said with a mocking grin. "You're always afraid of what might happen. You say — suppose I choke on the food I eat? I might strangle to death."

"You shouldn't laugh at me," Jen answered reprovingly. "You're all muscle, and Golden Sister hasn't borne any babies. You haven't learned yet that money is everything."

The impoverished Tseng-fu could easily sympathize with Jen. "Don't argue with Yu-wan," he urged. "Forget it. Just say what's in your heart." Though not in the team, he was its strong supporter.

Great beads of sweat on his forehead, Jen the Fourth squatted in the lamplight. The moment of decision had come. Solving a question like this was harder than pushing a thousand-catty stone roller. And that's the truth.

"Because of this thing I haven't slept well for several nights," he admitted. "Just look at my eyes — red as a chicken's backside. There've been two Jen the Fourths inside me, not letting me sleep. One says: You've got to close-plant the rice. If

you don't you'll be letting down the Party, letting down Chairman Mao, letting down Secretary Wang who helped make the plan, letting down Sheng-pao. The other one says: Better be careful. You're not like the others. They can afford to lose. You can't. . . . That's the whole story, really and truly. That's why I say: You three first try it a year. All right? Then next year, I'll. . . ."

Sheng-pao was very moved. He remembered what District Secretary Wang had said: It's very hard for peasants to abandon a road they've been following for thousands of years and take a new one. But he pretended to be quite disappointed.

"So when you boil it all down, you still don't trust me."

"I know you've got guts," Jen said quickly. "You're very brave."

"That's not it at all. The reason is I've got backing."

"I know. Secretary Lu, Secretary Wang, they both support you —"

"That's not it either. Think, now. Who have I got standing behind me?"

"I can't say. Just because you're doing a good thing, you shouldn't turn proud, young fellow."

"The whole Communist Party and people's government are behind me," Sheng-pao cried excitedly. "Me, proud? What's so special about me, Uncle Jen? Liang the Third's son. Have you forgotten that I'm a Communist? Frankly, if it weren't for the policy of the Party and government, I and my pa would be farming our dozen or so *mou* of paddy field and living very well. In another couple of years we'd be driving you hard — by then you'd be working for us. If I weren't a Communist would I be running all over the place for a mutual-aid team? You shouldn't look at new things from the old viewpoint. Let's carry out the plan together. Feng and Kuo Suo are both watching you. If just you don't go along with us, it doesn't matter much. But you'd block the path of those behind you, and that's serious."

Jen the Fourth hung his shaven pate, the lamplight reflecting on his bald spot. At Sheng-pao's mention of the Party and the

government, he remembered that he was one of the great mass of people they were leading out of poverty. After a moment he looked up and animatedly jumped to his feet.

"All right. Even if it's a cliff, I'll leap off it with you together."

Everyone was happy. Feng proclaimed on the spot that he would transplant his rice seedlings in the manner prescribed by the plan. Tseng-fu couldn't wait for the problem of Kuo Suo to be discussed. He rose, his sunburnt arms and torso draped by a white shirt he had bought at a second-hand stall in Huang-pao Town. A serious expression on his thin face, he demanded:

"What am I doing here tonight?"

The others stared at him in surprise.

"I've come to join your mutual-aid team. And I will join, whether you want me or not. You must take me; that's all there is to it."

The men chuckled. That was typical of Tseng-fu. He made up his mind without saying a thing to anyone, and then when the time came he suddenly spilled it.

Feng's beancurd mill grew exceedingly lively. A mighty warrior dropping down from out of the sky — of course they'd take him. Their mutual-aid team's land would now extend, except for two *li* of paddy fields in the middle, from one end of the village to the other. Who would have believed it?

Enthusiastically, Sheng-pao proposed that they make Tseng-fu the assistant leader of the team. The others approved by acclamation. Sheng-pao next proposed a division of labour: He would look after external affairs and ideological education; Tseng-fu would be in charge of crop management and assign the work. Everyone said that would be perfect — exactly six-teen ounces of wine to the one-catty bottle. Yu-wan rushed forward and in the style of the classical opera intoned:

"The commander-in-chief has come to the front. What orders does he have for this humble officer?"

They all roared with laughter, including Kuo Suo who was still fretting over his personal problem.

"Quit your kidding," Tseng-fu cautioned Yu-wan. "Feng's family are asleep. You'll wake them up."

Yu-wan fondly threw an arm over his shoulders. "We'll all lend a hand and in three days we'll carry your cottage over to this end of the village. It will save you a lot of running back and forth."

Sheng-pao, Huan-hsi and Jen the Fourth gazed smilingly at Tseng-fu to see if he would be pleased.

Tseng-fu shook his head. "No," he said. "For my own sake, I'd be glad to have my cottage shifted. But I don't want to remove the thorn in Yao's side. I'm joining the team here, but I I'm still a people's delegate from the fourth electoral district of Frog Flat. If I move to this district, who'll keep an eye on Yao? I can't do it."

Everyone looked at him with admiration. He had something of the intrepid steadfastness of Wu Sung, famous hero in the classical novel *Heroes of the Marshes.*

Unfortunately, in spite of the spirit which Jen the Fourth and Tseng-fu displayed, Kuo Suo's knotty problem was yet to be unravelled.

Today in his thirties, Kuo Suo had been a hired hand for many years. Only after land reform did he legally marry his former master's bondmaid. Although he was fifteen years her senior, a strong love had grown up between them during the period they lived in the same front courtyard of the landlord's compound. Theirs was not merely an attraction between the sexes, but a crystallization of the ties of class, the love of brother and sister. Nothing could tear them apart.

Twenty-two-year-old Tsai-hsia had not fully matured physically because of the years of mistreatment she had endured as a slavey. She had the body of a sixteen- or seventeen-year-old girl, and her face still showed signs of her suffering. But to Kuo Suo she was the loveliest, most adorable woman in the world.

After talking it over, they had sold the tile-roofed house they had been allotted in Hsiapao Village under the land reform and moved into a thatched cottage in Frog Flat. In the first

place, everyone in Hsiapao rather looked down on them because they had lived together for so many years without being married. It made the young couple very uncomfortable. Secondly, by selling the house, they were able to buy two *mou* of land. Adding this to what they had received under the land reform they now had a total of seven *mou,* which meant they could get along quite nicely. They longed to buy an ox, have a baby. They had illusions of letting the world go by and just living in peace, gradually dispelling the pent-up anger against past oppression that was in their hearts. Never did they dream that the very first spring after joining Sheng-pao's mutual-aid team they would earn enough money to be able to chip in with someone and buy an ox. Truly wonderful.

Kuo Suo raised an apologetic face. "Give me three days," he pleaded. "All right?"

"Nothing doing," Yu-wan replied implacably. "You and Tsai-hsia can talk it over tonight. What do you need three days for? To invite a monk to pray for an answer?"

"Everything's a joke to you," Sheng-pao rebuked him. Turning to Kuo Suo, he asked kindly: "Why do you need three days?"

Actually Sheng-pao knew why: He wanted to arrange about buying the ox. Kuo Suo had heard that former Kuomintang corporal Pai was looking for someone to go shares in purchasing a draught animal. But Pai was rather a low fellow. Kuo Suo didn't want to get mixed up with him. Tsai-hsia was even more against it. Although both couples had lived together before marriage, Blue Moth couldn't be compared in character to Tsai-hsia, and Pai was far inferior to Kuo Suo. They felt that if they joined Pai in the purchase of an ox, it would damage their reputation. But there was no one else in the neighbouring paddy fields who wanted to go partners.

Kuo Suo sat in silence, head down. Sheng-pao saw that he was unwilling to speak. But he was a new neighbour. Sheng-pao didn't know him well enough to speak intimately. He had no choice but to consent.

"Three days, then three days. It's getting late. Let's hurry up and finish planning how much fertilizer to buy."

Before one wave subsided, another wave rose.

Pai didn't respond to Yao's instigation and ask Kuo Suo to join him in the purchase of an ox. Imagine selling a good tile-roofed building to live in a thatch-roofed cottage! "What a sap," thought Pai. But now that Kuo Suo had earned a little money in Sheng-pao's mutual-aid team, he didn't want to go along with the team's production plan. He was quitting to buy an ox and build his fortunes alone. To Pai, Kuo Suo was one of those useless peasants who'd never amount to anything. Timid as a mouse. No vision. If he, Pai, had hired-hand as his background he, not Chen-shan, would be the big shot in Frog Flat. But as a former soldier in the Kuomintang army, he could never become a village cadre, no matter what sort of pose he adopted. In the four years since Liberation, one thing after another had proved this to Pai. But he hadn't given up hope. If the chance came, he'd try again to push himself in. Even if he didn't succeed, what did he have to lose?

After two days of looking around for someone to go partners with on an ox, Pai suddenly changed his mind. He would join Sheng-pao's mutual-aid team. The split in the team and the fact that some of the members were wavering over the question of close planting gave him inspiration. It was a great chance to demonstrate his bold progressiveness. At any other time, Sheng-pao would never consider accepting him.

When Pai went looking for the team leader in Liang the Third's compound he was told that Sheng-pao had gone to Huangpao Town. The matter would bear no delay. Pai followed him to Huangpao. Sheng-pao had just finished buying bean-cake fertilizer and was heading for the supply and marketing co-op. Pai hastened up and stopped him on the street in the blazing sunlight.

Taking him by the sleeve of his white tunic, Pai pulled the straw-hatted team leader aside.

"Let's get into the shade of this wall, Sheng-pao. There's something I must talk to you about."

"What is it?" With a suspicious smile on his honest face, Sheng-pao accompanied him into the shade.

Pai took two cigarettes out of his pocket. He had just bought them. One he handed to Sheng-pao, one he put in his own mouth. Quickly he struck a match.

Sheng-pao warily refused his cigarette. Cigarettes were very pleasant, but not when coupled with a request from Pai.

"Have you quit smoking?" Pai was surprised.

"No. I prefer a pipe." Sheng-pao pulled out his short pipe and filled it with tobacco. He couldn't help smiling at the scoundrel's displeased expression. "What's on your mind, Pai?" he demanded. "Hurry up. I'm busy."

Seriously, even solemnly, Pai announced: "I want to join your mutual-aid team. How about it?" His lips formed the words with special stress.

Sheng-pao stared. Would wonders never cease?

"Why are you looking at me like that? I'm on the level," Pai insisted. "I agree to all your conditions. All right? I'll close-plant, sow wheat after rice, obey the team leader, keep labour discipline — whatever the team wants. If you yell 'attention' I won't stand 'at ease'. Say the word, brother."

It was too perfect. Pai was just too good to be true.

Sheng-pao smiled and said evasively: "You're used to your freedom. Our team is a collective. You wouldn't be able to stand the restrictions. What's more, in the seventh lunar month we're going into the mountains again to fell some timber. Would you be able to take such hard work?"

Pai's swarthy face registered hurt. "It's not the moon you're going to, is it?" he protested. "Even if it is, I'm going too. I'm not boasting. You peasants can't imagine what I had go through in the old Kuomintang army. Men with a sense of organization can do anything. During that two-year period when we were overthrowing the tyrants and carrying out land reform here, you were the leader of the militia. Whenever you told me to do something didn't I do it? Didn't I stand

guard in winter, though my feet were freezing? Didn't I stop Tenant-skinner Yang from getting away? Others may not know it, but you ought to, Sheng-pao."

What he said was true. Sheng-pao hesitated. "Our team is heading for socialism," he informed Pai with a laugh. You can't even plough well. Do you know what socialism means?"

"*Aiya*, how can you look down on me like that? I'll go with you fellows to communism," Pai vowed, tossing his head for emphasis.

"A lazy person like you, Pai, you wouldn't be able to change so easily. That's the truth."

"Why can't all of you help me change? You're going up to heaven — am I to be left below? If I can't join, I'll probably be a loafer the rest of my life. But in the team — you just watch. If I don't work hard you can always kick me out, can't you? A full-fledged Communist — how could I put anything over on you? Really, now."

That bird certainly could talk. Sheng-pao looked embarrassed. He didn't know what to say. He couldn't refuse to consider Pai's request. He said he would talk it over with the other members of the team.

"See you tomorrow, then." Pai drove him hard.

Sheng-pao had to agree. "All right. Tomorrow."

After picking up the fertilizer at the co-op, he started back for Frog Flat. As he pushed his wheelbarrow beneath the blazing sun, he considered the problem of Pai.

Of course he's not a good farmer. He's a bit of a rascal and he lives beyond his means. And that wife of his is cut from the same cloth. But Pai's strong. If everyone pushes him, he can put in a good day's work. With our whole society stressing labour and production, he probably realizes there's no future in loafing. Judging by his manner and the tone of his voice, he's really made up his mind. He knows there'll never be another land reform, so he's decided to buckle down." As Sheng-pao trundled his wheelbarrow over the Huangpao Bridge, he smiled to himself.

Continuing west in the shade of a row of white poplars that lined the road, Sheng-pao thought:

"He's got so many good reasons, I can't refute him. It's true the mutual-aid teams have the duty to reform loafers. I clearly remember that being said. It's a social responsibility of the teams to draw the loafers in, not to keep them out. If nobody wants them, if we all think they'll be a nuisance, then who's going to reform them? It looks like we've got to accept that bird. *Aiya,* where am I wandering?"

Sheng-pao had been so engrossed in his meditations, he had taken the wrong fork in the road. Turning back, he pushed his wheelbarrow north along a path through the fields.

"How does Pai compare with Blind Wang?" he wondered. "Actually he's much more able than the old man. Although he's lazy and enjoys living high, he's bold, and willing to try new things. But can our team cure his faults? Yes, we can. We've got Yu-wan, Huan-hsi, Jen the Fourth, and now Tseng-fu. One demon can't whip up an evil wind all by himself. You need a whole gang of demons for that. What kind of a Communist am I if I haven't the nerve to take on Pai? Have I become timid just because two families have quit the team?"

At this, Sheng-pao's body filled with strength, and he strode on vigorously.

"You don't dare take on a fellow like Pai, and you still want to change society!" Sheng-pao twitted himself. "Of course we'll accept him. And when we do, Kuo Suo won't have anyone to go partners with in buying an ox. Our team's lost two members and gained two. We haven't been hurt a bit. We've still got eight."

But when he brought the fertilizer home to Frog Flat in his wheelbarrow and spoke to the other members about Pai, except for Yu-wan and Huan-hsi, everyone was against it.

Jen the Fourth shook his head and demanded loudly: "What do we want with a bird like that? He doesn't even know when his ploughshare drops off. He puts the wrong end of the pole into the millstone. One mouse in the soup spoils the whole pot. If he joins, I quit." And in a hurt voice, he admonished:

"No matter how much good you've done for the people, you shouldn't get cocky, Sheng-pao. You're liable to tumble."

The stern Tseng-fu was even firmer, more positive. Originally he had been intending to inspect everyone's barley to see whose was the most ripe. This would determine in what order the members' crops should be harvested. When he heard Sheng-pao's words, he called his inspection off, and announced he was leaving the team. It wasn't that Pai had sworn at him last spring at the time of the low-interest grain loans. That was a small matter. The main reason was that the gold of the new society should not mingle with the garbage of the old. Absolutely not. Of course he wouldn't rage against his beloved Sheng-pao. Calmly, quietly, he only asked that he be given his share of the fertilizer. He was going home.

Sheng-pao smiled. "Don't be like that, Tseng-fu, please. We wouldn't exchange one Tseng-fu for a hundred Pai's. Let's talk it over. You're the assistant team leader. If you're dead against taking him, I can't insist."

You're not steady enough if you get ideas like that, Tseng-fu's eyes said. You're a far cry from Chen-shan. I can't stick with you. You're too dangerous.

But his mouth only urged: "You work with him. His land is nearer the rest of you than mine. That's the truth. I'm too far away. Just give me my fertilizer and let me go."

Sheng-pao understood what he said — both with his eyes and with his mouth. But he would not give him his fertilizer. Tseng-fu left without it.

Now it was his parents' turn to criticize young Sheng-pao.

"See what a mess you've stirred up. Just as the team was beginning to look like something, you break it up again. Stand more firmly on your feet, child." His mother was very worried about the split in the team.

Sheng-pao's success with the "Hundred Day Ripener" rice seed, his expedition into the mountains to cut bamboo brooms, the unperturbed manner in which he faced the withdrawal of two of the members of the mutual-aid team had gradually won Liang the Third's admiration. If the Party could convert a

simple peasant's son into such a pillar of strength, he, Liang, who had accepted being put upon in vain all his life, had nothing to say. He even boasted to friends: Sheng-pao had staked their ten *mou* of land and their thatched cottage compound on the team, and he did it gladly. Old Liang thoroughly approved. If they were building a team, they ought to build it with a will. But Sheng-pao's proposal that they accept Pai into membership far exceeded the old man's powers of imagination.

He shook his finger under his son's nose. "You're riding for a fall. How can you be so rash? Pai is the worst fellow in the world. He'd only make trouble in the team. Even if he didn't, we'd be disgraced. People would say: See, they've lost two members, so they take on a loafer, an ex-dog-face in Chiang Kai-shek's army, and his tramp of wife — they don't care who they take. How would you like to hear that? Well, that's just what you will be hearing if you don't come down to earth."

Sheng-pao put the chemical fertilizer, packed in heavy paper bags, under the young agronomist's bed. He squatted, lit his pipe and gave the matter some more thought.

Was the opinion of the majority correct? Or the conclusion he came to when pushing home the wheelbarrow? Holding his pipe in one hand, with the other he rubbed the pate Jen the Fourth had shaved for him the day before yesterday. Should he act according to the view of the majority? Jen the Fourth, Tseng-fu and his ma and pa were very good people. He ought not go against their wishes. During the Party rectification campaign, hadn't Secretary Wang said that even though a Communist may be right if, after explanation, the masses still don't accept his ideas, he should wait and not try to force things. Right, he would have to wait. He decided not to take Pai into the team.

But after making this decision, Sheng-pao was very distressed. Pai's earnest request had moved the team leader's honest heart. And no thinking Communist could feel right when he couldn't fully carry out the Party's policy on mutual aid and co-operation.

He had lost face for the Party and had let himself be put on the spot by a loafer. He hadn't felt particularly uneasy when Shuan-shuan and Sheng-lu quit the team. Why should he? He was acting in accordance with Party policy. But he felt very badly when he couldn't accept Pai, as Party policy prescribed. Pai was a human being, not a wolf. Nor was he a landlord, or rich peasant, or reactionary army officer, or ringleader of a secret society. He had just served as an assistant squad leader in a horse-cart transport company of the Kuomintang army. From the anti-tyrant and land reform days right up to the present, Pai had moved along with times. He couldn't be a cadre, but did that mean he couldn't join a mutual-aid team either? A mutual-aid team was not a Communist Party or government unit. It wasn't even a people's organization. It was just a labour production group. Could it turn a man like Pai down flat?

Peasants didn't want loafers in their team. That was understandable. But a Communist shouldn't merely tag along with the peasants. Sheng-pao had an unhappy premonition. If they really refused Pai's request, they would be behaving unreasonably. They would be forcing him down the road to evil. Pai would become the team's enemy, and he had a wild, destructive streak. He would gossip in Hsiapao Village, saying the mutual-aid team never gave him a chance, he would besmirch its reputation. If the team accepted him, reason would be on the team's side. And if Pai then tried to make trouble? Call a mass meeting and put him under restraint. Just let him try. They'd squelch him, fast.

Sheng-pao decided that his job was not yet finished. He knocked the ashes out of his pipe against the sole of his shoe, placed the pipe on the agronomist's table, crossed the threshold and quickly set forth.

"Sheng-pao, supper's ready. Where are you going?" his mother chased after him to call.

"I've important business," he shouted back, without turning his head.

"Go after supper."

"I'll eat when I come back. You and pa eat first." He strode off in a southerly direction.

Chen-shan and his brother Chen-hai, standing in the muddy water, were transplanting rice sprouts on the west bank of Liberation Creek. Bare to the waist, their trousers rolled up to their knees, they moved backwards as they worked. Sweat, running down their sunburnt backs, was separated into two streams by the watersheds of their spines. Occasionally they wiped the perspiration from their foreheads with glistening arms.

It was past noon, and they were the only peasants left in the Frog Flat fields. But they did not go home. They wanted to transplant two *mou* of rice sprouts before cutting their barley. They had to get the first done or they couldn't start on the second.

Peasants – when they were striving to build up their family fortunes they could use their last drop of energy to increase output, they could ignore the hunger in their bellies to economize. Don't you remember how Sheng-pao and his pa slaved on those eighteen *mou* of land they rented from Miser Lu?

Of all the noble actions of mankind, labour brings the most permanent benefits. No matter how mistaken a man may be in his thinking, by his labour he can always in liking and sympathy, always arouse hope. The peasants of Frog Flat were amazed. How those two *mou* of run-down peach orchard on the west bank of Liberation Creek had changed. The old peach trees had disappeared. In their place were corn and wheat, and paddy fields shimmering with water. The Communists taught the peasants the principle that labour created the world. There never was a truer word.

For the past few days the chairman of the village deputies to the township people's council had been in poor spirits. His suggestion to Kai-hsia had not proved very timely. Not only had she come home without taking the entrance exam for the textile mill, but she treated him coldly when they met on the

village street. Kai-hsia no longer respected him or asked for his advice.

At first Chen-shan was panicky. His supporters were steadily dwindling. What was he going to do? Then he thought: "Anyhow we have at least another few dozen years of New Democratic society ahead of us. There won't be any more big political struggles in the village." He didn't need mass support to plant crops, did he? He had meant well when he made his suggestion to Kai-hsia. It just happened not to be the right time for it. His heart was in the right place, he knew that. Kai-hsia was annoyed with him? He'd just quit calling at her compound. They'd both get along just as well.

As to his mutual-aid team, it was only seasonal. If Kai-hsia and her mother came and asked for his help, he would not refuse them. But if they did not he would just forget about mutual aid. So what? Stubborn, self-confident Chen-shan had never gone crawling to anyone. Now Sheng-pao's team had split up, which only proved that Chen-shan's opinion of mutual aid and co-operation was correct. It made him feel much better. Let Sheng-pao pour his energy into a failure. He had energy to spare.

In a word, the defeat of the low-interest loans, the middle peasants' gradual desertion of the mutual-aid teams and the tightness of the free grain market were encouraging Chen-shan, who economically was growing into a well-to-do middle peasant, to develop a well-to-do middle peasant's mentality.

Distressed, agitated, Sheng-pao hurried to the west bank of Liberation Creek. When he found the chairman of the village deputies, Chen-shan and his brother Chen-hai had already come out of the paddy field and were standing on a grass-covered ridge. Chen-hai went to wash his feet in the ditch. Chen-shan, his feet still muddy, prepared to talk with Sheng-pao about official business. He was sure it was official business. Comrade Sheng-pao had never sought him on any private matter.

"Well," Chen-shan began with a laugh, "how did you do in the mountains this time? Earn lots of money?" His protruding eyes observed Sheng-pao's upset manner.

With the modesty befitting a younger man of inferior rank, Sheng-pao replied: "Enough to get our poor peasants and hired hands through the spring scarcity period and buy them fertilizer."

"And you didn't get anything out of it yourself, eh? Heh-heh. All for the poor peasants and hired hands, eh? Heh-heh."

Chen-shan's tone didn't sound quite right. But Sheng-pao replied with a forced laugh: "Naturally my own fertilizer problem has also been solved."

"Ah, that's more like it. When you tell a story don't keep half of it back. Don't pretend everything *you* do is for the poor peasants and hired hands. As if others think only of themselves."

The young man lowered his head. He didn't express himself very well. But he hadn't been hinting at what the chairman said at all. This would be a lesson to him. In the future he'd be more careful when he spoke.

Chen-shan rubbed the mud off his big hands. "You haven't attended a single Party meeting all this spring, young fellow," he said with an overbearing air. Chen-shan was Sheng-pao's Communist Party group leader.

Sheng-pao got a bit flurried. "When you held the first meeting I was in the county town at a conference of mutual-aid team leaders," he explained. "The second time I was up in Kuohsien County buying rice seed. The third time I was cutting bamboo on Mount Chungnan."

"You didn't ask to be excused, either."

"I never thought the Party would call those meetings just when I was away."

"You should have. You should have. Did you expect us not to have any meetings all spring? When you joined the Party you were told clearly: It's a Communist's responsibility to pay Party dues and attend Party meetings."

Sheng-pao had nothing to say. He was pale. He felt worse. *Aiya*, why must a man discover his failings only after they appear? He had been so involved in his difficulties he had completely forgotten the usual organizational rules. Why shouldn't the Party hold meetings in all that time he was away? He should have gone to Chen-shan whenever he had to leave and said that if there were Party meetings in his absence, he wouldn't be able to attend. That would have been in keeping with the rules. But he hadn't. Sheng-pao hated himself. Why hadn't he informed the leader of his Party group? He plainly had been in the wrong.

And it wasn't only because he was young. No, he couldn't excuse himself. He'd have to dig the reason out of his consciousness. Could it be that he had a sneaking contempt for Chen-shan because he had been criticized during the Party rectification? That would be awful. The young man knew that a comrade's ideology was one thing, his authority as leader of a Party group was another. What could Sheng-pao say? He was embarrassed almost to tears. He hated his callowness. He warned himself: "Don't get conceited, whatever you do; you must maintain good relations with Chen-shan."

"I was wrong, Comrade Chen-shan," Sheng-pao said. His voice was low and trembling. His eyes were moist.

Chen-shan wore a satisfied smirk. Speaking both with the lofty superiority of a leader and the simple kindness of an ordinary peasant, he smiled forgivingly. "A comrade who recognizes his mistakes is a good comrade. You're only a probationary Party member. We won't delve into your ideology. Pay attention to the rules in the future."

"Right. A man learns from experience." Sheng-pao felt as if he had been relieved of a heavy load. He was very grateful.

Chen-shan sat down on the grassy bank of the ditch and washed his feet. Turning his head, he asked with a smile: "What did you come to see me about? Is it because your team has collapsed?"

"It collapsed, but we put it together again," Sheng-pao said cheerfully.

"But you lost two members. How many does that leave?"

"Seven. And now Pai wants to join our team. That's what I want to ask you. Do you think we ought to take him in?"

"What do you think?"

"I think we should."

Chen-shan snorted through his hairy nostrils. A chill struck Sheng-pao's heart.

Only after he finished washing his feet, clambered up the bank, and put on his shoes did Chen-shan speak. Sternly he said to the waiting Sheng-pao:

"I've kept a close watch on that man ever since Liberation. He wants to bore his way into our ranks? He'll never do it even if he sharpens his head with a knife. He wants to be a cadre? He'll find getting up to heaven easier. What's his background? Kuomintang army dog-face, loafer, social scum. For the sake of having eight members on your team and proving what an able fellow you are, you're going to open the back door to the likes of him?"

Sheng-pao went cold. It was plain he hadn't looked at the whole picture. Maybe he was trying to push ahead too fast. Forget it. They wouldn't accept Pai, then. A probationary Party member couldn't assume such a political responsibility. If, in the next three days, Kuo Suo quit, they would simply get along with the remaining five poor peasants and one middle peasant. It was a good team. Why look for trouble?

"Comrade Chen-shan," Sheng-pao said gratefully, "it's lucky I came to you. We won't take him. Half our members are against it anyhow. Letting him join the team would only mean trouble." Chen-shan had been curbing his bad habit of lecturing people ever since Kai-hsia started ignoring him. But seeing that Sheng-pao was so tractable, he said in a concerned voice:

"You must learn to be more steady, Comrade Sheng-pao. Only when your feet are planted firmly on the ground can you take a new step forward. It takes time to become a Model Peasant. Don't be in such a hurry. You hope to be called to the provincial capital, be sent to Peking, meet Chairman Mao?

You're too young. Be prepared to wait at least ten to fifteen years. If you rush too fast you're only liable to tumble. We're both from the same village; I have your best interests at heart. Who else would talk to you like this? Do you understand me?"

Sheng-pao, who a few words had made so malleable a moment before, now flared into a rage. Chen-shan absolutely sickened him. How could he stay on good terms with a man like that? Just because Chen-shan never forgot his personal interests in anything he did, he needn't think everyone else was the same! Did a soldier risk his life at the front only in the hope of becoming an officer? Did people work hard because they were looking for higher rank or more pay? Couldn't a person be enthusiastic about mutual aid and co-operation without coveting the title of Model Peasant? What a mind! Sheng-pao's nostrils practically spurted flames. But Chen-shan was of the elder generation. What could he say to the man?

Sheng-pao muttered a farewell and returned home.

Squatting in the courtyard, he ate the lunch his ma had kept for him. She didn't question him. The more Sheng-pao thought the angrier he became. After the meal, instead of resting, he went out bare-headed under the mid-day sun, forgetting his wide straw hat, and crossed Tang Stream. In the middle, he tripped. Hey, for the sake of the people and the Party, what if a man went down? You did your best, that was all. Other comrades could learn from your defeat. In China's revolution, the lives lost were countless.

He charged into the Hsiapao Township government compound to find Secretary Lu.

Several ancient cedars grew in the big courtyard. Oho, Communists, Youth Leaguers, people's deputies and committee members from the various villages were in the meeting hall using the noon rest hour to hold an emergency conference. They were preparing to launch an all-out attack that evening on the wheat borer infesting the northern plain before it could get a firm hold. Frog Flat was free of this pest, so the village was not represented. Sheng-pao listened. Secretary Lu was addressing the meeting:

"Is there any trouble the Chinese people can't lick? Tell me. Millions of old Chiang's Kuomintang troops, armed to the teeth with weapons from their Uncle Sam — who wiped them out? Are we going to let a little wheat borer push us around? Tell me: Will we stand for it?" The beloved secretary's rough peasant voice aroused his listeners' hatred and contempt of the wheat borer.

"Exterminate the wheat borer!" shouted the township chief.

"Exterminate the wheat borer!" The thunderous response shook the meeting hall.

Hot blood coursed through Sheng-pao's veins. Here were Communists of the same spirit as he. Seeing this assembly, he knew he would dedicate his life completely to the cause of the people, with never an instant's hesitation.

He didn't enter the meeting hall. Sheng-pao never liked to attract attention. He went out and squatted under the cedars. He was like an irritated contestant in a law case. Only today did he realize the extent of the conflict between himself and Chen-shan. But no matter how Chen-shan annoyed him, he controlled himself. He didn't want it to develop into an open clash. The success of the mutual-aid and co-operation movement would make Chen-shan admit his faults. If he didn't wake up, Chen-shan wouldn't remain in the Party much longer. Just talking about "Communist spirit" wasn't enough. It was action that counted.

Squatting there, Sheng-pao knew he wasn't afraid of Chen-shan; he'd have it out with him if there was no other way. Chen-shan had already been criticized, whereas Sheng-pao believed that his own approach was the same as the Party leaders'. The reason he wanted to avoid a clash was not timidity but because he hoped that, given time, the competent Chen-shan would finally get straight in his thinking and be able to lead him onwards once more. But if Chen-shan couldn't see that the world was bigger than Fifth Village, and clung to the dream — which Sheng-pao had also had before Liberation — of building up his family fortunes, and insisted on this as his motive in life, he was in for some rough times.

The mobilization meeting for the attack on the wheat borer ended. The cadres returned to their various villages to start the campaign. The Party secretary, the township chief and the township clerk would go to the villages that needed help most. Sheng-pao took Secretary Lu by the arm, and the two pushed aside the white door-curtain and entered the office. This was the second time since his return from Mount Chungnan that Sheng-pao had called on the secretary.

Since Lu was plainly in a hurry to go to the countryside, Sheng-pao immediately told him of Pai's application to join the mutual-aid team. He said nothing of the fact that he had asked Chen-shan's advice. Still less did he relate what Chen-shan had said to him. Even if Secretary Lu weren't busy, Sheng-pao wouldn't have repeated those words.

All smiles, the secretary asked him: "What do you think about it?"

"I think we ought to accept him," Sheng-pao answered militantly, chest high.

He explained his reasons — Party policy, the strengthening of the mutual-aid team, Pai's background, the two possible ways Pai might develop after joining the team. Sheng-pao spoke in detail, like a litigant arguing his case in court. He seemed anxious not to lose.

After hearing him out, Secretary Lu, always cheerful, always far-sighted, smiled and said: "Take Pai in, quick. If he didn't want to join, we couldn't force him. We couldn't just assign him to one of the teams, could we? He wants to join? I only hope he means it. What's so dangerous about Pai? An assistant squad leader in a Kuomintang army horse-cart unit! What are we supposed to do with the old Kuomintang officers — there are a couple of thousand generals alone — kill them all? Accept them. Turn every one of them over to the people and let the people educate them. Go back to Frog Flat. If Tseng-fu and Jen the Fourth and the others agree — good. If they don't — don't argue. Tonight, when I've finished this battle, I'll come around and talk to them."

On the way home, Sheng-pao felt fine. Passing Huan-hsi's apricot tree, he jumped up and picked a piece of ripe fruit. He took a bite. Delicious.

There was really no need for the secretary to come tonight. If the people's government and the Communist Party advocated something, would Tseng-fu and Jen the Fourth refuse? Who ever heard of a man quarrelling with himself?

All the team members who had been opposed, including Sheng-pao's ma and pa, looked at Sheng-pao in amazement. But he knew it was the prestige of the Party which convinced them, not his own. If his own prestige had been high, wouldn't they have agreed as soon as he made the proposal? He had only one merit, Sheng-pao felt — his complete devotion to the revolution. All the rest of the credit belonged to the Party.

Sheng-pao notified Pai to come to a meeting that night in Feng's beancurd mill to discuss harvesting barley and transplanting rice. Pai was a devilish fellow. He sprang to attention and smartly saluted his team leader.

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It was an early summer evening. Although the spring chill had gone, the really hot weather was yet to come. A west wind blew down from the plain along the upper reaches of the Wei, bringing with it the fragrance of burgeoning wheat and driving the heat of the day into the eastern provinces. It also kept the mosquitoes from biting. Since most of the paddy fields had not yet been flooded, the frogs' chorus was still relatively low in volume.

What an enchanting night! Those fields which were being soaked, glistened and shimmered. Could compound walls keep lovers in on a night like this?

Kai-hsia, who had made all her preparations for going out before supper, hastily finished her meal and left. As she stepped out of her thatched cottage, the night was very dark. She could see only the dim outlines of Mount Chungnan and the eastern plain. But as she passed through the compound gateway, northern plain, Hsiapao Village, the buildings, the trees, the paths and the ridges in the fields also became visible.

"Where are you running every night, Kai-hsia?" her mother called after her. "What are you so busy about?"

Kai-hsia didn't answer, but continued along her pre-determined path.

"Come home early. Don't make me go out yelling for you again."

Kai-hsia heard her mother irritatedly close the compound gate. This didn't bother her. Kai-hsia decided she wasn't going to take the most important step in a girl's life according to the preferences of a feudal mother.

"You got married at twenty yourself, ma," she thought. "And when you were a big girl, what concerned you most? But don't

interfere, ma. I'll settle my own affairs. You gave birth to me, but my heart belongs to the Party." All this was going through Kai-hsia's mind as she walked down a path amid fields of ripe barley. She was reproachful but not angry.

Kai-hsia had discovered an infallible rule. Whenever she followed her mother's wishes, her mother only increased her demands. But when she stubbornly held out, ma usually backed down. Kai-hsia believed her mother would tacitly agree to whatever accomplished fact she confronted her with.

She and Sheng-pao would be sweethearts. Of this, she was positive. She saw through chairman Chen-shan now. His fine words about supporting the Party could no longer fool the twenty-one-year-old girl. Although her dear Sheng-pao was all tied up with the trouble in his mutual-aid team, Chen-shan just went casually on, transplanting rice sprouts with his brother in their two new *mou* of paddy field. He wouldn't think of offering Sheng-pao a hand. A fine mentality!

Every night since Sheng-pao had returned from the mountains, Kai-hsia had been strolling along the path through the paddy fields near the lower reaches of the stream, hoping to meet him. She was longing for a talk with him in the peach grove by Liberation Creek. Kai-hsia wanted to settle their misunderstanding, to explain that he had hurt her girlish self-respect that day near the Huangpao Bridge but that she had long since forgiven him. She wanted to make it plain that her love for him had never changed.

Her words were already rehearsed. She would tell him how dull the city seemed after they separated. She would describe her different states of mind on the two occasions she went to the city, reporting her reactions in detail to show him what misery their parting had caused her. Kai-hsia had many, many things to say. Was the summer night short? It didn't matter. As long as Sheng-pao was willing, she would stay with him in the peach grove till the sky over the eastern plain turned pale, till the peasants led their draught animals to the fields in the rosy dawn. She didn't care how her ma would scold.

To a marriageable girl, Kai-hsia finally realized, love was like a searing flame in the heart. Neither rules and conventions, parents' strictures, nor public opinion could extinguish that flame. Of course if the boy changed his mind, or lacked the corresponding fire, that would be another matter. But Kai-hsia was convinced that Sheng-pao wasn't the petty sort. He wouldn't hold a single display of temperament against her. He was young in age, but he had the outlook of a grown man. The ardour of a person like that was much more precious than that of an ordinary young fellow who revealed his emotions easily.

Kai-hsia didn't love Sheng-pao because of his exterior; she loved his "inner man". She couldn't quite explain what she meant by this — Kai-hsia had only three years of primary school. But on one point she was clear — Sheng-pao was a hero. Although everyone agreed that he would take time to mature, Kai-hsia could already see the early signs. Sheng-pao did things differently from ordinary people.

She would tell him what Comrade Ya-mei of the county Youth League had said — that the secretaries of the county Party committee had a very good impression of him. She was sure Sheng-pao would be pleased and encouraged. It was her guess that the county Party committee would pay special attention to his development.

From now on she would take more initiative, and not resort to various devices to compel Sheng-pao to make the first move, as she had previously. It wasn't that she wanted to play up to him, but she had learned from her last experience that all his attention was focused on the job the Party had given him. His interest in girls was considerably less than it had been a year or two before. She would emulate the well-educated cadres in the city — when those men and women walked together it was side by side. She would do the same with Sheng-pao on the paths through the fields. When she brushed against his strong frame, their arms touching, how happy she would be.

But Kai-hsia was in for a disappointment. The first night, Comrade Han, the young agronomist, was still sharing Sheng-pao's room. The second night, Sheng-pao went to Feng's place to settle the team's accounts. The third night he again went to Feng's to plan the summer harvest and the transplanting of the rice shoots. That night Kai-hsia decided to wait beneath a white poplar till his meeting was over. But her mother, on the bank of Liberation Creek, began calling her:

"Kai-hsia – Kai-hsia –"

Ma's voice was strident and carried far. It probably could be heard in every house in Hsiapao Village. Listening in the dark, Kai-hsia grew very upset. Sulkily, she went home and berated her mother. They nearly quarrelled.

"What could happen to a big girl like me? Wolves eat me? What were you yelling about?"

Kai-hsia's ma had been a widow for many years. There was no man in the house and she couldn't control her daughter, she thought. The widow wept. Kai-hsia softened.

The fourth night, Kai-hsia met Sheng-pao on the grassy cart path. But Huan-hsi was with him, and they were going to Feng's compound again. What could she say? Looks and facial expressions were lost in the darkness. She could only give him an ordinary greeting. As the two young fellows continued on to their meeting place, she swore softly to herself:

"Huan-hsi, you hateful young devil! You're Sheng-pao's tail – always dragging along!"

Now it was the fifth night. Kai-hsia's determination and boldness were at their height. Even if Huan-hsi were there, she'd make a date with Sheng-pao. She couldn't keep scampering around all hours in the fields every night. What was there to fear? Maybe Huan-hsi would laugh at a grown girl chasing after a young man, but when she moved into the Liang compound as Sheng-pao's wife, what difference would that make? So she'd lose a little face.

Then she saw them. Sheng-pao and Huan-hsi appeared through the veils of night. They were going from a grassy path in the fields on to the main road.

Kai-hsia hurried forward to intercept them before they could leave the road again for the path leading to Feng's compound.

"Where are you going?" Kai-hsia asked tensely, when she had caught up.

"We're working on our summer harvest and rice shoot transplanting plans," Sheng-pao replied in a relaxed manner. And he queried politely: "Where are you going?"

Kai-hsia's heart sank. Why was he so cold? In the past, he was always very awkward when he spoke to her, like all young courting peasants. Now he was so casual, so natural, as if there were nothing special between them. Annoyed, Kai-hsia was sorry she had taken the chairman's advice to apply job in the textile mill.

She forced a smile. Then, afraid Sheng-pao might not see it clearly in the darkness, she twisted her body – which looked very willowy in her summer clothes – in an appealing manner and queried fondly, as if they were all one family:

"You still haven't arranged about the transplanting and the summer harvest?"

Sheng-pao's reply was businesslike. "Originally it was all settled. But we've had a big turnover in manpower. Now, Tseng-fu and Pai have joined the team. We have to make new arrangements."

The clever Huan-hsi could see that Kai-hsia was determined to lure away his team leader. He knew too that at one time their relationship had attracted considerable attention.

"You two talk," he said with a smile. "I'll go on ahead." He strode away.

Sheng-pao and Kai-hsia, just the two of them, were alone on the great plain in the limitless night. Sheng-pao had a feeling that happiness was charging in his direction.

Frogs croaked in the roadside ditches. Wherever the young couple approached, frogs ceased their clamour and dived into the water, poking their heads out and resuming their chorus after they passed.

The lovers were silent. They walked a dozen or more yards, but neither could think of how to start the conversation. For

the moment the only thing that came to Sheng-pao's mind was Kai-hsia's attempt to get a job in a textile mill. But he didn't like to talk about other people's failures. Why hurt her feelings? And Kai-hsia? All her carefully prepared words were driven into a jumble by Sheng-pao's coolness. How could she begin a conversation and lead it around naturally to the question of their relationship?

She was quite excited. As they strolled side by side, the narrow blue sleeve of her tunic brushed against the wide white sleeve of his shirt. The night breeze wafted the fragrance of her face cream to Sheng-pao's nostrils.

Kai-hsia decided she would commence with the topic that was closest to Sheng-pao's heart.

"How come your mutual-aid team is taking in Pai?" she queried.

Sheng-pao had been through several turbulent days. Gazing at Mount Chungnan, he said with a sigh:

"What can we do? He wants to join. What reason have we to refuse? He was a soldier mercenary in the old society, but his class status is poor peasant. What choice have we?"

"Huh," Kai-hsia said contemptuously. "During land reform he was all for it. He sharpened his head to a point, hoping to push his way into the ranks of the activists. But we wouldn't have him as a cadre in our village."

"Nobody's going to let him become a cadre now either. Don't worry," Sheng-pao said firmly. "All we want is that he takes part in mutual-aid team production." After a pause, he added: "I spoke to Secretary Lu first. I wouldn't decide a thing like this myself."

"But that wife of his is such a slut—"

"Before Liberation, while Pai was away in the Kuomintang army, Blue Moth was much too free and easy," Sheng-pao agreed. "But since Liberation the social atmosphere has changed. Men don't go to her thatched cottage any more."

"She's lazy too."

"That doesn't matter. So is Pai. We'll reform them."

"I've got to hand it to you," Kai-hsia said admiringly. "You certainly are determined." In a tender moving voice she continued:

"Sheng-pao, you don't know how I worry for you. This member of your team quits, that one won't carry out the plan. What are you going to do? I say to myself. The district considers your team a key team, you've accepted the challenge of the best team in the county, and now, just at the busy season, your team breaks up. What are you going to do? I'm even more upset about it than you. My heart's with you every moment. I've been out on this path every night since you came home from the mountains, waiting for you. I hate myself for being a girl. Otherwise I'd be working right with you, strengthening your team. When I heard that Kuo Suo wanted to quit, I ran to his house and pleaded with his wife not to let him. Mutual aid and co-operation is the only road for the poor peasant and hired hand, I told her. There's no future in going it alone."

As they turned off the main road to a grassy path that led into the fields, Sheng-pao halted. An exalted love was melting his cool reserve. In the light of the stars and the night glow reflected on the water in the paddy fields, Kai-hsia observed the appreciative smile on Sheng-pao's face, and she was glad.

But they had come to the parting of the ways. How distressing! This instant seemed more precious than several ordinary days, several ordinary months.

Kai-hsia put a tender hand on Sheng-pao's white sleeve and asked very, very softly: "Are you still angry? That day at Huangpao Bridge you were much too hard on me. I didn't really. . . ." She leaned nearer and closed her long-lashed eyes. It was an obvious invitation.

Sheng-pao's heart had already been reduced to liquid by the flaming heat of love. He was burning all over, as if something within Kai-hsia were being transmitted to him through her loving words, her intelligent expression, that gentle hand. Sheng-pao was intoxicated. He felt vitally alive, he

had a delightful sense of well-being. The fragrance of Kai-hsia's face cream had irritated him at Huangpao Bridge; he had thought her frivolous. Now he realized she was wearing it to please him.

Women, oh women! Even an unlettered girl is infinitely painstaking where love is concerned. Men are much cruder by comparison.

Sheng-pao was very stirred. He longed to wrap this girl who loved him in his strong arms and kiss her. But he didn't. To any decent fellow, the first kiss was an extremely important business.

Reason usually took precedence over normal weakness with Sheng-pao. Kissing Kai-hsia, he thought, would create a radical change in their relations. The flames would burn higher. Sheng-pao had never had genuine sexual relations with his sickly little child-bride, and Kai-hsia excited him powerfully. If it were a long night in the slack winter season he wouldn't have hesitated to taste the joys of love. Why not? Communists are human too.

But the summer harvest and rice shoot transplanting were about to begin. He ought to control his elementary instincts. In every tree in every thatched cottage compound, the robins were warbling a subtle warning:

> Hey young fellow, don't sleep so,
> The grain is yellow, don't you know?

And Sheng-pao was no ordinary young fellow. He was the leader of a mutual-aid team that was torn with strife and that was about to be joined by a complicated fellow named Pai. As a Communist he couldn't let his private life interfere with his responsibilities. Sheng-pao felt he had no right to give rein to his passions. He was a man who intended to change the social structure of Frog Flat.

Aiya! Sheng-pao suddenly remembered that people were waiting for him in Feng's compound. They were waiting for him to start a meeting, and here he was wondering whether he ought to kiss a girl. He shouldn't forget who he was.

Gently, he pushed the expectant Kai-hsia away. Recovering his calm, Sheng-pao said: "I have to go to a meeting. They're waiting for me."

"I'll go with you," Kai-hsia offered eagerly.

"It wouldn't look right."

"I'll wait for you outside."

"No, don't, Kai-hsia. Cool down a little. Don't get yourself into flurry again. I've got a lot of work to do. Our affair . . . let's wait till after autumn. All right, Kai-hsia?"

He turned and walked rapidly down the grassy path towards Feng's compound, where the sound of many voices could be heard.

Kai-hsia stood at the head of the path. Night covered the lovely young girl as she dabbed her tears with her handkerchief. That's what came of listening to the chairman and going to take that textile mill exam — people said she had got herself into a flurry.

Kai-hsia started home. She resolved she wouldn't let her mother see the signs of her tears. Were unattractive men always as hard to shake off as Blabbermouth Sun? Were attractive men always as cool as Sheng-pao? Kai-hsia began to doubt whether two strong-willed persons could ever really become sweethearts.

Epilogue

To those impelling the wheels of history forward, life presented all sorts of problems – political, economic and social. Some, relying on a working-class consciousness and viewpoint, were able to solve them. Others could not solve them completely, or were completely unable to solve them. It was a complicated period. People with a high level of working-class consciousness and a firm class standpoint fought with all their might against the old forces, which were trying to stem history's advance. People whose political awareness was insufficient and whose class viewpoint was hazy were confused by the involved struggle; they watched and waited. Of course there was also a small number whose political consciousness was virtually nil and whose standpoint was wrong; these wavered and lost the road.

And so the publication of Chairman Mao's statement and the Resolution of the Communist Party cleared the skies like the sun after rain.

In October, 1953, Comrade Mao Tse-tung said: "We are in a period of transition, which began the day the People's Republic of China was established and which will end when socialist transformation is completed in the main. The general line and over-all task of the Party during this transitional period is to bring about fundamentally, within a relatively long period of time, the industrialization of the country and the socialist transformation of agriculture, handicrafts, and capitalist industry and commerce. This general line should be the beacon which illuminates every phase of our work. Departing from it in any phase of our work will lead to committing either rightist or 'leftist' errors."

In October 1953, the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party issued a Resolution regarding the planned purchase and distribution of grain, putting into more concrete form the thesis of Chairman Mao.

Firstly, the Resolution explained the contradictions involved in the grain problem:

". . . Due to the growing demands of the cities and industry, and the increased consumption of grain that has accompanied the people's rising standard of living, and especially because of the existence of a free market in grain and the machinations of the grain speculators, people with surplus grain in the countryside have been adopting a wait and see attitude, holding on to their grain and waiting for a rise in price. This has affected supply and distribution: The state has been unable to complete its purchases of grain on schedule, and has far exceeded plan in the marketing of grain. Supply and distribution are out of balance. The market is tight. . . ."

The Resolution pointed out the seriousness of the situation and its social character:

". . . Unless we can solve this, a profound gap between supply and distribution will develop on the grain front, disturbing the whole price structure and influencing the entire plan for national construction. . . . The present tension in supply and distribution reflects in essence the contradiction between state planned economy on the one hand, and small peasant economy and free markets on the other. . . . In the ultimate sense, it reflects the contradiction between the elements of socialism and the elements of capitalism."

The Resolution sets forth detailed measures for planned purchase and planned distribution, and then asserts:

"Implementation of the above policy not only will solve satisfactorily the contradiction between the demand for grain and the supply under present conditions, ensure the stability of prices more effectively, and economize on grain, it is also an important step which must be taken to bring the scattered small-peasant economy within the purview of state planned

construction, lead the peasants on to the socialist path of mutual aid and co-operation and bring about the socialist transformation of agriculture. It is an indispensable, integral part of the Party's general line during the transition period."

A thorough discussion of the economic, political and ideological influence of the planned grain purchase and distribution regulations on the nation's industrialization and agricultural co-operation is a job for the historians. As a writer of a tale of everyday life I want only to call the readers' attention to them. Many historical events are the products of necessity. For example, if it weren't for the Five-Year Plans there might not have been such a demand for grain; if the grain merchants hadn't tried to take advantage of the situation, there might not have been any need for planned grain purchase and distribution regulations; if it hadn't been for the regulations, mutual aid and co-operation might have continued jogging along instead of springing forward like a fine horse at the touch of a spur. Mighty history takes no confused strides. Not God but Comrade Dialectics decides. Let the old forces rant and rave before they die. Let them arouse us, hasten us into the battle to destroy them. There is no turning back.

In ancient and modern times, governments of the exploiting classes, in order to wage evil wars, have often imposed controls on various commodities, including grain. These controls, whether in their own countries or in their colonies, invariably increased the people's burdens. The people therefore fought them in every way, and because of this many were thrown in jail, or killed.

But how different was the reaction when the People's Republic of China, led by the working class and based on the alliance of workers and peasants, issued the planned grain purchase and distribution regulations to aid the nation's peaceful construction. No sooner did the regulations go into effect than the people adopted them as part of their daily lives. After harvest, the peasants gladly sold their surplus grain to the state. People in the cities and towns were able to buy edible grain every month at fixed prices. No one had to worry

about food. Maybe one person in ten thousand didn't like it, but what of it? That couldn't stop history.

In October 1953 the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party convened the Third National Mutual-Aid and Co-operation Conference to deal with the new situation arising from the promulgation of the grain regulations and the General Line. The Conference resolved that every county in the land, after proper preparatory work, should organize at least one or two agricultural co-operatives before the spring of 1954, as Comrade Mao Tse-tung had proposed. Wherever the conditions were right, and the peasants were willing, and they had honest capable people to lead, they could organize a co-op. The more the better.

See — by the winter of 1953, the socialist forces had taken over China's countryside. A society of farmland that had been worked in small scattered plots for thousands of years, in the winter of 1953 began to rock on its foundations.

Grain purchasing started in Frog Flat in December. The Hsiapao Township people's council, taking into account tillable land, that year's harvest and size of the population, calculated that the village of Frog Flat should be able to sell to the state a total of 350,000 catties of grain after each family set aside enough to satisfy their food needs. Two months — December and January — were fixed as the delivery period. Comrade Wang, secretary of the Communist Party committee of Huangpao district, moved into the township government office to lead the work of the entire district. He planned the job in four stages: First, publicize and explain the General Line. Second, determine exactly how much surplus grain each family had available, and talk individually with those persons unwilling to sell. Third, collect the surplus grain. Fourth, overhaul the mutual-aid teams and settle any remaining questions. He estimated about half a month for each of these stages.

Aiya, such excitement! From every province, region and county office in China, thousands of cadres poured into the

countryside in the winter of 1953. Day and night in every village there were meetings – Party and Youth League branch meetings, township people's council meetings, township and village cadres' meetings, meetings of women, youth, militia, old folks' discussion forums. Day and night, announcement cymbals clashed, voices boomed through megaphones. Everywhere people talk about the General Line.

"Sell your surplus grain to the state, and help industrialization."

"Mutual aid and co-operation is the road to prosperity for all."

"Within the next fifteen years each and every family should join an agricultural producers' co-op."

These were the words which passed from the township governments to the administrative villages, to the peasant compounds, to the old women sitting on the heated brick *kangs*. Everyone was estimating how old he or she would be in another fifteen years. Some were excited by the General Line, others distressed. Some thought it too slow, others too fast. Some believed in it, others were sceptical. Some laughed for joy, others were morose. Bad-tempered individuals became cheerful, good-tempered ones turned irascible. Some who seldom went to the villages were now running all over the place. Some who used to enjoy hanging around the village streets now never emerged from their compound gates. Some people's appetites improved, others' got worse. Some slept more soundly, others tossed all night. No Party decision in Chinese history ever created such an upheaval in thinking and mood as the decision of October 1953.

Peasants, oh, peasants. What importance they attached to their land, draught animals, buildings, grain, to every bit of property they owned – was it only a carrying pole, a piece of rope, or a little ring on the handle of their plough. Any change in history made some people tremble, so fearful were they of losing even a bundle of straw.

Just as the other four villages of Hsiapao Township were starting the second stage – determining the amount of surplus

grain each family had available for sale and persuading those who were reluctant – cymbals and drums began dinning in Frog Flat. Peasants rushed to the stream and peered across. They saw red flags floating above the rice fields and heard joyous voices. They looked at each other. Was some young fellow being decorated for meritorious public service?

No, that wasn't it at all. Frog Flat had already completed its purchase of surplus grain. The merry racket was an accompaniment of its delivery to the government purchasing station.

How was it possible? Two months' work finished in two weeks? You certainly had to hand it to those former poor peasants and hired hands.

The success of Sheng-pao's mutual-aid team gave Frog Flat living proof of the value of the General Line. As a result of close planting, the team brought in a harvest of six hundred and twenty-five catties of rice per *mou* – nearly double the production of the farmers who were going it alone. On an experimental rice plot of a little under two *mou*, Sheng-pao reaped nine hundred ninety-seven and a half catties per *mou*, only two and a half catties under an even thousand. Of the eight team members, five had been virtually paupers who every year had to apply for low-interest grain loans. This year the team sold to the government a total of twelve thousand catties of surplus grain. There was concrete evidence for you! Without opening its mouth, it spoke volumes. Sheng-pao, Tseng-fu, Yu-wan, Jen the Fourth, Huan-hsi, Yu-yi, Kuo Suo and ex-corporal Pai – who during the past half year had been trying hard to earn a good reputation for the sake of winning a cadre's post – now stood before the community for all to see.

With the vast majority of the poor peasants and average middle peasants, there was no need whatsoever to persuade them to sell their surplus grain to the state. Only one middle peasant, an old fellow called Tiger Head, who had a surplus of five *tan* (twelve hundred catties), was unwilling to dispose of so much all at once. Frog Flat's most eloquent propagandist, chairman of the village deputies Chen-shan, barraged the old

man with everything he knew about the General Line. Tiger Head still wouldn't part with more than three *tan.* By dint of great effort, Chen-shan gradually pushed him up to three *tan* and a half. But at this point the old man cursed heartily, and vowed that he'd be a four-legged beast if he added so much as a single pint. The hard-working Chen-shan had to admit defeat. Sheng-pao, a new white towel bought with the proceeds of the bumper harvest draped round his neck, then went forth.

As he entered the old man's thatched cottage compound, Sheng-pao smiled warmly and hailed him respectfully by his proper name.

"I heard you weren't in good spirits, uncle Hsing-fa. I've come to see how you are."

Embarrassed, Tiger Head dropped his eyes. Standing before him was a young man who had been a beggar boy in 1929. Later, the child had watched orchards and cut fodder grass for people who had no kids of their own to do it. Next, he served as a hired hand to Miser Lu, then became his tenant. To avoid being conscripted into the Kuomintang army, Sheng-pao had been forced to hide on Mount Chungnan. Today he was loved and respected by everyone in Frog Flat. After the harvest, but before the news of the General Line reached the village, a number of people with land to sell had dogged his footsteps, as if curious to see just how deep his moral sense went. The whole village watched. Sheng-pao had reaped such a huge harvest. What would he do with it if not buy land? But Sheng-pao didn't buy any land. He said he was going to invest in expanding the mutual-aid team's production.

Tiger Head couldn't look him in the eye. Although Chen-shan had called on him a dozen times, the old man had refused to dispose of his entire surplus. But how could he make Sheng-pao lose face? Everyone in Frog Flat would scorn him if he did. Old Tiger Head told Sheng-pao what was in his heart.

"*Ai,* how can I refuse you anything, nephew? I believed when I turned Chen-shan down, that would be the end of it.

I never thought you would come. All right, all right. Five *tan,* then five *tan.*"

Sheng-pao made no comment. All smiles, he filled his pipe and handed it to the old man. After they chatted a while, Sheng-pao said he was busy, took his leave and departed.

Frog Flat had a few well-to-do middle peasants. But these couldn't hold out a single night in the atmosphere of ardent support of the grain regulations which the poor and ordinary middle peasants created. The village cadres calculated surpluses of nine *tan* for Sheng-lu, eleven for Iron Man, and eighteen for Shih-fu. Each carefully and exactly delivered. Their farms after all were amid the fields of Frog Flat's poor and ordinary middle peasants. In all of China there wasn't a single community composed exclusively of well-to-do middle peasants. Before the people were united the relatively prosperous middle peasants often acted high and mighty. But today, confronted with a rip-roaring mass movement, they were as docile as lambs. The pompous air which Shih-fu had displayed last spring was gone completely. He suffered from loss of appetite again, as he had during land reform, but to a lesser extent. Shih-fu was able to leave his bed, although he didn't show himself outside his compound gate.

Only rich peasant Yao put up a stubborn resistance. The village cadres estimated his grain surplus as thirty-five *tan.* He went home and instructed his wife:

"Get my quilt ready. Put some more cotton in my padded pants."

"What for?" she asked, startled.

"I'm probably going to have to sit in jail. I'm sure it won't be warm there."

Worried frowns on their faces, his wife and superstitious old mother tried to soften him.

"Sell the thirty-five *tan.* Haven't we still got well over a hundred in our front building?"

"What's the use of storing a lot of grain if you have to sit in the county jail? This society! Buddha preserve us!"

Yao scowled and ground his teeth.

"I don't care how much grain we've got. I can't bear to let them get away with this. Sons of bitches. Is that what they call buying grain? They said they wouldn't use force, just explain and educate. Well, I'm bucking them. We'll see whether they use force or not. If they put pressure on, I'll resist. What can they do about it? When Tseng-fu comes to our compound, you two start crying. I'll tell you to get my quilt ready. We'll see what the young fellow has to say then."

Yao slammed his brass water pipe down on the table and gave it a vicious push. It knocked over a wine bottle, which fell against a tall wardrobe mirror and shattered it. The women were very upset, but Yao didn't care. He was a hard nut.

"If it's broken, we'll buy a new one," he said. "Living under the thumb of Communists, what good is money anyhow?"

But the next morning after breakfast, the thing Yao had feared two years before during land reform finally happened. He had never dreamed it would occur at a time of government grain buying. For his callers were not only Tseng-fu, people's delegate from the west end of Liberation Creek, but also Chen-shan, chairman of the village delegates, and a big crowd of Frog Flat peasants. They swarmed into his handsome compound. Some were village cadres and activists, some were people who had asked to come along to back them up, some just wanted to see rich peasant Yao squirm. But as the hundred or more — including old folks, women and children — surged into the compound, there was no telling what their purpose was. In Yao's eyes, all were his enemies, all were the thatched cottage dwellers he hated so bitterly.

No person hostile in spirit to the people is ever really as tough as he thinks, even if he controls the government, the army, or vast quantities of property. When he stood alone in his handsome compound, Yao felt he could chew iron and spit nails. But when face to face with his enemies, the people, his bones turned to mush.

Standing on the steps of his house, Yao flushed scarlet. Inside, the superstitious old lady was burning incense and

kowtowing before an idol. Yao's wife was peeking through the window of her room, her ringed fingers trembling.

Tseng-fu, on the steps of the west wing, exclaimed with satisfaction: "We knew talking to you would be hard. These friends said I couldn't do it alone, so they've come along to help."

From the steps of the west wing Chen-shan cried sternly: "Every family in our village has agreed on an amount of surplus grain to sell the state. We're just waiting for you. As soon as you set a figure, we can start delivering. Think it over. And don't keep staring at your feet. Raise your eyes and look at the peasants of Frog Flat."

But Yao looked only at his feet. People began shouting:

"Show some spunk. Quit pretending you're being abused."

"We're not here to beg for favours."

"You're a smart fellow — act like one."

Yao raised his head and cried in a piteous manner: "Good neighbours, I don't have that much surplus grain. Wouldn't I sell it if I had? Everybody wants to live in honour. Honour, honour, grain means honour. I've got forty *mou* of land. Even if I harvested one *tan* per *mou,* that's only forty *tan,* isn't it? You've estimated thirty-five *tan* for me. What is my family supposed to do, sew their mouths up? And what about my animals? Do you want to kill me?"

"Quit lying," roared Chen-shan. "We're telling you straight: Deliver twenty *tan* of surplus grain, and fifteen that you've got stored away."

"I haven't got any grain in store —"

"What's happened to it?" Tseng-fu shouted.

"This spring, when prices were high," said Yao, "I sold it."

"That's a lie. You didn't sell, you bought." The voice from the crowd was Tseng-jung's. After teaming up with the rich peasant for a year, Tseng-jung knew all about him. He hoped by exposing Yao to win the people's forgiveness for having gone against his class.

Chen-shan called another witness. He was standing in the crowd near the door of the stable, which was housed in the front building's ground storey.

"Shuan-shuan, do you know whether Yao sold any grain or not?"

"He bought, three times."

All eyes were now on Yao. His face was deathly white. He couldn't refute the evidence of Tseng-jung and Shuan-shuan. Hating them, Yao ground his teeth. Not only did he have grain left over from last year, but this spring he had bought an additional twenty *tan* of wheat, which he also stored in the front building's upper storey. Anything to make trouble for the Communist Party and the people's government when there was a shortage of grain on the market! What else did he need money for?

Jen the Fourth was practically blue with rage. At the head of the crowd he waved his pipe high and yelled:

"Chairman Mao holds a lamp to show us the way to the General Line. Are you trying to block its rays? I'll beat the life out of you, dirty bastard."

Rolling up his sleeves, Jen charged forward. The others held him back. Of course, he was going too far. But some people knew he wanted to take this chance to work off his fury against Yao for having seduced Su-fang. They all marvelled: *Aiya,* the first year Jen didn't have to worry about enough grain to feed his large brood, and how bold he had become.

After Jen was calmed down, Chen-shan made the speech he had prepared in advance:

"Tomorrow, we're delivering our village's surplus grain to the state. We're not waiting for you, Yao. It looks as if your question isn't one the people of Frog Flat can solve themselves. We'll turn it over to the township government. Let them decide. Frog Flat's a little cauldron; it can't cook a big ox like you."

Turning to the crowd, Chen-shan commanded: "Let's go, neighbours. Let's get on with our deliveries. We'll be over

target even without any grain from this rich peasant. You don't need dog turd to plant white cabbage."

Like water released from a paddy field, the crowd in the compound flowed out of the gate.

Yao's wife rushed after Chen-shan, who was bringing up the rear, and cried entreatingly: "We'll deliver too, chairman, we'll deliver too. My husband says even if our whole family has to go hungry next year, we'll still sell our grain to the state."

"Who are you trying to fool?" Tseng-fu countered. "Your family go hungry? We're only buying surplus. We don't want any of your eating grain. Why wouldn't you have enough? If that's how you talk, forget it."

But Chen-shen, eager for Frog Flat to win the red banner of the first village to complete its grain deliveries in the county, was more practical.

"Let them deliver," he urged Tseng-fu. "How do you expect rich peasants to talk? You can't get ivory out of a dog's mouth." To Yao's wife he said: "Get it ready — seven-tenths fine grain and three-tenths coarse. Don't be short a single pint. Have it all loaded on your cart by tomorrow morning."

Yao called two relatives from another village the same day. That night they carried down thirty-five *tan* of grain from the upper storey of the front building and packed it in three big mat hampers, ready to load.

The competent Chen-shan fully demonstrated his forcefulness and organizational ability during the grain collection. In the first few days of December, when cadres from the various villages met day and night in conferences at the township government, Chen-shan was quite uneasy. He was afraid he would be criticized again for turning his back on the Party line during the past year and pursuing his own private ends. He was jealous of Sheng-pao's success, and envied his "luck". Each time he went to the township, the stubbled cheeks of his big face were red. On entering the government meeting hall, he always sat down in an inconspicuous corner and smoked his pipe. He avoided the eyes of district Party

secretary Wang and township Party secretary Lu, although their gaze was kind and friendly, and not containing the slightest hint of any inclination to start an inner-Party struggle.

Finally, Secretary Wang noticed that a few Party members who had prospered and become middle peasants since Liberation seemed rather apprehensive. He made an announcement: Some Party members had been infected with peasant acquisitiveness, but if they showed up well in this present movement, their previous dishonourable thinking would not be openly discussed. The purpose of criticizing a Communist's erroneous ideas was to correct them. If a member examined himself in the light of the Central Committee's directives and, finding that he had been wrong, corrected himself, that was the end of it.

This took a big load off Chen-shan's mind. Several Communists who were now middle peasants stood up and criticized their selfish concepts. The clever Chen-shan, who in such circumstances never swam against the tide, also offered a few self-critical remarks. He said he hadn't properly understood mutual aid and co-operation; he hadn't realized that all of China's peasants would be in co-operatives in only fifteen years. Chen-shan didn't say a word about having intended to invest in a brick and tile kiln.

When the grain collecting campaign went into the villages, Frog Flat's announcement megaphone was always under Chen-shan's arm, as if it were a part of his body. Every day the peasants could hear the chairman's highest notes vibrating across the early winter paddy fields. He was still the leader of Frog Flat. How lovable Chen-shan was at times. Since he recognized his mistakes, why not forgive him for the sake of our common cause? Why keep poking at the sore boil of another fellow's unfortunate slip? As long as the majority of his actions were for the people's benefit, that was enough.

Chen-shan got a lot of support from Secretary Wang and Secretary Lu in his grain collecting. They had the township lend him thirty ox carts — each with six long sacks — borrowed from the other four villages. They praised his planning, and

said the example of Frog Flat would stimulate every village in the township. Chen-shan was spurred on to even more strenuous efforts. He ran around, his forehead beaded with sweat, his voice hoarse from shouting. Let no one think he was useless. He was still the old Chen-shan. He considered himself a person of great use to the revolution.

Pulling the first cart was Chen-shan's big ox, a red ribbon tied to its horn. A red flag led the way, followed by a band of drums and cymbals. Next came the nation's flowers - the women and children — dressed in colourful prints. They were all smiles. Hadn't they been told that the General Line was the prelude to a happy life under socialism? They were parading into Huangpao Town to savour the sweets of being honoured.

Chairman Chen-shan had announced that anyone who didn't want to go, didn't have to. But only the wives of the rich peasants and those of a few of the well-to-do middle peasants stayed home. Blabbermouth Sun picked the job of leading the women's contingent in shouting slogans. The men drove ox carts or pushed wheelbarrows. Lovable Chen-shan, holding his megaphone, dashed back and forth, giving instructions. The warm early winter sun shone on the two *li* long procession. Red and green triangular banners fluttered on the ox carts. Peasants from all the surrounding countryside — men and women, young and old — surged to the outskirts of the village to see the honoured people of Frog Flat. Oh, you Mount Chungnan! You've been squatting there for millions of years. Did you ever witness such a stirring scene?

But why were so many familiar friends missing? Why weren't they taking part in this historic event of a lifetime? Nearly every man, woman and child of Frog Flat was there.

How could they come? Sheng-pao, Yu-wan and Huan-hsi had long since gone to the training course on mutual aid and co-operation in Weiyuan, the county seat. Originally Tseng-fu was also supposed to go, but what with his work in his election ward and spreading the team's winter fertilizer, he couldn't get away. Secretary Tao was in charge of the over-all grain

collection for the county, Secretary Yang was responsible for mutual aid and co-operation. In both departments you had to strike while the iron was hot. People said that Sheng-pao and the others would be studying for half a month.

Sheng-pao's sister Hsiu-lan also was not present. She wasn't in North Poplar either. In July 1953, the armistice at Panmunjom was finally signed. Hsiu-lan's sweetheart Ming-shan was in the first unit to return to China. He was stationed in the Northeast. In September, when the rice was being harvested along the Tang Stream, he returned to North Poplar to see his parents and, at the same time, to get married. He took the adorable ruddy-cheeked girl off with him.

And Kai-hsia wasn't around either. *Aiya*, she ought to be here. We had hoped that she and Sheng-pao would marry this winter. Where had she gone? Dear Kai-hsia was now an apprentice at a big locomotive works outside Peking, learning to be a moulder. Another locomotive works was about to be set up in Sian, and each county had been asked to select some of its best young people from the countryside. Secretary Lu, knowing that Kai-hsia wanted to go into industry, had recommended her. The boys and girls chosen were sent to locomotive works in different parts of the country. Kai-hsia left for Peking in July for a year's training. That was just the time Sheng-pao and his team mates were wading in the muck of the paddy fields, spreading fertilizer. She watched him fondly from a distance and, once again murmured: "I wish you success, I wish you victory, I hope you find the kind of girl you want. As for me, this time I'm really leaving."

The determined girl had considered telling Secretary Lu about her relations with Sheng-pao, and one day she had stood outside the Party secretary's office for several minutes. But finally she decided to go on to the front of national industrialization and forget about a marriage that might not work out too well anyway. Although she still had a lot of feeling for Sheng-pao, she left Frog Flat without the slightest hesitation. During May, June and July, three months, she had gone over the question thoroughly in her mind. No great scholar ever

analyses a problem more thoroughly than a girl in love analyses the prospects of her marriage.

Both she and Sheng-pao were strong personalities, Kai-hsia knew, and both were enthusiastic participants in public activities. Would their marriage be a good thing? Ever since that unhappy night in May a seed of doubt had been growing in her mind. She couldn't have plucked it out even with a pair of tweezers. Sheng-pao would certainly devote his life to the people. But what about her? She didn't want to become just a peasant's housewife. After marriage, the honeymoon period would soon end, and then a long life in a peasant household would begin. She, not Sheng-pao, would cook the food. She, not Sheng-pao, would bear the children. Would her desire to excel, her fondness for running around, cause conflicts between them?

In emotional moments, Kai-hsia tended to let herself be carried away. But after she cooled down, she was capable of thinking broadly and far. A soft indecisive girl often is coy and evasive when her young man tries to embrace her. If he's a wilful type, he may push her aside in annoyance, to her external regret. A resolute girl, on the other hand, may have an exaggerated sense of self-respect. Her young lover never seems ardent enough. She fears that their marriage may not be ideal, that after she becomes his, she may have an unexpected change of heart.

Kai-hsia belonged to the latter category. A new social consciousness is causing most of our girls to develop an independent spirit. The girl who follows only the dictates of her husband and wants nothing more than his kisses and embraces as her reward, is becoming increasingly rare.

Although the first instalment of our romance ends on an unsuccessful note and Kai-hsia has left Frog Flat, her letters have taken part in the campaign to publicize the General Line. Perhaps this will be some consolation to our readers. Like all those who have gone to other parts of the country to serve as workers, soldiers or cadres, in her letters home Kai-hsia urged her peasant neighbours to sell their surplus grain to the state,

support industrialization, and travel the road of mutual aid and co-operation. She also asked how Sheng-pao's team was getting on. The letter of apprentice moulder Kai-hsia, as well as that of army man Sheng-jung, was read aloud in the village people's council.

Sheng-pao did not know of her departure until after she had gone. At first he felt very badly. He hadn't believed that she wouldn't wait for autumn, as he had proposed to settle their affair, and would leave without a word. Poor Sheng-pao had immersed himself too much in business. We have to admit that regarding his relations with his father, with Blind Wang's family, and with Chen-shan, to say nothing of the question of Pai's membership in the mutual-aid team, he had handled matters exceedingly well. But he certainly made a sorry job of his relations with Kai-hsia.

Frankly, Sheng-pao, you're a bit of an oaf. Why did you have to set a date for your romance to start? Did you have to wait till after the autumn busy season before you could admit to being in love? You were not nearly bold enough, and showed a complete lack of experience.

Only after Kai-hsia had left did Secretary Lu learn that she and Sheng-pao had been interested in each other. Lu was extremely sorry. He blamed Sheng-pao for not having told him. The young fellow had kept the secret all too assiduously. Two years before, Lu had reminded Sheng-pao to be careful in his relations with Kai-hsia. But what was the situation then? And what was the situation now? There was nothing to stop them from being in love today. Sheng-pao was too mechanical.

Regretfully, Secretary Lu informed Secretary Wang about the matter. The district Party secretary laughed. He wasn't regretful. Kai-hsia was rather superficial, he said. She wasn't as steady as Sheng-pao. Courting is a time of illusions, but marriage is a concrete, practical proposition.

Lu agreed with his analysis, except where Wang said Kai-hsia was too self-assured. Lu insisted that this was entirely due to Chen-shan's influence.

Both Party secretaries were concerned that Sheng-pao might seek an unwise solution — like either remaining a bachelor another nine or ten years, or marrying some girl who wouldn't be of any help in his work. Wang urged Lu to take a hand in getting Sheng-pao straightened out. At an appropriate time, the district Party secretary said, he would take a hand himself.

After the grain collection was completed, chairman Chen-shan diligently overhauled his Liberation Creek mutual-aid team and began vying with Sheng-pao. Like activated army units, teams all along the Tang Stream, stimulated by the General Line, combined into larger contingents. Sheng-lu and Shuan-shuan shame-facedly returned to their team when the winter fertilizer was being spread. Iron Man Kuo also joined. The poor peasants were all clamouring to form agricultural producers' co-operatives. But Chen-shan wasn't so sure that Frog Flat measured up to county standards.

One day after a meeting in the township government, he asked Secretary Lu into the courtyard. As they stood under the ancient cedar, Chen-shan queried suspiciously:

"Why are Sheng-pao and the other two studying so long at the county seat? Why did three of them have to go?"

"To get ready to form an agricultural producers' co-op," Lu replied happily.

Chen-shan's bristly face flushed a fiery red. It was several moments before the village chairman managed to blurt:

"What about me? Doesn't the Party —"

"The district committee has decided that you should be in charge of the mutual-aid team of Liberation Creek. I was just intending to talk to you. After you work with it for a year, you can take a number of teams and form a co-op. This will be good for you personally too. In the first place we can't start a big co-op the first year. If you went into the co-op, who would lead the Liberation Creek mutual-aid team?"

"What about Tseng-fu? He'd be all right."

"He's going to join the co-op. He was one of the leaders in building up the team. Now that a co-op is being formed, how can you keep him out? You're a Communist, he's a non-Party

activist. Our organization always tries to be reasonable, you know that. But your eagerness to take the socialist road is fine. It's a big step forward."

Chen-shan was rather offended. Hadn't his recent good work in the grain collection campaign spread his fame throughout the district?

"I can't trust them to set up a co-op in Frog Flat without my leadership. They wouldn't be able to do it right," he asserted truculently.

The township secretary laughed. On friendly bantering terms with Chen-shan, as he had that spring night when they discussed the low-interest grain loans, Lu chose to ignore his tone. In order not to embarrass Chen-shan, he said with a smile:

"You needn't worry. It won't be just Sheng-pao and Tseng-fu forming the co-op. The whole Party's behind them. Now listen 'Bomber', you and I have sworn and laughed at each other plenty of times. I'm not afraid of rubbing you the wrong way. You ought to quit bragging. Even your wife must be tired of hearing you. I'm telling you this from my heart — don't overestimate the importance of the individual, Chen-shan. That's been the downfall of many a man."

So when Frog Flat organized its first agricultural co-operative, he would be relegated to a secondary position. The Party obviously attached more importance to Sheng-pao. The merit he had displayed during land reform hadn't won him forgiveness for the "slight slip" he subsequently made after the Party rectification. . . . That was what Chen-shan believed. Tears came to the eyes of the tough chairman of the village deputies.

But he was too tough to let them fall. He blinked them away and blew his nose.

Secretary Lu was amazed at the tenacity of Chen-shan's conceit. He thought it was lucky he had only mentioned "in the first place". If he had revealed to Chen-shan what was said about him "in the second place" at a district Party committee meeting, who knows what his reaction would be?

A few committeemen had advocated that Chen-shan be recommended for chairman of the agricultural producers' co-op, but this proposal was defeated eight to five. After the vote, district Party secretary Wang explained that the Party could not recommend an unreliable individual to be the leader of the first co-op in the district. Because of the Party's prestige, the members of the co-op would be sure to accept the recommendation. Comrade Wang said he was convinced future events would prove that the best thing for Chen-shan was first to gain experience in a mutual-aid team, and then join a co-op. If he started immediately as the chairman of an agricultural co-operative, he would probably injure the prestige of the Party and ruin himself at the same time. Chairman Mao has said that key cadres must be unprejudiced and competent. Chen-shan was competent enough, but he certainly wasn't unprejudiced.

After hearing this, the committee members whose good opinion of Chen-shan had been formed in the land reform days but who weren't up to date on changes in Hsiapao Township in the later period, changed their vote to favour Sheng-pao unanimously. The district committee reported its decision to the county Party committee, which discussed and approved it.

The third day after Sheng-pao, Yu-wan and Jen the Fourth returned from the county seat to Frog Flat, a new name — "Lighthouse Agricultural Producers' Co-operative" — flew like the wind through the hundreds of large and small villages dotting the area of the Tang Stream.

The twenty-third of November was a market day in Huang-pao Town. Peasants thronged the streets. Some were delivering grain, some were going to the bank to make deposits, some were buying things with the money they had earned from the sale of their surplus grain, some were bringing their daughters for a first look at prospective grooms; a few young people, already engaged, were on their way to have their pictures taken. From restaurants came shouts of drinking games — the wild

yells of rich peasants getting rid of some of the depression pent up in their hearts.

Everyone was discussing the big news written in red chalk on a number of public blackboards – the Lighthouse Agricultural Co-op, first in the district, had been organized. District government offices, public establishments and primary schools plastered the town with slogan streamers of various colours. It was like the celebration of a national holiday.

At the southern end of the town in front of the supply and marketing co-op where tobacco, wine, and condiments were sold, a long line of peasants, able for the first time to afford such things, were waiting their turn. Huangpao had many general stores, and they were well stocked. Prices were the same as the co-op's. You paid your money and took your merchandise. Service was very fast. But the peasants preferred lining up in front of the supply and marketing co-op. They trusted the Party and the government, which meant they trusted state-run enterprises. What peasants feared most was being cheated. They were always leary of merchants.

The several dozen sturdy peasants standing in line were all talking about the Lighthouse Co-op. A fellow named Liang Sheng-pao was the chairman. Quite young – only twenty some-odd. Nobody'd heard much about him before.

"What's his pa's name?" an old man with a goatee asked.

A bent-backed old fellow in the rear, wearing a round felt skull cap, called out: "Huh, his pa doesn't have a name. He scraped for a living all his life in the southern mountains. Nobody knows what his real name is. But now, in this society, the ones who count are coming from the ranks of us poor peasants."

After much talk of this sort, everyone said he'd have to find time to go down to Hsiapao Township and see for himself. What you heard was not reliable; you could only believe what you saw with your own eyes. People said the draught animals would all be tended together, the co-op would pay for your farm implements, and land would be pooled. Everyone would work in the production brigades they would form. *Aiya,* it

sounded complicated. Was this fellow Sheng-pao competent enough? Even with the Party and government behind you, a chairman of an agricultural producers' co-operative couldn't be some stick who just stood there and did nothing.

In a word, the peasants were both interested and doubtful. It seemed like a good idea, but it remained to be seen whether it would work out.

The seventeenth person in line was an old man who once had been very tall, but now appeared short because his back was bent. No one paid any attention to him. He wore heavy new padded clothing. In a basket hanging from his left arm lay an empty bottle which he was waiting to fill with bean oil for cooking. Head down, he wiped his eyes, but his tears continued to flow.

His face was deeply grooved with wrinkles, a sparse moustache adorned his upper lip. In his eyes was an expression of life-long worry. Years of heavy labour had left their mark upon him, that was very plain. Even among the thousands of peasants attending the fair, he was a rare sight.

Finally, someone recognized him. Sheng-pao's father.

When he heard the peasants discuss the Lighthouse Co-op and its chairman Sheng-pao, old Liang the Third had recalled how he and his father had spent their whole lives trying to build up the family fortunes. Actually, theirs wasn't a history of builders, but a history of bitter toil, of starvation, of humiliation. Together, Liang the Third and his father had lived a total of a hundred years on this earth, but when did they ever have a complete set of padded clothes to wear in winter? If the tunic was new, the pants were old. A few years later, by the time one of them got new pants, his tunic would be old. Or if the outer cover cloth was changed, the lining or the cotton padding would be old.

After land reform, Liang the Third dreamed of the day when the father of the future well-to-do middle peasant Sheng-pao would walk the streets of the town in a brand new set of cotton padded tunic and trousers – nice and warm and dignified. But his dream world was shattered and the real world

stood before his eyes as solid as Mount Chungnan. It was as the father of Sheng-pao, chairman of the Lighthouse Agricultural Producers' Co-operative, that he trod the streets of Huangpao Town in brand new cotton padded clothing, nice and warm and dignified. When the autumn harvest ended, Sheng-pao told his ma he was going to have a new suit of cotton padded clothes made for pa before he did anything else, and fulfil the old man's dream.

"You're a good boy, son. You have a heart," Liang the Third had said. "It means more to me to hear you talk like that than whether I get those clothes or not. You go out and level the bumps in the world. Your grandpa told me it couldn't be done even if you used a shovel. I believed him and always accepted my fate. I passed his words on to you, but you didn't believe me. Go out and fight, then. I'll look after the household, sweep the courtyard and feed the pigs. It's more important for you to spend that money on getting a wife. Once you're past thirty the young girl won't want you, and you'd never be satisfied with a widow."

But Sheng-pao and his ma insisted on fulfilling the old man's dream. It was thinking of this that made Liang the Third weep. What was the most precious thing in life if not to enjoy the respect of others?

When the peasants waiting in the queue discovered that the old man was the father of chairman Sheng-pao of the Lighthouse Co-op, they invited him to go to the head of the line and buy his bean oil. He was getting on in years; his legs would ache if he stood too long. Liang the Third tried to refuse, but they simply pushed him up to the counter.

Carrying his bottle of oil, old Liang walked solemnly through the crowds of peasants. After a life of slavery, he was at last able to bear himself as one of life's masters. He knew that Frog Flat would have many problems in the future. But the period when he worried about and feared most for his son was over.

About the Author

Liu Ching was born in 1916 in Shensi Province. While still in middle school he joined the Communist Youth League of China and began reading revolutionary literary works. In 1934 he started writing himself and translating short pieces. Some of his early efforts were published in Sian periodicals. In 1935, at the time of the "December 9th" Student Movement he worked as an editor on the student publication *Salvation Front*. In 1936, when the "Sian Incident" occurred, he helped edit the magazine *The Students' Voice*. He joined the Chinese Communist Party the same year. After graduating from middle school in 1937 he became an editor on the *Northwest Cultural Daily*. He went to Yenan in 1938. From then on he worked in the anti-Japanese army and took part in many political activities, which brought him into direct contact with the people.

During the War of Resistance Against Japan he wrote a number of short stories, most of which have been collected in a volume entitled *Land Mine*. After victory he went to the Northeast where, in 1947, he wrote his first novel *The Planting of the Grain*. He returned to northern Shensi the same year to join the War of Liberation.

In 1949, after the People's Republic of China was established, he went to Peking. His novel *Wall of Bronze*, a story of how the peasants in northern Shensi supported the War of Liberation, was published in 1951.

In 1952 he settled down in a small village not far from Sian and was appointed secretary of the Communist Party Committee of Changan County. Taking a direct part in countryside activities in the years that followed, he became thoroughly familiar with the peasants and rural life. As a result, he

produced a number of excellent articles (compiled in the book *Three Years in Huangpu Village*) and a short story *Iron-Piercing Hatred.*

Liu Ching is a council member of the Union of Chinese Writers, and is a vice-chairman of its Sian chapter.

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