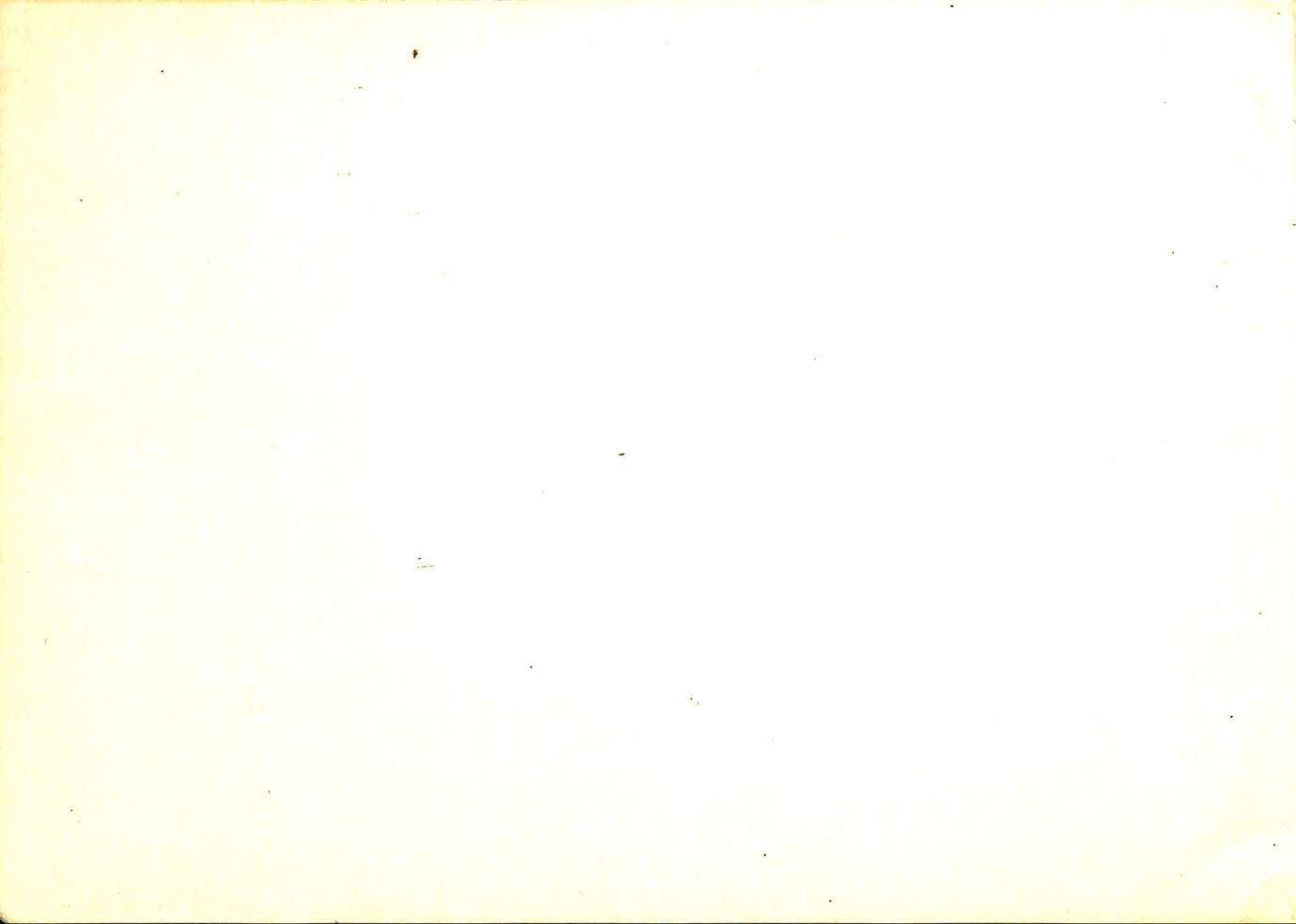




THE OLD MESSENGER



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Young Kao was a small town postman, thoroughly unhappy with his job. He saw no future in the postal service and considered his talents wasted there. His comrades tried to help him and show that he was wrong. The county postmaster told the lad about the exploits and devotion to duty of a veteran postman by the name of Lao Tieh. In the life-and-death struggle against the Kuomintang, Lao Tieh ran the enemy blockade to carry important messages and kept communications going behind the enemy lines. After the victory over the Kuomintang, he did not slacken but studied hard to improve his work and he did well at his post. The postmaster's story created quite an impression on his listeners, every one of them, Young Kao included; they were especially moved when they learned who Lao Tieh was.

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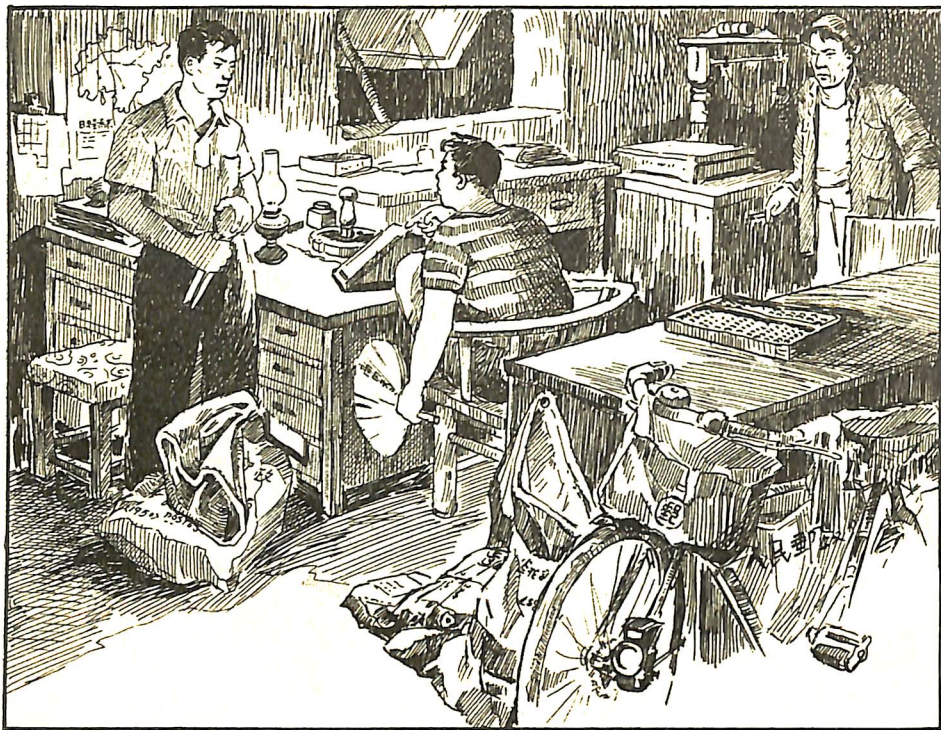
Young Kao, a postman, went round the villages to deliver the mail.



"Hey, messenger, any letters for us?" the villagers would call out to him when they heard his bicycle's bell. Now "messenger" was a word Young Kao loathed, he pedalled off without giving them so much as another look.



In the evening, Young Kao grumbled to his mate, Lao Liu. "There's no future in this. Just 'messengers'—we're not even addressed as comrades."



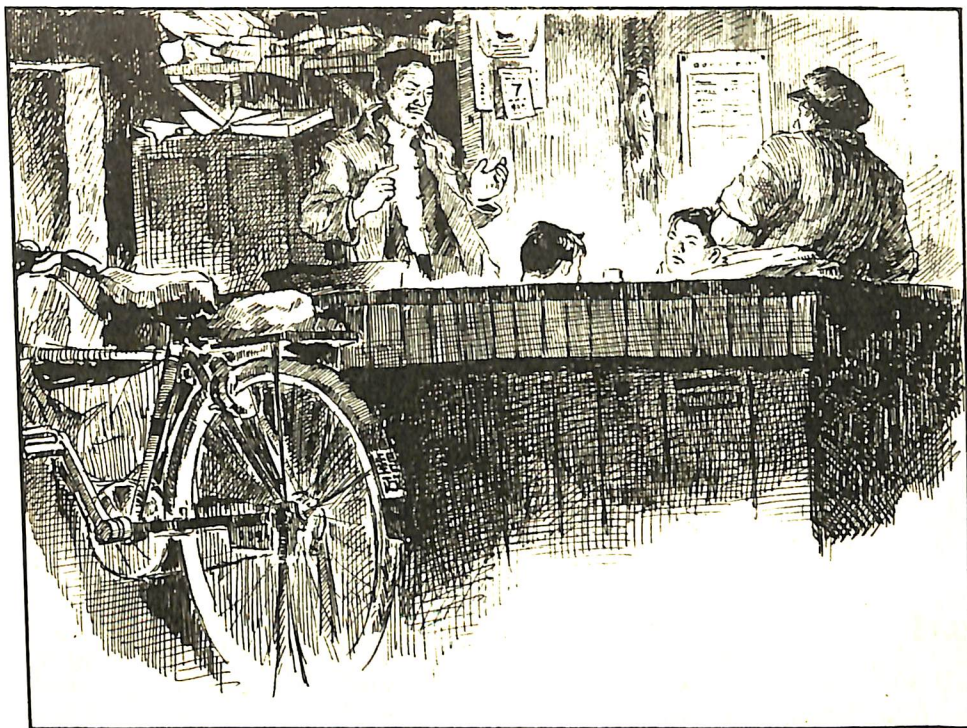
"But do you know," said Lao Liu, "our postmaster, Hsu, is ever so pleased when people call him Old Messenger." "That is because he hasn't got high ideals," Young Kao retorted. "Look at him. He's only an insignificant postmaster in a small town. It's the same with Ma. . . ."



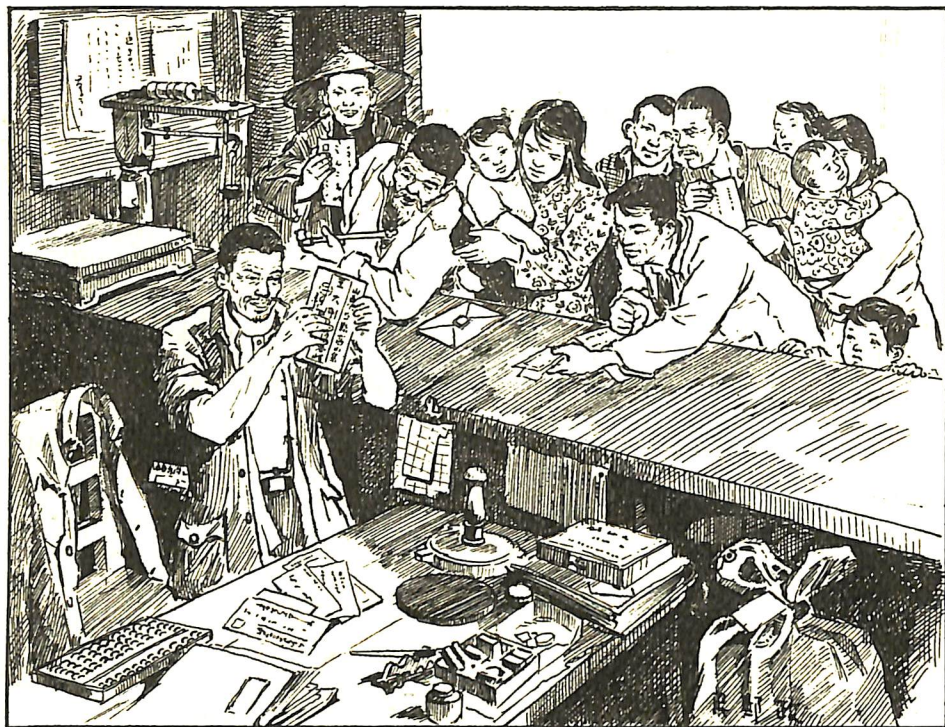
Ma who came in at the moment was in a sulky mood. He thought having worked in the revolution for a couple of years he should have been given a more important position. Young Kao's words stung him to the quick.



"How dare you criticize me," roared Ma. "What and where were you when I was doing my bit to fight the Kuomintang?" Hsu heard the quarrel and went in to calm them down.



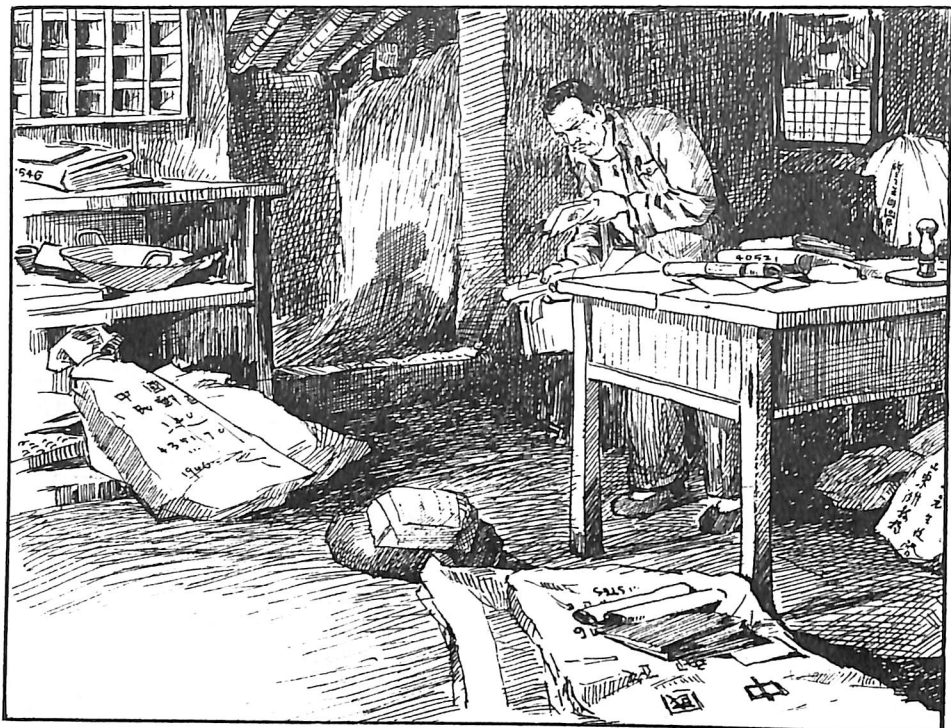
"We shouldn't hurt one another's feelings," said Hsu. "If we've got faults, try help one another to correct them. After all, our common ideal is to work well for the people's postal service."



The next day was market day, and the sub-office was thronged with people. "Lao Hsu," cried one peasant, and "Old Messenger," shouted another. Hsu served them all and never looked the least bit impatient.



One villager appeared with a counterfoil. "Old Messenger," he asked. "When will my registered letter arrive?" Hsu looked at the counterfoil; it was dated several days ago. He promised to find out.



Hsu went to Kao's desk but found no trace of the registered letter. Kao's drawer was full of letters and newspapers which should have been delivered long ago.



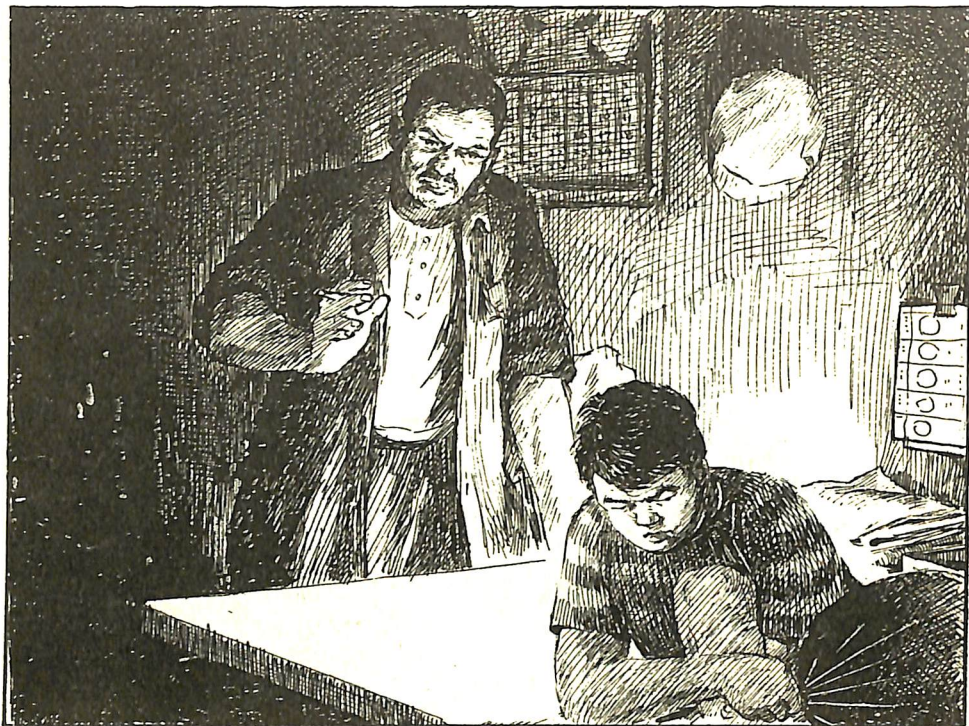
When the lad came in, Hsu asked him about the letter. Kao searched everywhere but it was quite clear now that the registered letter had been mislaid.



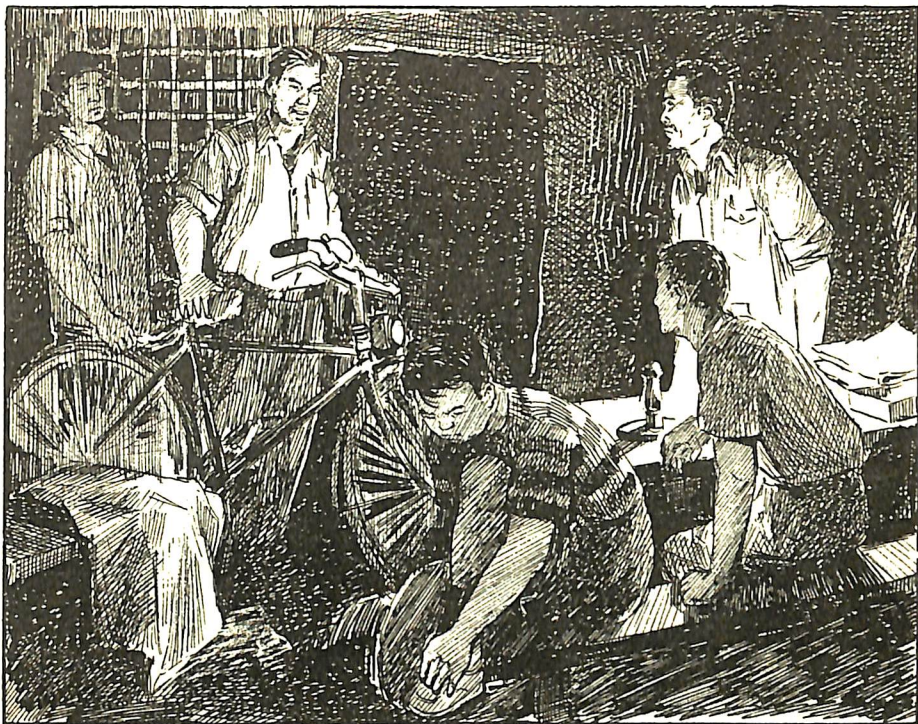
That night a meeting was called to discuss Kao's behaviour. Hsu first criticized himself for not giving Young Kao sufficient help and allowing him to bring harm to their work.



But Young Kao was not sorry. "I've made a mistake, you can punish me if you like," he said defiantly. "Never mind about the punishment," said Hsu patiently. "But do you really understand what's wrong with you?"



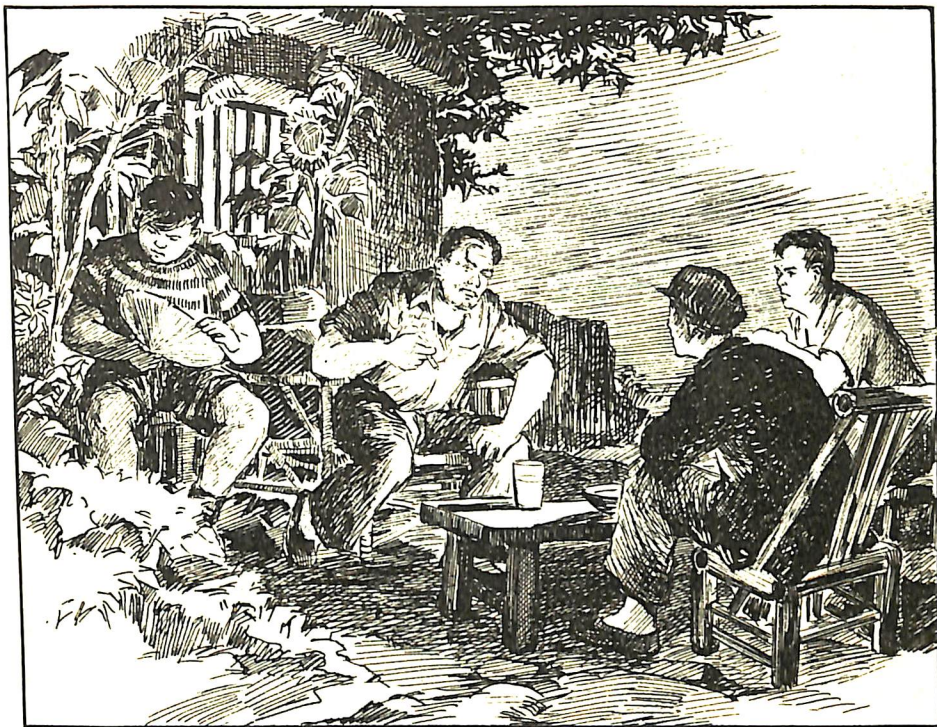
"Say what you like," said Young Kao insolently, "but I'm going to get out of this rotten business." Hsu could restrain himself no longer. "Rotten business! We're entrusted with delivering important messages, money orders, etc. It's serving the people. How dare you insult our work!"



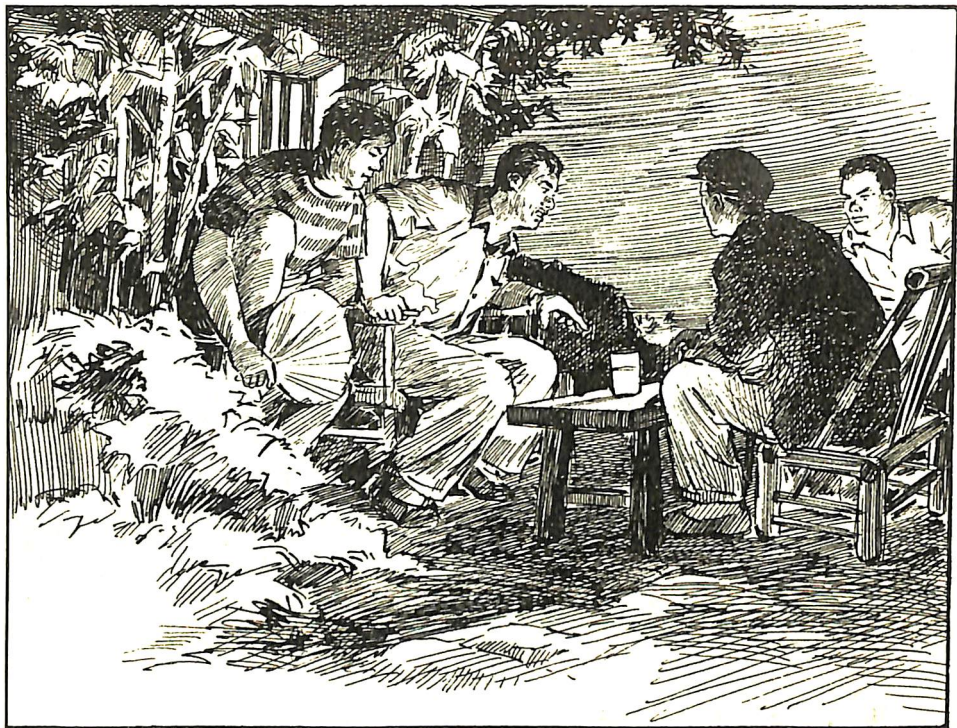
The atmosphere in the room became tense. Just then, they heard the ringing of a bicycle's bell. A few minutes later, Wang, the county postmaster, entered.



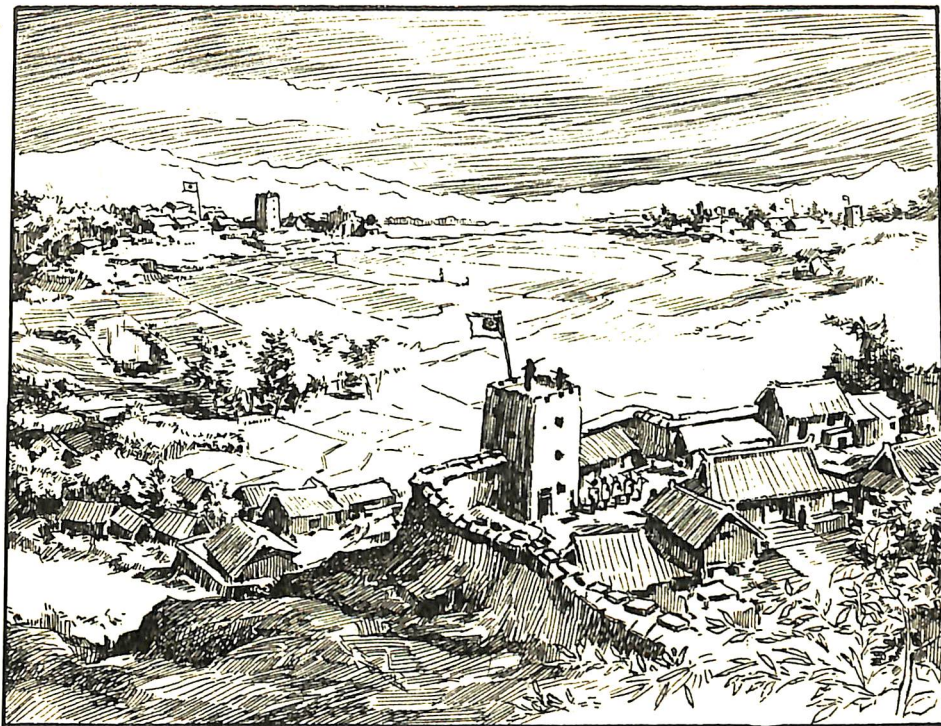
Wang looked at the comrades and seemed to guess what had happened. Hsu looked pale, so he poured him a glass of water and told him to rest for a while. Then he suggested that the others go outdoors for a breath of fresh air.



Everyone felt ill at ease, Young Kao especially. "What's the matter," Wang tried to draw them out. "Why is everyone moping? . . . Well, like to hear a story?"



All breathed a sigh of relief and settled down to listen. So the story began. . . .



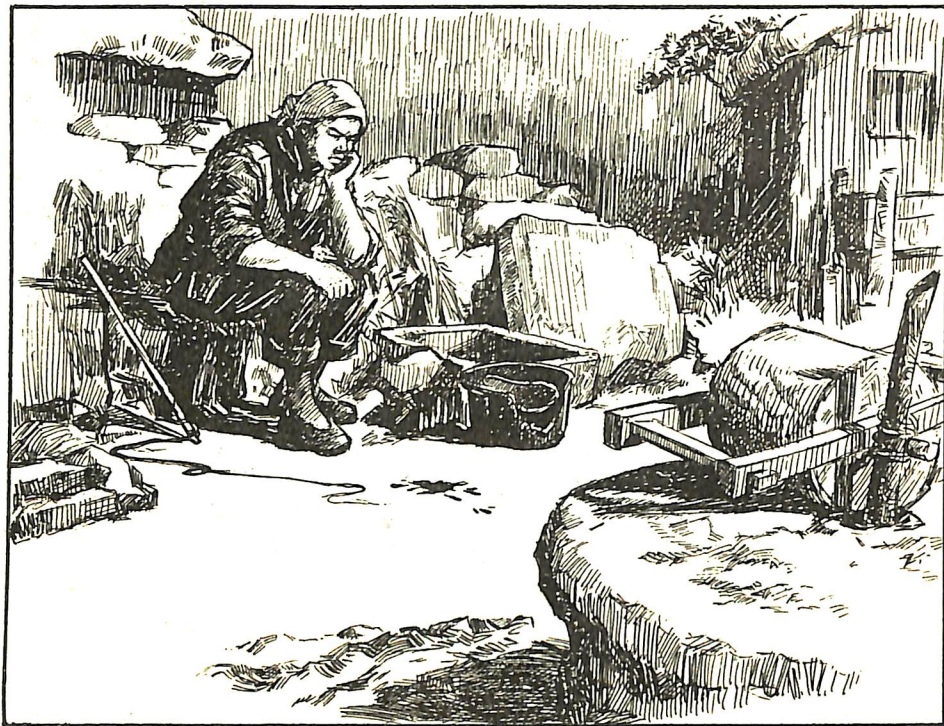
In 1943 when these parts were under the rule of the Japanese and Kuomintang troops who had gone over to the enemy, the Communists depended on an underground communication network for contact with the outside world.



In those days we had a Party comrade called Lao Tieh who looked after all communications for twenty miles round. He could not work by day or the enemy would see him, so he worked by night.



Even in freezing weather the enemy still watched the river crossings. Despite the icy water Lao Tieh always used to wade across. After he got across, his wet clothes used to freeze solid on him.



He always had to get back before daybreak to work for the landlord. There was no time for him to rest. Of course this seriously impaired his health, but he never complained.



One afternoon there were four important messages to deliver: one for our Army H.Q., the other three for underground armed detachments in the neighbourhood.



As the messages were extremely important and urgent, Lao Tieh had to ask his wife to help, even though she was expecting a baby soon. He asked her to see to the three in the neighbourhood, and took the one for H.Q. himself.



Lao Tieh's wife put the notes in a chipped bowl in her food basket. She filled the bowl up on top with cooked rice and a handful of sweet potatoes and taros. Then she set off.



It was snowing and the road was difficult. By dusk she still had one message to deliver. She tried to go faster towards the Hu's, the last person she must contact.



No sooner had she stepped through Hu's gate than she saw there were four enemy soldiers there. They had tied Hu's hands and were taking him away.



She quickly turned back, but it was already too late. The enemy had seen her and wanted to know what she was doing. "I've come to beg a bit of rice," she said and indicated her basket.



The enemy soldiers did not believe her. They surrounded her and searched her from head to toe; they even tore the patches off her coat. But they never found anything.



Giving the basket a vicious kick, the squad leader told her she could go.



The basket rolled over and over and the broken bowl rolled out on the snow, showing the message.



The enemy squad leader stooped down to pick it up, but Lao Tieh's wife got there first. She snatched the paper, and swallowed it.



The enemy soldiers were furious. They killed her in their anger.



How had Lao Tieh got on? He delivered the message to H.Q. all right, but by the time he turned homewards it was slow going in the snow. He went as fast as he could, as he was worried about the other three messages.



He wasn't noticing where he was going, because of worrying, his foot slipped, and he fell with a shower of snow into a gully.



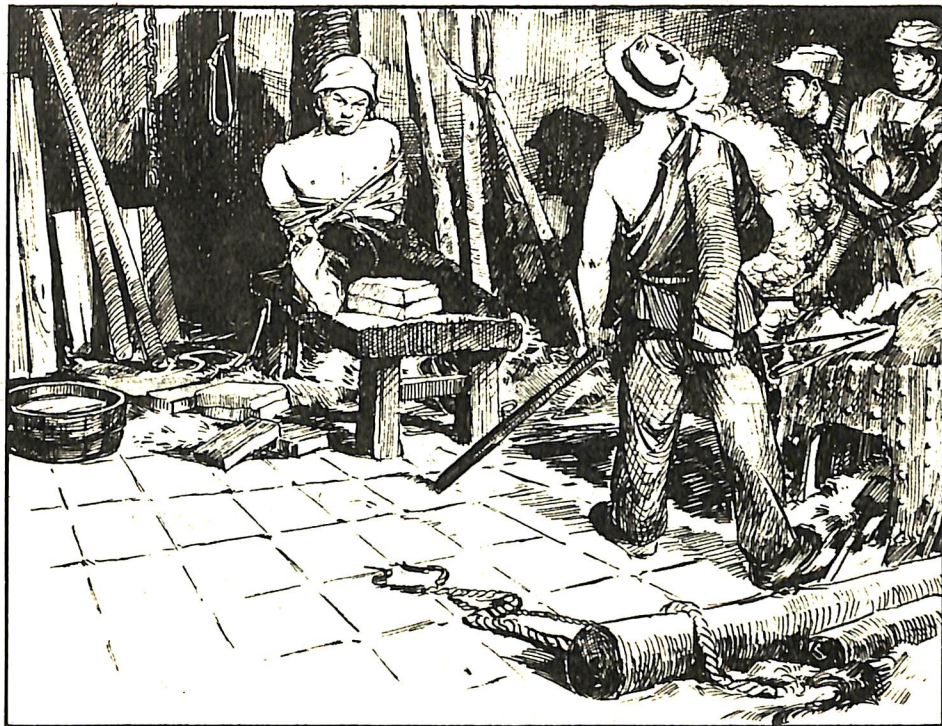
His head and his legs were cut and scratched but he scrambled up and went painfully on his way.



At last he got back; it was already dawn. As soon as he got into the village, a dozen or so enemy troops suddenly jumped on him and he was seized.



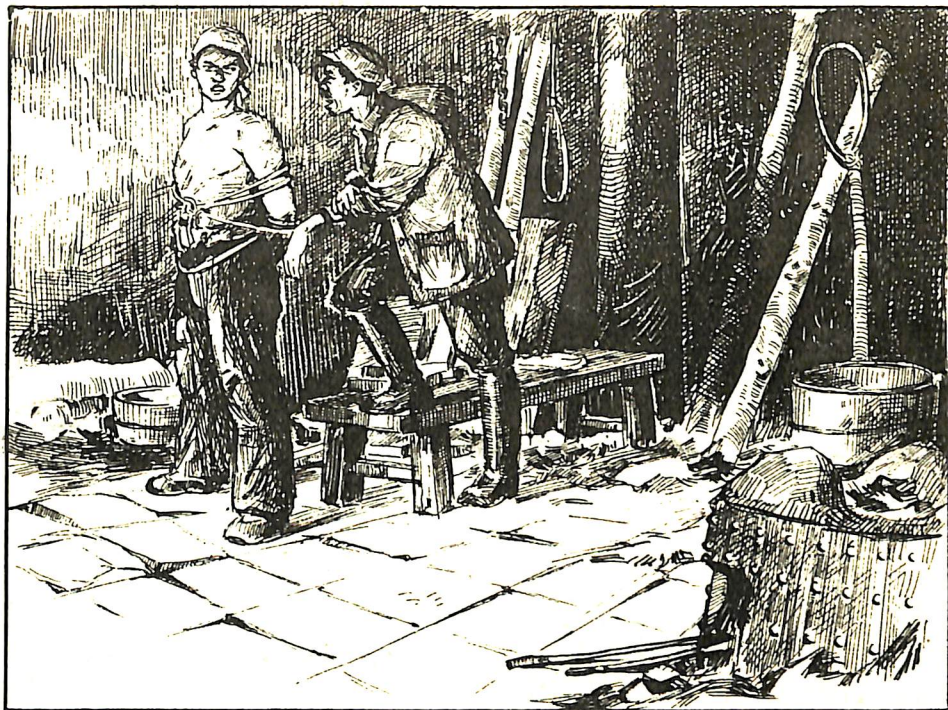
It was the same enemy soldiers who had killed his wife. They had traced her to his house and first tied up his son. They took both him and his son to the enemy H.Q.



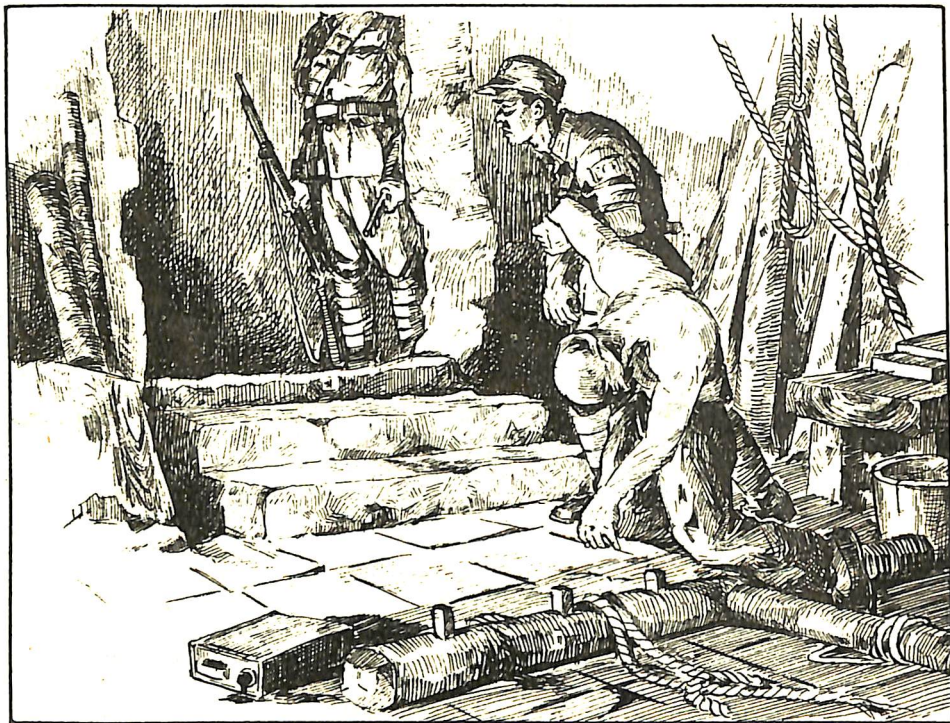
Lao Tieh was interrogated and brutally tortured. He fainted away again and again. He knew that the communication network was the artery of the revolution, and didn't tell them a thing.



Unable to get any information from him, the enemy threatened him further. "We'll kill your son if you refuse to talk. You've got two minutes to make up your mind." Lao Tieh was so grieved that he couldn't stop the tears from flowing.



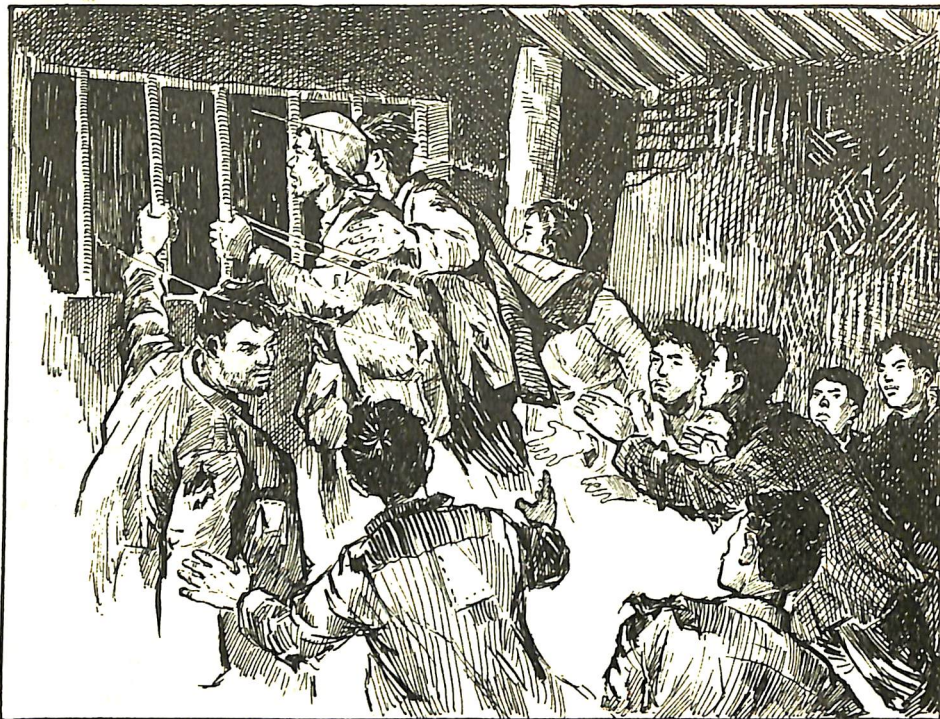
The enemy thought he was weakening and would divulge some information for his son's sake. "Go to hell, I'll never capitulate," cursed Lao Tieh. He heard his son scream and fainted away.



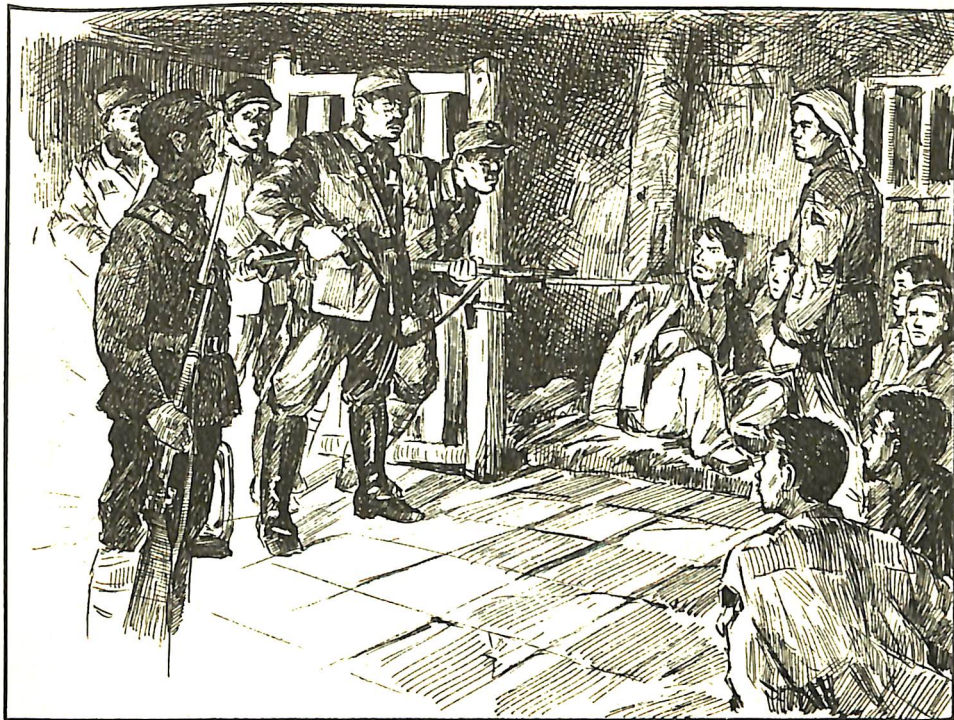
He was tortured till there was hardly breath left in him, and then thrown into gaol.



On New Year's Eve the same year, the "prisoners" in gaol were startled by the sound of fireworks in the streets and were reminded of their homes and loved ones.



Suddenly they heard rifle-fire outside, then shells falling one after another near the gaol. The "prisoners" were overjoyed.



A few minutes later, the door sprang open and panic-stricken enemy soldiers came to take the "prisoners" away. The enemy blockhouse was already in a blaze.



A shell whizzed past and dropped near them. The enemy soldiers were so frightened, they crouched low on the ground. Lao Tieh looked at the flashing lights with a smile.



"Tomorrow," he said to his comrades, "this place will be ours. We messengers will be able to walk about in broad daylight with despatches and letters. Oh, how good it would be!"



As he spoke these words our shock troops were dashing across the lines. In one instant, all the comrades were freed.



Lao Tieh, still suffering from severe injuries, was sent to the hospital that very night.



After six months of treatment and rest, he was restored to health.



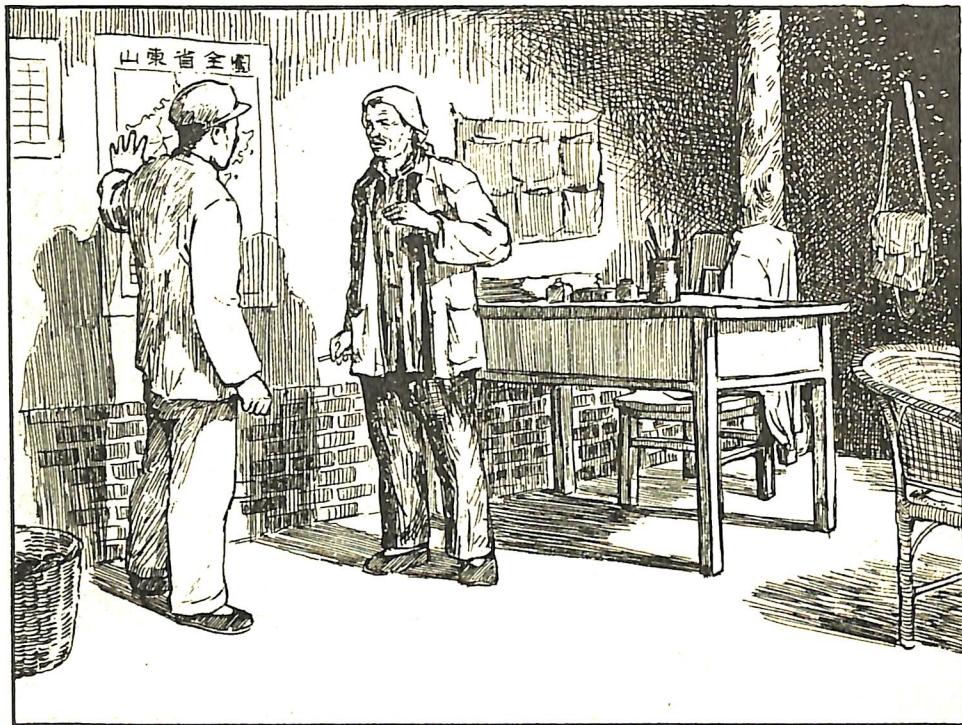
He went straight home from the hospital. But where was his home? His wife and son were dead, even his house was burned down by the enemy.



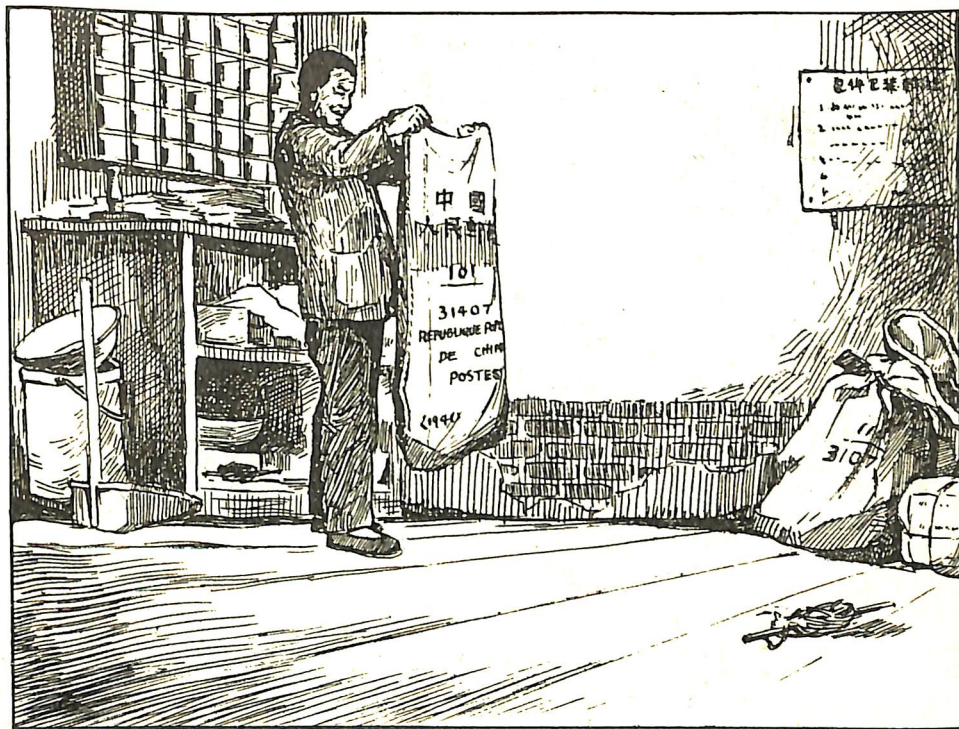
Neighbours tried to get him into their house for a bite and drink, but he wouldn't go. He sat quietly amid the ruins for a long time, then stood up and walked away.



He headed for the county Party committee, and asked for his old job. The comrade in charge smiled. "No more underground communications now. We've set up regular post offices. Do you still want to work in that line?"



The county Party committee meant to appoint him postmaster of the district sub-office. Lao Tieh, however, thought he was not good enough for that position and asked to start as an ordinary messenger.



His request was granted and the next day he was sent to the sub-office as a postman.



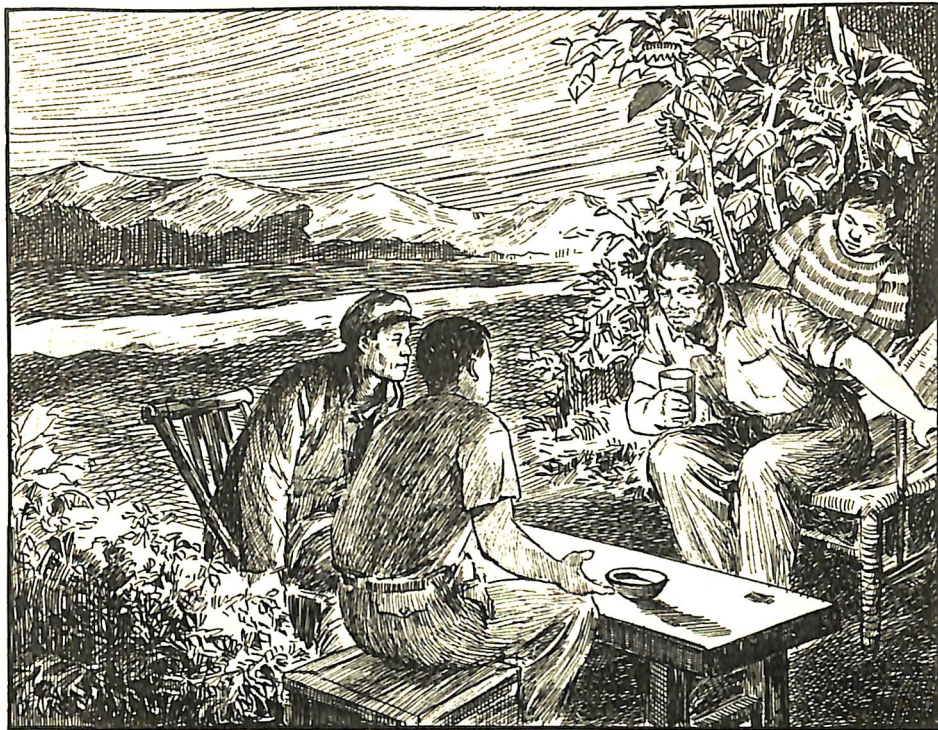
During the day he climbed mountains and went round the villages delivering letters.



In the evenings he burned the midnight oil, studying hard.



After a couple of years, he made much progress. The year before last he was made postmaster of a sub-office.



"And now, the higher-ups have decided to promote him to assistant county postmaster," said Wang, winding up his story. "Fine chap," said Lao Liu, very much moved. "He's a real revolutionary."



"Yes," said Ma, the mopes gone. "Compared with him, how small we are. And yet we are always grumbling about this and that." He glanced at Young Kao but Kao's head hung deep in thought.



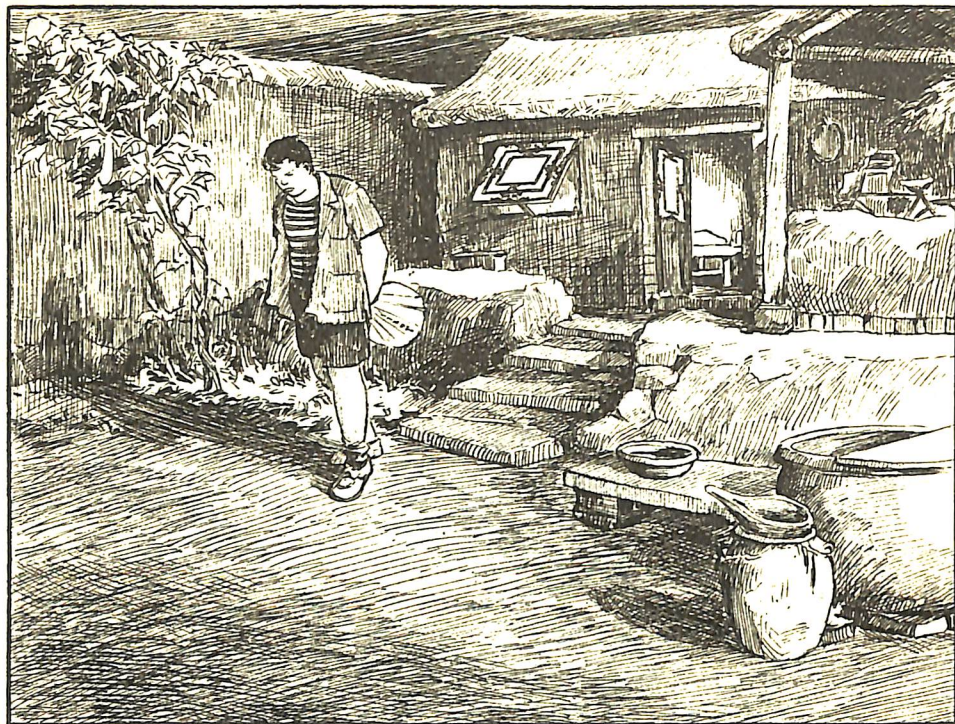
"Postmaster Wang," Young Kao asked suddenly. "Where is this comrade Lao Tieh now?" Wang smiled and said, "He is right here."



"Oh, it's Postmaster Hsu then!" cried everyone all at once.



"That's right," said Wang. "Hsu is Lao Tieh, the old messenger. He will be Assistant County Postmaster Hsu." His listeners were all deeply stirred.



That night sleep was slow in coming to every one. Ma tossed and sighed in bed. Young Kao paced to and fro in the yard. His footsteps echoed till dawn.
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