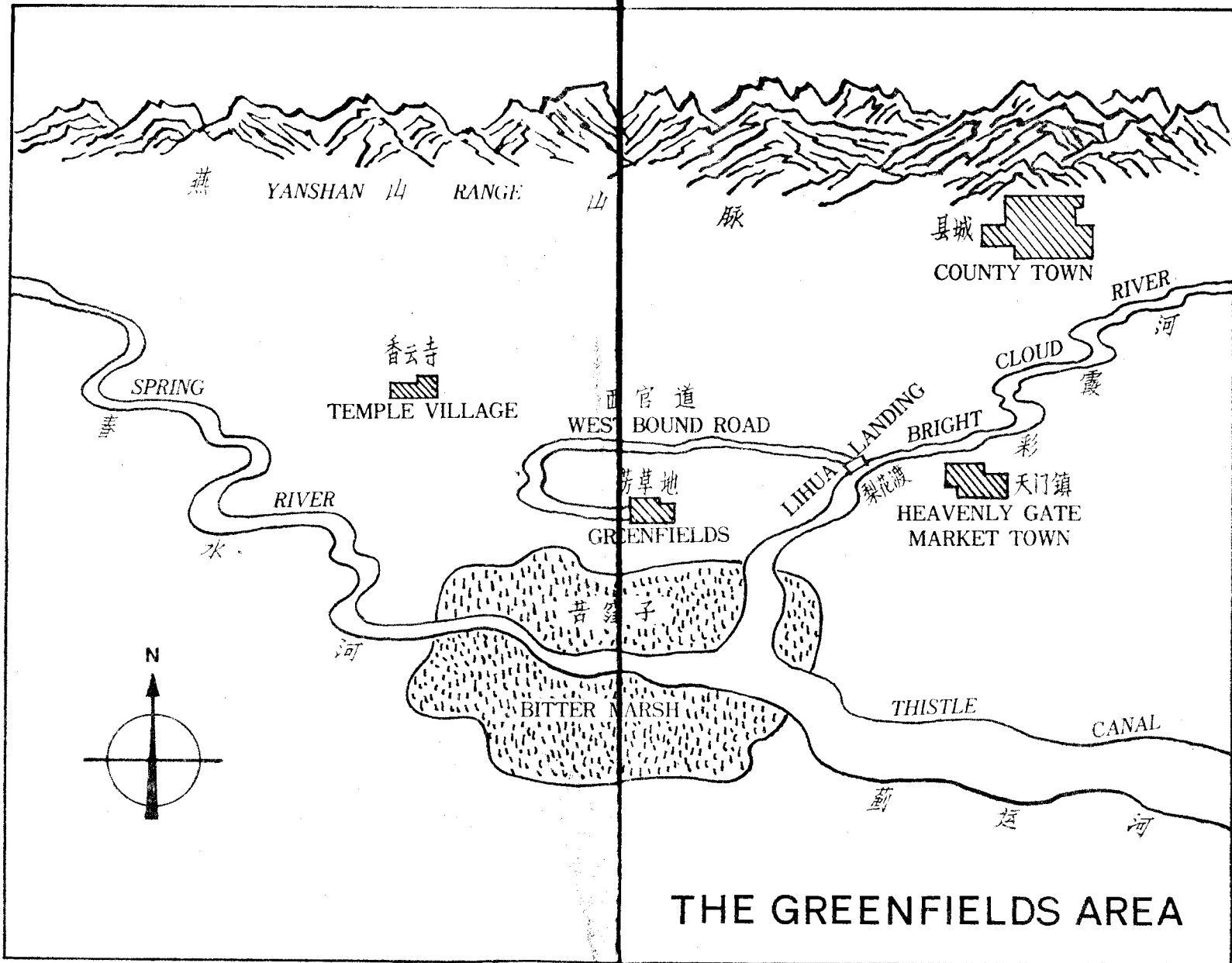


A CHINESE NOVEL

# THE GOLDEN ROAD

A Story of One Village in the  
Uncertain Days After Land Reform





燕 YANSHAN 山 RANGE 山

脉

县城  
COUNTY TOWN

RIVER  
河

SPRING

水

香云寺

TEMPLE VILLAGE

官道  
WEST BOUND ROAD

CLOUD

河

RIVER

水

草地

GREENFIELDS

LIHUA LANDING

BRIGHT

彩

天门镇  
HEAVENLY GATE  
MARKET TOWN

苦窠子

BITTER MARSH

THISTLE

CANAL

蘆

花

河

THE GREENFIELDS AREA

# The Golden Road

HAO RAN

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## INTRODUCTION

*The Golden Road* is the most significant Chinese novel to emerge in the last fifteen years. A dramatic story of one North China farming community in the early days after the revolution, it concerns the relationship between the Chinese peasantry's desire to overcome its poverty and peasant efforts to collectivize agriculture. In addressing a central question of our times — how to eliminate poverty — this work clearly demonstrates that the triumph of the Chinese revolution in 1949 did not resolve the rural crisis but served to open up wider perspectives for economic and social development.

The process of revolutionary transformation in the countryside profoundly affected the lives of all involved and came to be powerfully symbolized by one word: *fanshen*. Coined in the liberated areas of North China during the late forties when the land reform movement was shattering the economic, social, and political power of the landlords, *fanshen* literally means "to turn over." To the hundreds of millions of peasants participating in the destruction of the feudal, medieval order, it meant emancipation — from the landlords, from superstition, from ignorance; and it signified the beginning of a new life. With the acquisition of land, tools, and political power, one fifth of humanity had entered a new world.

The trials of land reform and the successive steps toward agricultural collectivization which brought an end to private farming have provided the raw material for many of

the best novels and stories of contemporary China. Novelists such as Ding Ling, Liu Qing, Zhao Shuli and Zhou Libo, whose works have been translated into English and published by the Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, hold the view that socialist literature should reflect the needs and tastes of the general public; it should portray life realistically but in an optimistic and idealized manner, free from the limitations of real life. They have produced a genre of literature which is fundamentally political in nature, designed to stress the positive aspects of the revolutionary process and intended to inspire those engaged in the building of a new society.

Hao Ran, the pen name of Liang Jinguang, is in the same tradition as these writers but of a younger generation. Born on March 25, 1932 in an impoverished peasant family in Zhaogezhuang Mining Town, Hebei, North China, he grew up in times of tremendous social turmoil. During his first decade of life, he was orphaned and his homeland invaded by Japan. To make a living, he ran errands for the Communist soldiers fighting the Japanese.

In 1946, Hao Ran became a cadre in one of the liberated areas, serving as head of the Children's Corps. As the battle for China was raging in 1948, he was admitted into the Communist Party, and during the first years of the People's Republic, he participated in the setting up of mutual-aid teams and cooperatives in Hebei's Jixian County where he had moved around 1940. In all, he worked for eight years as a cadre at the grass-roots level, with these experiences providing invaluable first-hand material for his literary career.

Hao Ran first began writing at the age of seventeen when the need to encourage peasants in production had compelled him to pick up a pen and compose a short skit on the subject. But his real boost came in 1954 when he joined the

staff of the *Hebei Daily* as a reporter. During the next ten years, while he worked for various publications as a correspondent and then as an editor, he published seven collections of short stories, one volume of prose and three children's books.

The publication of volume one of his first novel, *Bright Skies*, in September 1964 brought Hao Ran into the literary limelight. It was greeted with enthusiasm by the public and established him as a major writer on the theme of revolutionary transformation in the countryside. He left his job at the time as an editor of the journal *Hongqi* (Red Flag) to devote himself full time to his writings and to the activities of the Beijing Writers' Union.

The outline of Hao Ran's second novel was begun before the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 but were put aside for four years while he participated in the movement, which included a six month stint in the countryside at Zhoukoudian Commune, about 45 miles southwest of Beijing. In 1972, the first volume of this novel, *The Golden Road* appeared, bringing Hao Ran to the pinnacle of his literary career. An ambitious project, it was envisaged as a four volume work tracing the course of collectivization in the countryside from 1950 to 1956. Volume two, like its predecessor a mammoth creation of a half a million words, was published in 1974. Sections of volume three subsequently appeared in periodicals but the whole has never been completed.

The first volume of *The Golden Road*, which is translated here, concerns events in one village during the first few months of 1950. It derives much of its strength from Hao Ran's extensive knowledge of the speech, customs and way of life of people in eastern Hebei. Its slow moving presentation is reminiscent of the rural story-telling tradition

practiced by itinerant folk artists. As a modern day storyteller, Hao Ran uses vivid colloquial language with an occasional historical allusion, reflecting his close ties with the rural populace. His familiarity with farming tools, planting conditions and soil quality is unmatched by any other modern Chinese novelist.

Unfortunately, this novel is flawed in several ways, as a result of certain literary practices in vogue in the early seventies. Quotations from Mao Zedong printed in bold face, over-emphasis of the role of the leading character and excessive rhetoric mar this work. With the author's consent, such parts have either been dropped or modified in the English version. Also cut for reasons of economy were many extraneous anecdotes and portions that presume an intimate knowledge of Chinese history on the part of the reader.

Despite its flaws, *The Golden Road* has a definite place in the literary history of New China. It remains the best of the novels published since 1966 and it shows the path that its author firmly believes will lead hundreds of millions of Chinese peasants from poverty to prosperity.

The translators would like to express their appreciation to Adele Rickett for her moral support and critical readings of early drafts of the manuscript. We also owe thanks to Janet Costner, Margaret Decker, Lois Hely, Patricia Jackal, Margie King, Ruth Misheloff, Maxine Miska, Judy Polumbaum, Jan Ting and Silvia Wineland for their valuable criticisms and generous advice.

Chris Gilmartin  
Beijing, 1980

## PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

For the convenience of readers, the original Chinese names have been shortened. The full names are given in brackets.

Caifeng (Qian Caifeng)	<i>Fiancée of Erlin.</i>
Crooked Mouth	<i>Former landlord in Greenfields.</i>
Daquan (Gao Daquan)	<i>A Party member in Greenfields.</i>
Erlin (Gao Erlin)	<i>A young peasant in Greenfields, Daquan's brother.</i>
Fan Keming	<i>A cook in the district office in town, but whose home is in Greenfields.</i>
Grandma Deng	<i>An elderly poor peasant in Greenfields.</i>
Gu Xinmin	<i>The head of Heavenly Gate County.</i>
Jinfa (Zhang Jinfa)	<i>The village head of Greenfields.</i>
Jiukuan (Deng Jiukuan)	<i>A poor peasant in Greenfields.</i>
Liang Haishan	<i>The Party Secretary of Heavenly Gate County.</i>
Liping (Zhou Liping)	<i>A Youth League member, Zhou Zhong's daughter.</i>

Liu Xiang	<i>A poor peasant in Greenfields.</i>
Luo Xuguang	<i>Deputy leader of a land reform work-team in Greenfields.</i>
Qin Fu	<i>A middle peasant in Greenfields.</i>
Qin Kai	<i>A middle peasant in Greenfields, Qin Fu's brother.</i>
Ruifen (Lu Ruifen)	<i>Daquan's wife.</i>
Shaohuai (Feng Shaohuai)	<i>An upper-middle peasant in Greenfields, a distant relative of Daquan.</i>
Tiehan (Zhu Tiehan)	<i>A Party member in Greenfields, the leader of the village militia.</i>
Tough Hide (Jin Shou)	<i>A loafer in Greenfields, Jinfa's cousin.</i>
Wenji (Qin Wenji)	<i>Qin Fu's eldest son.</i>
Wenqing (Qin Wenqing)	<i>A Youth League member, Qin Fu's youngest son.</i>
Zhou Zhong	<i>An old poor peasant in Greenfields, an activist.</i>

## I

# Greenfields Reborn

A fiery sun rose from the horizon, gilding the rambling plain and the thatched-roof houses in the old village with a crust of gold. Smoke from breakfast fires hovered above the streets which were alive with sounds of cocks crowing and children merrily laughing.

A cloud of dust suddenly boiled up from a side lane. Chickens flapped their wings and scooted off in every direction. It was not a gust of wind nor a cart — just Zhu Tiehan charging out of an alley. He was not running, no pressing business was beckoning him; his gait always suggested a great to-do. This ruddy-complexioned young man was unusually tall and strong; he even seemed to breathe more powerfully than others. Although it was the coldest time of year when dripping water instantly solidifies, the collar on his partially buttoned padded jacket flapped open, exposing his swarthy chest.

When he was born, his mother had failed to lactate and he had howled from hunger under a shabby quilt beside her. Not a speck of rice was to be found in the house; his father could only scrape together wild vegetables which he cooked into broth for the newborn baby. Tiehan lived on chaff and vegetables for the next nineteen years. He never owned a stitch of decent clothing: in summer he wrapped a gunny sack

around his middle and in winter he threw another one over his shoulders. He was famished, freezing and neglected, but he never fell ill; even a slight headache was rare. All in all he was much healthier than those who feasted on meat and fish and bundled up in silk quilted jackets. Believing he was destined to survive, his parents called him Tiedan (iron egg) and gradually everyone else picked it up. During the upsurge of land reform, a comrade from the work team who was helping him write an application for Communist Party membership persuaded him to change his name from Tiedan (iron egg) to Tiehan (iron man).

Now he rushed over to the old locust tree in front of the "Tall Steps," a common nickname for the landlord's former domicile because of the particularly high steps leading into the compound. Wrapping both arms around the tree trunk, he kicked off his shoes and nimbly shinned up the tree. He reached for a cardboard megaphone hanging from a branch and was about to speak into it; but then he paused, yanked off a dead branch, and broke it into several pieces. With his eyes squinted mischievously, he looked down the street.

Two friends were approaching from the east. Qin Wenqing was carrying a roll of paper and a bucket of paste. He had his hair parted on one side, a style common among students, and looked gentle and good-natured. Zhou Liping, two thick braids hanging down to her waist, walked along beside him, completely absorbed in their conversation. She was carrying a washbasin in one hand and a long-handled broom in the other.

"He hides at home and barely ever steps out of our courtyard," Wenqing was saying. "He sees the new society through a crack in the gate. All he ever does is sit around and calculate how to make another buck. It makes me look bad."

"Your father is weird," Liping declared. "Why's he so afraid of us poor peasants anyway? The government policy is clearly to unite with middle peasants."\*

"Well, it's not hard to see why. All those rumors spread by the Kuomintang reactionaries just before Liberation scared the hell out of him. Since land reform he has softened a bit. You can even spot a smile on his face once in a while. But he's still very suspicious of anything connected with the government. I wouldn't mind him being so conservative if only he wasn't such a drag on me."

"Why bother with him? Even women are liberated now. How can he get in the way of a young man like you?"

"He was against me teaching in the night school. Daquan had to spend two evenings persuading him. Why, if it weren't for Daquan, Heaven only knows what kind of fuss he would have made."

"You just can't deal with conflict," Liping asserted. "And Daquan is too patient. Now if things were left up to me, I —"

Suddenly Liping screeched as something hit her on the head. Before she could look up, a barrage of dry branches came hailing down on her.

Pleased with his prank, Tiehan laughed so hard the whole tree shook. He ignored Liping's tongue-lashing and raised the megaphone to his mouth. "Hey, all you group leaders,

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\* After liberation in 1949, land reform was carried out in China's countryside to uproot the feudal ownership of land. According to the government policy on determining the class status in the rural areas, the rural population at that time was classified into landlords, rich peasants, middle peasants (who were subdivided into upper-middle, middle and lower-middle peasants), poor peasants and workers (including farm laborers). The landlords and rich peasants belonged to the overthrown exploiting classes.



attention please! The village head is going to a district meeting soon, so we need to collect examples of recent improvements in our village and gather together everyone's opinions."

He repeated his announcement several times, then started to laugh again.

Liping waved her broom in the air and yelled, "You rotten egg! I dare you to come down here and have it out with me."

With one arm wrapped around a branch, Tiehan dangled his big feet and countered, "If you had any guts, you'd come up here."

"You come down!"

"Haven't you been running around every day yelling that men and women are equal now? After all that racket, looks like you haven't made the grade yet."

Liping shoved Wenqing. "Climb up there and pull him down for me."

"I don't want to get in his way," Wenqing declined, stepping back.

"Scaredy-cat," Liping spat. Then she picked up her basin and left in a huff.

Tiehan called out, "Wenqing, now you've seen it with your own eyes. For the first time Liping has admitted she's been licked. And I'm the one who did it!"

Wenqing laughed, then said more seriously, "Tiehan, come on down and help us set up the village office."

"If I help you, who's going to canvass the members of my group?"

"Everyone in your group is praising the government to the skies except my father. Compliments are all you'll get. Why bother?" Wenqing retorted and followed after Liping.

"That's just what I'm after. The more good news the

better. The district leaders are concerned about the *fanshen*\* peasants. I want to tell them all the good news." As he said this, Tiehan slid down the tree and noticed his shoes were missing. "Liping," he screamed at the top of his lungs, "give me back my shoes!"

Standing at the top of the Tall Steps, Liping held up her broom in one hand and the basin in the other. "What are you talking about? Who wants your shoes!"

Puzzled, Tiehan bent down to look around. Suddenly a heavy shoe landed squarely on his head. As he looked up, Liping was taking the other shoe from the basin and getting ready to let it fly. Tiehan went charging up the steps.

Quick to react, Liping snatched the bucket from Wenqing's hand and threatened, "If you dare come up here, I'll dump all this paste on your head."

Tiehan bargained, "No more trouble if you give me back my shoe."

"Are you going to pull any more tricks on me?"

"Give me back my shoe," Tiehan demanded.

"Not unless you promise to behave yourself."

"Okay, okay."

Just then a group of people sallied out of a nearby alley, bundles, basins, bowls, brooms and pitchforks in hand. A few were lugging a cabinet. Everyone was laughing and chattering as if they were part of a triumphal procession.

\* "Literally, it means 'to turn the body,' or 'to turn over.' To China's hundreds of millions of landless and land-poor peasants it meant to stand up, to throw off the landlord yoke, to gain land, stock, implements, and houses. But it meant much more than this. It meant to throw off superstition and study science, to abolish 'word blindness' and learn to read, to cease considering women as chattles and establish equality between the sexes, to do away with appointed village magistrates and replace them with elected councils. It meant to enter a new world." (William Hinton, *Fanshen: A Documentary of Revolution in a Chinese Village*, New York, Vintage, 1966, p. vii.)

Tiehan, always one for a good time, ran over and asked, "What's going on here?"

"We're helping Aunt Chen move," Lu Chunjiang replied, his ruddy cheeks showing from under a big iron wok over his head.

Tagging along after the crowd, Tiehan boasted, "You're just moving now? We moved everyone in our group two days after the houses were assigned. You're falling behind."

"Not everyone does such a slapdash job," countered Lu Chunjiang. "We repaired all the houses that are going to be handed out so that they look like new. New houses for new people. If you don't believe me, go take a look for yourself."

Realizing that he had blundered, Tiehan grinned ingenuously at Chunjiang, then worked his way over to Aunt Chen, who was holding onto a couple of old hens. "Aunt, do you have any other heavy things? The heavier the better. I'll move them for you."

The widow was so thrilled by the excitement of moving she could not keep her mouth shut. "Where are your eyes? With so many helping hands, one trip will take care of the whole thing," she replied glancing around at the crowd. "Besides, you cadres have your hands full as it is, without worrying about me. By the way, I just heard your broadcast to the group leaders. Even though you're not my group leader, I want to tell you my criticism of Daquan —"

"Oh, Aunt," Chunjiang came over and said, "why don't you just drop it."

"What are you doing?" Tiehan glared at Chunjiang. "She has a right to speak her piece."

"I was itching to move into my new house as soon as I got it," Aunt Chen recounted. "But then Daquan told me

to wait. The windows needed to be fixed. All right, I let him have his way. After the windows were fixed, he said wait a few more days so we can replaster the walls. Okay, I said, replaster the walls. Then the night before last I saw the walls had dried so I found Daquan and told him I'd been dreaming about living in my new house, nothing could keep me from moving in now. But he said that the *kang*\* should be relaid. I said no. Mixing mud and plaster is too much trouble in winter. I could just make do for a while. So last night I found some people to help me move. But when I got there, the *kang* was already fixed. Someone told me Daquan, Yongzhen and Chunjiang did it the night before. It was so cold. And they worked all night without a bit of heat in that house. What if they had gotten sick? How could I bear to see that?"

Tiehan blinked. "Huh! Is that all that your criticism amounts to? Forget it. Better go snuggle up on your *kang*."

"Tiehan," Aunt Chen yelled, "how can you be so undemocratic? When my group leader comes around to get my criticisms, I'll add one for you."

The crowd roared with laughter, frightening the two hens under Aunt Chen's arms into frantic squawking.

As he watched this lively crowd move down the road, Tiehan felt tremendously gratified. Surrounded by tears and anger while he was growing up, he had never seen poor people so happy before.

Liu Xiang came into the village toting a carrying-pole that bounced and squeaked, the load so heavy the baskets almost scraped the ground. The manure in each basket was piled

\* A brick platform, heated in winter from underneath, and used in the day to sit and work on and at night as a bed. It usually takes up one whole side of a room in a northerner's house.

to a peak and was held in by branches stuck around the rim of the basket.

Tiehan clapped and cheered. "Hey, Uncle Liu, you must have rolled out of bed pretty early to collect all this manure!"

Sweat running down Liu Xiang's face had crystalized into beads of ice on his stubby beard. "Earlier than you think," he grinned. "This is my second trip."

"Gee, you're really putting yourself out!"

"Now that the world belongs to us, I'm bursting with energy. Why shouldn't I go all out? I'm going to work to double my crop this year and see the grain bins overflowing."

"That's the way we poor peasants should feel. The road ahead is so clear we can just let loose and run. Nothing can get in the way of our good life. You should have your wife fix some good meals so you can work even harder."

Liu Xiang put down his heavy load and brushed off his sweat. "You know the old saying, morale soars in happy times. Ever since land reform, my wife's sickness and depressions have disappeared. Why, yesterday afternoon she pushed the millstone all by herself. Ground up more than two pecks of corn. Isn't it amazing how much strength she has? In fact, that's the way most folks feel. Take Zhu Zhankui's father for instance. A few years ago the old man was so worn-out he couldn't go outside in the wintertime. Now he's so happy he refuses to stay inside. He hangs around the piece of land they got during land reform from morning to night. Never gets tired looking at it."

Tiehan, reminded of his duties, said, "We've got endless examples of how good our lives have gotten. When we report them to the leading comrades, they sure will be pleased. I must go tell Daquan to start writing them all down for his report."

"I wonder if Daquan's back home yet. I saw him in front

of the Tall Steps early this morning on his way to the Consumer Coop. He might not be back yet."

Tiehan was so preoccupied he hardly noticed what Liu Xiang was saying. Before Liu Xiang had finished, he had rushed off to Daquan's house.

Gao Daquan lived on the east side of town. His place used to be an abandoned threshing ground owned by the former landlord, Crooked Mouth. After land reform when Daquan moved in with his wife, Lu Ruifen, and his brother Gao Erlin, they eagerly refurbished their new home. They fashioned a courtyard by building an adobe wall around the two buildings standing on the property — a tile-roofed brick main house in the northwest corner of the square lot and a thatch-roofed shack in the southeast corner. They planted willow trees along the wall and a few locust trees near the house.

Zhu Tiehan entered the Gao courtyard and saw a toddler chasing after a speckled hen. He screwed up his face, posed as if he was about to pounce on the boy and glared. "Xiao Long, where is your father? Hurry up. Out with it!"

Xiao Long was extremely wary of Tiehan as he would twcak Xiao Long's nose whenever he was in a good mood. The boy forgot the hen and scrambled toward the house to seek the security of his mother's arms.

Ruifen, hearing a voice in the courtyard, came outside. Motherhood seemed to suit her well; her body had filled out and a certain poise was reflected in her youthful features. She still dressed in her native Shandong style: a front lock of hair sloped across her forehead and was pushed behind her ear; her padded jacket was buttoned on the side and made of plain patterned cloth and her black padded pants were very wide at the cuff. Since her hands were covered with

golden corn flour, she drew Xiao Long toward her with both wrists and said to Tiehan, "Are you teasing my child again? Don't you ever behave yourself?"

"I asked him about his dad but he wouldn't answer me."

"With such lousy manners, no wonder he won't talk to you."

"So that's how it is. There sure are a lot of rules around here. Well, I can handle that."

With a click of his heels, he snapped to attention and gave a military salute, then said in a mocking tone, "Comrade Lu Ruifen, may I ask if Comrade Gao Daquan is at home?"

Ruifen burst out laughing. Kissing Xiao Long on the cheek, she said, "Look at what a strange uncle you have. Don't be like him when you grow up."

Tiehan thrust his chest forward. "What's wrong with me? Put a gun into my hand and I can defend the village. Give me a hoe and I can work the fields. If Xiao Long shouldn't be like me, who should he be like? You? One day when I was cleaning out my gun at your house, you didn't dare come near it, kept on asking whether it was loaded. Another time Erlin and Daquan dug up a tree root and you couldn't carry it home by yourself. Erlin had to go help you. And what about the time you were asked to say a few words on behalf of the cadre families for a National Day celebration? Daquan sat up late into the night helping you put together a speech, but what happened? You got tongue-tied and said 'we must be patient' instead of 'we must be patriotic.' You think I'm strange. What about yourself? Ha, ha!"

Although this last example brought a flush of red to Ruifen's face, she refused to back down. "Why poke fun at me? Of course we plain folk can't match you Party members. But as far as cadre families go, I'm at least better than your mother. The day everyone was burning the old land deeds

and getting their new land certificates at the Tall Steps, where was she? Burning incense behind her closed door and praying on her knees to the Buddhas. She was rambling on about how the Almighty must have had his eyes shut for the last thousand years and only now was looking kindly on the poor."

"Don't go around spreading rumors," Tiehan hotly rejoined, obviously defensive. "My mother threw away her idols and shrines as soon as she realized that dividing the land and houses was for real. She's not superstitious anymore."

"What do you mean spreading rumors?" Ruifen retorted. "I saw her doing it with my own eyes. I went to your house that day and practically stumbled over her. She was kneeling on the ground. She grabbed me in a fluster and pleaded, 'Please don't tell anyone. It's too embarrassing. I'm just so happy I don't know what to do with myself.' But you don't have to worry. I won't spread it all over the place."

"Is Daquan at home or not? I have something important to discuss with him."

Ruifen too became serious. "Except for eating and sleeping, is he ever at home? He went out around midnight and just came back a while ago. But then he ran right out again to give Grandma Deng some medicine he had bought for her. It's like he's on roller skates. Who can keep track of where he's off to or what he's up to?"

Tiehan could not tell if she was praising her husband or griping about him. Still a bachelor, he did not quite understand the complexities of married life and was not interested in finding out either. He puffed up his face and stamped his feet in Xiao Long's direction before rushing out.

The sun had already climbed fairly high in the cloudless sky, its rays glistening on the peaceful street where a handful of children were at play.

Suddenly he heard the rumbling of a fast-moving cart. "Hey, watch out, watch out," a voice shouted. "Get out of the way."

Tiehan turned toward the voice. Daquan was racing down the road pulling a wooden-wheeled cart piled to a peak with dirt. Stampeded along with his back bent over, he looked like a bull ox. The shafts were firmly gripped, the shoulder strap was taut. Sweat was streaming down from his overheated red face and dark hair.

Tiehan ran over and pushed the cart from the rear. "What's this dirt for?" he yelled out.

"To fix the road. It's real bumpy. When we start working in the fields this spring, it will be a terrible nuisance." Daquan brushed the sweat from his forehead with his wrist; a glint of white flashed from cotton poking through a new rip on the cuff of his well-patched padded jacket.

"You can do this later. I have something important to discuss with you. The district office just called a meeting for village heads to report on what's been happening since land reform. I think we should collect a lot of good examples so that the leadership can be reassured. You need to take care of this right now. There will be a group leader meeting this afternoon and we're having our Party meeting tonight. We better not let any good examples slip by."

Daquan looked back at Tiehan and stopped the cart. Learning on the shaft, he thought for a while. During his youth when he had been knocked around quite a bit, he had learned to seriously think things through and this habit was strengthened through his participation in the land reform struggles. No incident, good or bad, escaped his probing mind. He would even heed seemingly idle chatter, mulling it over long afterward. Events most people deemed quite ordinary could

touch off a whole chain of thought. Now he carefully considered Tiehan's remarks before responding, "This is the first district-wide cadre meeting since land reform. I figure that besides hearing local reports, the leaders are sure to announce some new tasks."

Such a possibility had not occurred to Tiehan. "New tasks? What could they be?"

"My guess is this time the leadership will call for socialism."

"Really! So soon?"

Daquan continued, "Remember what the work-team's\* deputy head Luo Xuguang said the day we joined the Party? The ultimate goal of the Party is communism. After land reform we'll need to work toward socialism. Just think! Land reform was over quite a while ago. Won't the leadership call for socialism soon?"

Tiehan clapped his hands. "How do you see us going about it?"

Daquan grinned. "I can't say for sure how it will be. In the past all I knew about land reform was that I wanted it. I didn't have the faintest idea how to go about it. Then the leadership sent a work team here and we all learned. I'm sure they'll provide the same kind of help when we take up socialism."

"You're a much better thinker than I am. Well, let's talk about it tonight at the Party meeting."

Tiehan started to leave but Daquan held him back. "The leadership hasn't announced this yet, so don't go spreading

\* Work team — During the land reform movement government organizations sent groups of cadres to the countryside to help with the setting up of the local power organs, the redistribution of the land and property confiscated from the landlords and the implementing of other rural policies of the Chinese Communist Party.

it around. One other thing. Liping and some others are fixing up the village office right now. Why don't you go give them a hand? We need a couplet to hang on either side of Chairman Mao's portrait. Since this office is run by the people, we should fix it up right."

"Who me? Write a couplet? No matter how hard I rack my brains, I can't come up with fancy words."

"Go find the primary school teacher Jiang. Have him put our feelings into verse."

Tiehan dashed off without a thought of helping Daquan.

Daquan pulled the cart to the west end of the village. Hanging his padded jacket over the fork of a young willow tree, he pushed up his sleeves and took a shovel out of the cart. He first filled in the pot holes and flattened out the bumps on the corrugated road. Then one shovelful after another, he sprinkled the yellow dirt from the cart onto the ground. The small shovel moved gracefully in his powerful hands, reminiscent of a Beijing Opera warrior brandishing his sword. Clouds of soil flew from his shovel seeming to carpet the frozen country road with a golden camel's hair rug.

Wan Shuhua came along holding her baby in one hand and carrying a colorful bundle in the other. She was on the way back from visiting her parents in another village. "I saw someone working on the road from a long way back. Gussed it was you. Do-gooders always fare well and live long. Next year your wife will surely give you another healthy son." Tickled by her own teasing, she started to laugh.

Wan Shuhua was a gregarious woman. She liked to drop in on friends and neighbors and stick her nose into other people's business. Everyone called her a walking telegram because of her loose tongue. She had one other notorious foible: After she married Zhu Rong she did not adjust well to living

with his family and often went back to her own folks. Zhu Rong was displeased but there was nothing he could do. Now Daquan jibed in response to Wan Shuhua's teasing, "Tell Brother Zhu Rong to do a few good deeds himself. He'll be well-rewarded for his efforts. Maybe his wife won't keep running back to her parents all the time."

"Get lost!" Wan Shuhua yelled. "I dare you to say that again. If I wasn't holding this baby, I'd pick up a rock and bash your head in. That would send you bawling to Ruifen."

She calmed down quickly. Stepping closer to Daquan she implored, "Brother Daquan, you shouldn't judge me by my past anymore. Many people have criticized me behind my back for always going to my mother's house. But how could I help it? At that time we didn't even have a speck of land. Zhu Rong could hardly feed his own mother on what he brought in as a hired hand. So I kept going to my mother's to save on food. Whenever folks made fun of me for going home so often, I'd have a run-in with my old man. I'd wave my finger in his face and speak my mind. 'Zhu Rong, I'd say, 'can we expect to see our own land in this lifetime? When we get old and kick the bucket, there won't even be a spot to dig a grave. We'll end up being tossed into the marsh for the vultures to gobble up!' Who ever thought the Communist Party would give us land while we were still young? I only went to my folks this time to tell them the good news. After this even if they send a cart for me, I won't be able to visit them. I'll be too busy working on our fifteen mu!"\*

She walked on down the street, then turned around and bellowed, "Brother Daquan, put on your jacket. Mind my words. You'll catch cold in this weather!"

\* 1 mu = 1/15 hectare or 1/6 acre.

## “Demonstration”

At the cadre meeting in Heavenly Gate the district Party secretary, Wang Youqing, called on all peasants to step up production and make themselves rich. The news quickly spread throughout Greenfields and everyone thought about how it would affect their lives.

On a sunny morning three days later, a group of men gathered at the village office steps in lively conversation. Facing south and sheltered from the wind, they could take in the scenery of the surrounding fields and see the people coming and going in the streets. Some squatted by the wall while others stood around with manure baskets on their backs. Six or seven pipes of varying lengths were lit. Between the branches of the old locust tree overhead a white cloud of smoke rose in whirls and dispersed, leaving a pungent smell.

Their talk naturally drifted to the subject of the recent district meeting. Most of them were from middle-income families and had a strong desire to do better. Sidestepping the touchy issues that had kept them pondering for the past three days, they discussed this new call indirectly by commenting on other people. The conversation moved from who was building a new house and which family was getting a new bride to which of the hundred-odd families would get a fresh start under the new government policy.

One person piped up, “Zhou Shiqin has the best chances. After all, he has some property left from the old days and is the best farmer around. His hopes to strike it rich never got anywhere before. But now that times are good, he’ll go all out!”

Another said, “As I see it, Zhu Zhankui will get ahead even faster than Zhou Shiqin. He might not be so well off but land reform has given him a new lease on life. He’s young and strong. So’s his wife. And his father’s got good sense. They’ll grab the chance and make good in no time.”

“I think it’s what you’ve piled up over the years that makes the difference. Even the smallest of landowners from before the revolution still have lots of things in hand. But those starting from scratch can hardly make ends meet. They’re constantly running out of this and that. For them, good days will be hard to come by.”

“Don’t you realize that the Communist Party especially helps poor people? These people have the morale, backbone, and muscle. If they just grit their teeth and get to work, they’ll be doing fine within a year.”

At this point a scrawny, baggy-eyed man, in his early forties, came up the street. He shuffled along, his shoes barely on his feet, holding his ragged padded jacket closed. He stopped by the crowd and listened listlessly. Suddenly he stepped forward and slapped his thigh. “You’d better stop blabbering and wasting your energy. You’re all talking nonsense.”

Everyone looked at him. It was Jin Shou, nicknamed Tough Hide. All his life he had drifted about without a home or a clod of dirt he could call his own but had known good food and decent clothing from time to time and was an old hand at stirring up trouble. He would shove aside anyone who crossed his path regardless of whether they were rich or poor. Unable at first to qualify for the peasants’ association during land reform, he had whined and sworn to mend his ways. Not until the last group came up for consideration did he manage to get in. After land reform, he styled himself Greenfields’ “number one poor peasant.” He

disgusted everyone but no one dared get in his way. That was why most people now held their tongues. Several, though, assumed an attentive look and baited him.

"If we're talking nonsense, why don't you enlighten us?"

"Speak up. Bless us with your words of wisdom."

Tough Hide wiped off his spot, rested his hands on his hips, stretched his skinny neck, and yelled, "I don't want to brag, but I know exactly how much money is locked up in everyone's cupboard, down to the last penny, not to mention who's getting rich and stashing it away. You're sure to agree on the two people I've picked. The first one is Qin Fu and the second, Gao Daquan.

"Why do I name these two? I've heard the tale of the Three Kingdoms and seen the opera. In there it shows that starting anything big depends on the 'timeliness of heaven,' 'gifts of earth' and 'harmony among people.' Qin Fu and Gao Daquan stand on the very spot where these three things meet. Now we're living in a society in favor of building a fortune for oneself. That's what the leaders are calling for, so whoever is prosperous will have an edge over others. This is your 'timeliness of heaven.' The Qin family had quite a lot of land to begin with, and it wasn't touched during land reform. The four people in the Gao family received almost eighteen mu. These are the 'gifts of earth.' The 'harmony among people' is even more obvious. Look at the Qin family. The oldest son can rake in money just like his father. The second son brings home hard cash from a city job and the third son is now old enough to help out. In the Gao family, the two brothers team up very well, one running the family business, the other having ties in the village, while Daquan's woman knows how to keep things in line around the home.

"The advantages of these two families are not to be sneered at! I can't say who'll get rich first, but in any case, there'll come a time when men and women in Greenfields will just have to stand back and gape while these two fight for the lead. If Old Man Shou is wrong about this, I'll read my surname upside down and pluck out my eyeballs for you to stomp on."

Many people, agreeing with this prediction, encouraged him with a round of applause and a click of the tongue.

"Old Man Shou must be pretty sober today to make such a smart forecast."

"These two families are as promising as clouds bursting with rain. They're sure to take the lead in Greenfields."

Only one person kept his mouth shut and gently shook his head. That was Qin Kai, a man in his forties with sparse eyebrows and small eyes, which suggested an easy-going personality. But he had a keen mind, was very responsible, and stood up for what he thought was right. His words carried weight among the villagers.

As soon as Tough Hide noticed Qin Kai's skeptical look, he scowled and shouted, "Huh! Do you think I've got holes in my eyes?"

Qin Kai smiled. "Your choices are sound. If Qin Fu and Gao Daquan put some muscle into it, they could make a bundle. They might even make it to the top."

Tough Hide threw back his head, puffed out his cheeks and boasted, "See, when Old Man Shou speaks, pearls of wisdom fall from his lips."

"Wait a second," warned Qin Kai. "It's not what might be, but what will be that matters. Everyone in Greenfields knows that one of those men wouldn't dare try to get rich and the other one doesn't want to. So how will it ever happen?"



People standing around thought this made sense. Some clapped their hands and nodded in approval while others were visibly disappointed. "Qin Fu has been drooling to make a fortune for half his lifetime but had it tough all along. Why should he back out now that his chances are better than ever?"

"That's not hard to figure. He is just like a horse which gets scared when the mule next to it is thrashed. If there ever is another land reform, he doesn't want anyone to know how much he has tucked away. It's Gao Daquan who's puzzling. He's a Party member. Why doesn't he want to get rich?"

Noticing that Tough Hide had grunted his disagreement and was about to leave, Qin Kai teased, "I say Old Man Shou, you call yourself the number one poor peasant. Now that the government has called on everyone to make themselves rich, you'd better set a good example."

Tough Hide thought he was being complimented and did not catch the sarcasm. He tossed back his head and announced smugly, "To tell you the truth, I can't get rich and won't try either."

"Why? Because you're like Qin Fu and don't dare to or because you're like Gao Daquan and don't want to?"

Tough Hide waved his hands in denial and seriously explained, "Neither. Just as the five fingers can never be equal, there'll always be rich and poor in the world. Besides, if everyone were rich, who would join the poor peasant league in the next land reform? And who would handle the redistribution?"

Normally such a statement would have been taken as a joke. But everyone felt uneasy when it came from the lips of Tough Hide. People glanced at one another and a tension filled the air.

Qin Kai liked to speak his mind and see things done fairly, but he also could size up a situation and knew how far to go. Seeing that the crowd's reaction had made Tough Hide nervous, he diverted the conversation. "It's pretty warm for this time of year and there isn't a gust of wind. Who knows what next year's crop will be like?"

While talking, he shaded his eyes from the sun with his hand and looked out across the fields. Suddenly he exclaimed, "Hey, who's that coming up West Bound Road?"

Everyone looked. Sorghum stubble dotted the furrows on the spacious plain; the mounds and banks, studded with withered weeds, retained patches of glistening ice and snow. West Bound Road wound through it like a homespun ribbon dyed earth-brown. A powerful black animal could be seen trotting up the road in front of a trail of dust. The rider swayed to and fro, loosely jiggling the reins. For a time a thicket obscured their progress, then they came into sight again passing the brick kiln, crossing over the stone bridge and coming down Front Street...

Unable to make out who it was, the men repacked their pipes and started guessing.

"It must be someone from the district office."

"But they all ride bicycles these days. Who rides a horse?"

"Maybe someone has just bought one."

"Would anyone who could afford it right now have the guts to be the first buyer?"

Now a racket could be heard coming from the adjoining alley. A bunch of children and some adults crowded around a man leading a big black mule. Everyone was amazed to see who it was.

A heavy-set, fifty-year-old man, he wore a tattered felt hat, its winged-out ear flaps lined with moth-eaten rabbit skin. He was dressed in an old sheepskin coat with slits

down both sides and the front flap pulled up and tucked into his blue belt. He had sturdy thick-soled shoes quilted with a fancy stitch. Conceit and audacity showed in his old pumpkin-like face and round eyes as he strutted through the crowd. He glanced around at the different faces while pulling on the mule's reins with one hand and stroking its mane with the other. To questions about the price and age of the animal, he responded amiably.

Tough Hide squinted and watched closely. Then he slapped his thigh and came forward, pushing away the children who were in his path. "Hey, Shaohuai! May I ask, what's the honorable name of the mule? Where'd it come from? Did you borrow it?" He stood on tiptoe and grabbed the mule's head. Posing as an expert, he held its upper lip in one hand and pulled down its lower lip with the other. He examined its mouth so closely his face was almost plastered onto the mule's teeth. He let go and wiped his saliva-covered fingers on his pants. "Six years old! Just the right age. A fine animal! The first of its kind to come to Greenfields."

In a pompous tone Feng Shaohuai declared, "Good or bad, it'll have to make do."

Pretending to be shocked, Tough Hide remarked, "I gather you bought the mule then."

A suggestive smile crossed Shaohuai's lips. "Out of the way," he warned the rowdy kids. "Don't blame me if you're trampled."

Tough Hide trailed close behind Shaohuai and his mule, jabbering all the while. "This old bird must have some cash stashed away to get himself a mule. It's like magic. Shaohuai, you have mules and fat pigs while the only furry animals at my place are the rats in the walls. It ain't fair. When I need a mule, I'll drop over and help myself."

Shaohuai stopped short. "Depends!" he said sharply.

Some people hate me so much they'd eat their guts out trying to label me a rich peasant. No way I'd loan them my mule. But for those who don't think they're too good for me, no problem. Why, if someone was in a crunch, I'd lend it out even if I needed it myself."

During land reform, when the poor peasants led by Daquan wanted to classify Shaohuai as a rich peasant, Tough Hide tailed along after them. While the poor peasants had been motivated by the extent of Shaohuai's exploitation, Tough Hide was concerned that the fewer people pinpointed as landlords and rich peasants the less property he would receive in the redistribution. Now Tough Hide's face tightened like a drumhead as Shaohuai began to speak, but melted into a broad grin at his concluding remarks. With a slap on Shaohuai's back, he proclaimed, "Life is full of wonders. Strange things have been happening in Greenfields. Those who should be on stage are nowhere to be seen while the ones you'd never even dream of are right up there in front. No wonder you're called a daredevil. It's no exaggeration."

Shaohuai smiled at him. Those people who had initially hung back uncertainly now crowded around the truly admirable mule. A great shortage of draft animals, particularly mules and horses, had been created in this area by the Kuomintang plundering plus the killings and auctioning off of animals by landlords and rich peasants on the eve of Liberation. Such an important acquisition was in itself quite newsworthy, let alone the fact that the person acquiring it was such a controversial figure.

Shaohuai well deserved the nickname "daredevil." When he had fled from Shandong Province twenty-five years before, he had escaped from the famine with only the skin on his back. Daring to gamble when the stakes were high, he

rented more than a hundred mu of land in one swoop and then craftily overworked his hired hands and took advantage of his relatives to become prosperous within a few years. He tried to add to his nest egg by competing with Crooked Mouth for the affections of a landlord's young widow who had some money. His fortunes dwindled when he became hopelessly entangled in the resulting lawsuits. But he still maintained his standing in Greenfields and at the same time, like an ambitious gambler who has just lost his stakes, intensified his drive to compete.

During land reform when Shaohuai caught wind of the debate over whether he should be classified a rich or an upper-middle peasant, he immediately went into action. He pleaded with some people and argued with others. He even sought the ear of County Head Gu Xinmin, intercepting him while he was out in his jeep inspecting work in the countryside. Shaohuai's cunning and quick tongue put some work team members and land reform activists on the defensive. His triumph caught many by surprise, and those who knew his past assumed that this close call would warn him to behave himself. They never imagined that three days after the district meeting issued a call for people to get rich, he would show up in front of the villagers with such remarkable audacity.

While those people clustered around and appraised the mule, it shook its head, swished its tail and peered meekly about, totally unaware of the feelings it had aroused by its sudden presence in Greenfields. But it was not so much the mule as its owner that was being judged. Hands stroked the mule, but eyes were fixed on Shaohuai's face: why had he bought the animal now and put it on show?

A middle-aged man who was standing at the edge of the crowd abruptly called out to a youth, "Let's go. An animal

is an animal. What's the use of gawking at it?"

But the youngster moved toward the center of the crowd. "I want to see what this guy has up his sleeve."

"Bet it's nothing but horseshit."

This remark triggered a burst of jeers. Shaohuai turned his head and saw a group of *fanshen* peasants. His heart jumped. He quickly turned his head back, his smug expression fading.

Just then a tall, slender man with a ruddy complexion, bulging nose and bloodshot eyes walked up the street from the east end of town. A black padded jacket was thrown over his shoulders and a coarse shirt was matted with sweat to his chest. His trouser legs were caked with black mud. He walked hastily, closely surveying everything around him, a rolled up newspaper under his arm and an open letter in his hand. A woman pushing a millstone out on the street called out, "Village Head, not going anywhere today, huh?" Another old woman holding a child called over the top of a half-broken wall, "Come on in to my place and warm up."

Zhang Jinfa flashed a smile in their direction and walked on, deep in thought. Just recently appointed village head, he was preoccupied with the work plans from the district meeting. Not only was he the first person in Greenfields to hear the new directive, but Wang Youqing, the district Party secretary, had explicitly pulled him out of a meeting to brief him on the county leadership's full program and to express his hope that Greenfields would lead the way in the new movement.

Upon his return to the village, Jinfa promptly spread the news, but his plans to call a village-wide meeting never materialized because he was tied up with work in his own fields. Just a few minutes earlier while he was shoveling manure, the

district messenger delivered an urgent letter from Wang Youqing. It criticized Jinfa for his slow start and urged him to act decisively so that he could summarize people's opinions to the district office by the next major market day. He scanned the short note three times. Plagued by pangs of guilt, he hastily crawled out of the pigsty and went looking for the group leaders to tell them to call their members to a mass meeting in the early afternoon.

Jinfa noticed the large crowd gathered in a circle near the Tall Steps and rushed over. The first thing he saw when he peeked over people's shoulders was the powerful, high-strung mule. A flicker of envious admiration, a familiar feeling for a farmer, swept across his face. But his heart skipped a beat when he realized the person holding the mule's reins was Shaohuai. Flustered, he could not decide whether someone of his rank should say something or just leave.

Shaohuai spoke up first. "Hey, Village Head Zhang, come on over. I was about to look for you. I just bought this mule in Heavenly Gate Market Town. You're a pro. Tell us what you think it's worth."

Jinfa made a feeble attempt to smile. "No, no, no. I don't know the first thing about mules and horses." He turned to leave.

Shaohuai raised his voice. "Village Head, it was your call to get rich that prompted me to tighten my belt and buy an animal —"

Jinfa scowled. When Shaohuai's class status was lowered during the final phase of land reform, some people gossiped that Jinfa had played a decisive role. In order not to lend credence to that suspicion, he wanted to keep his distance from Shaohuai. Now he purposely interrupted, "You'd better get the picture straight. For families like yours, the call should read: step up production and get rich THROUGH

**HARD WORK.** This is the intent of the government policy."

Seeing that Jinfa was trying to hit him in a sensitive spot, Shaohuai assumed a nonchalant look and kept on talking. "That's right. I have the greatest faith in the people's government. As soon as I heard you announce Secretary Wang's directive three days ago, I made up my mind to carry out the government's call. Some people are afraid to show how much they have, fearing another land reform. Not me. I know that there won't be a second time. Last night I stayed in the market town to ask Secretary Wang's advice. According to him, land reform's meant to do away with feudal exploitation, it's not meant to keep people from starting to live better. He says we should buy more draft animals, that the government welcomes this. Village Head, I know the taste of exploitation well. I've done it to others and others have done it to me. Now land reform has opened my eyes. Don't think I'm trying to use the mule to exploit others and become a rich peasant. From now on everyone in my family is going to work hard."

Jinfa immediately thought of the letter in his hand and guessed the cause of Wang Youqing's criticism. Feeling somewhat irked, he said, "Your class ranking is now like a weight which just balances the scales. The question is will the arm tip up or down? That's why I'd advise you to make a good honest living from now on."

"Village Head, don't worry about a thing. This time if I get rich, it's definitely going to be one hundred per cent by working. The money for this mule came from a whole year of skimping, plus what my wife brought in by making shoes through the winter and the money my daughter-in-law and I earned selling fodder in —"

Jinfa interrupted him again. "I was only reminding you. No one's asking you for an accounting. You're our ally. As

long as you don't have second thoughts, we won't treat you as an outsider." He immediately left the crowd and went down the alley leading to South Street. Leaning over a low wall, he called out, "Tiehan, Tiehan!"

The voice of Mother Zhu came from the house. "He's out getting water. What do you want him for?"

Jinfa answered, "When he comes back, tell him to notify all the group leaders to call their members out to an assembly in the early afternoon while it's still warm. It'll be in the village office."

He left without saying anything more. Excited sounds continued to come from the village office steps. Not wanting to pass by that scene again, Jinfa hesitated for a moment and took a roundabout way home.

### 3

## The By-Stander

The drama at the foot of the Tall Steps was over, the site deserted. The only remains were a few piles of ashes next to the wall and a spattering of hoof and footprints in the dust. Several squawking chickens scurried around with outstretched necks.

Zhu Tiehan's thunderous voice again blared through the megaphone, this time to notify people about the village meeting. Then he dashed into the street and bounded from door to door, encouraging his group members to show up promptly. He was particularly determined to pull out Qin Fu who had

eagerly attended meetings during land reform but since then could not be budged.

Qin Fu lived on Front Street. During the slack winter months his back door was permanently sealed and his front gate tightly closed. Anyone who had business with him would have to yell from outside the main gate. Qin Fu would ascertain the caller's identity from the voice and respond accordingly: For those he deemed useful, the gate would be opened; for those not worth his time, his wife would be commissioned to deliver a few perfunctory words through the closed gate while he stayed cloistered in his house. And if the caller was viewed as not only useless but also a menace, the couple would feign deafness. A person could yell until he was blue in the face and pound until his knuckles were bruised and still get no response.

Tiehan knew he was a persona non grata in Qin Fu's house. Rather than calling out or knocking, he crept up to the overgrown entranceway and peeped through a crack in the gate, intending to make his presence known only after he had spotted the hosts so that they could not run away and hide.

The Qins' courtyard was quite large. Near the entrance was the threshing ground, piled with hay. Beyond that was the pig pen built against a side wall, and opposite that a well. Qin Fu's wife stood by the well, with a bunch of chickens hopping and squawking around her, while she calmly stirred a corn-husk mixture in a clay basin. "The saying goes — you won't go broke from eating good and dressing well," she chattered. "You only go broke by reckoning wrong. In spite of all your careful plans, others still have done better. You might as well accept it. You're not gutsy like others so don't bite off more than you can chew. Stop dreaming."

Her babbling puzzled Tiehan. He looked all around but could not see anybody drawing water from the well or feeding the pigs at the pen. As she was far from the house, it did not seem plausible that she was talking to her son or daughter-in-law either.

As soon as she put down the basin, the chickens bunched together, jabbing their heads into it in rivalry. Watching them, she dusted off her hands and continued, "I told you not to upset yourself. Just pretend nothing happened. Who doesn't lust after good things? Let the smarter ones grab a few more mouthfuls. We aren't so clever so we'll eat a little less. We don't exactly stuff ourselves but we're not starving either. Compared to some we're not in such good shape but compared to others we're still well off. Now with Liberation we don't have to worry about war and no bully can push us around. Can't we just settle down and take it easy?"

The chickens devoured the husks in no time. A young rooster hopped onto the rim of the basin and knocked it over; flapping their wings the hens flew off in every direction.

Qin Fu's wife picked up the basin and said, "Who are you standing guard for on this cold day anyway? Even if you stare for 365 days a year, other people's stuff won't fly into our courtyard." She shook her head, helplessly sighing, and walked into the house. Then she came out carrying a shabby sheepskin jacket. "What can I do? Haven't you gotten an eyeful by now? Better put this on or you'll catch cold and start coughing again."

Tiehan's gaze followed Qin Fu's wife as she walked toward the wall to his left. A very peculiar scene appeared before his eyes.

A bowlegged, humpbacked, gray-haired old man stood on top of an overturned basket at the foot of the wall. His two hands were clutching the top of the wall lined with

pricker bushes and draped with a few dead squash vines. He was on tiptoe and his heels, rising out of his padded shoes, were as black as two hunks of coal. He seemed hypnotized, looking over the wall.

On the other side lived Feng Shaohuai. His house was packed with visitors, laughing and chattering, although the courtyard was rather quiet.

Only then did Tiehan realize that Qin Fu's wife had been talking to her husband. But he still could not figure out what was happening. So he clenched his fist and banged on the gate three times.

Jolted by the abrupt knocking, Qin Fu caught the cuff of his pants on the basket while trying to step down and fell over on his rump. The moment Qin Fu's wife heard the rapping at the gate, she instinctively ran toward the house, but then Qin Fu's tumble made her turn back. "Oh, my God! Did you hurt yourself?" she screamed and ran toward him.

Qin Fu grimaced with pain. One hand clutched his hip and the other pressed against the ground as he groaned faintly.

"I told you not to look but you had to," his wife muttered while trying to help him to his feet. "Why should you go haywire when someone else buys a mule? I knew you were going to get in trouble."

Tiehan could not resist a laugh.

Realizing that this was not his son's laughter, Qin Fu leapt to his feet, scooped up his basket and put it beside the pig pen. Then he winked to his wife and tiptoed toward the house.

"Hey, Uncle Qin Fu, don't try to hide," Tiehan yelled from outside the gate. "I've already seen you."

Qin Fu now knew it was Tiehan. Still walking toward the house, his mind clicked away like an abacus as he deliber-

ated how to deal with this gate-crasher.

Tiehan called out to Qin Fu's wife, "Aunt, how about opening the gate?"

But it was inconceivable for her to do such a thing without her husband's permission. Tailing close behind him, the sheepskin coat still in hand, she pleaded, "What should I do, what should I do?"

The unheeding Qin Fu proceeded all the way across the courtyard. Suddenly he whirled around, marched back to the front gate and threw it open.

Tiehan bounded into the courtyard, gave Qin Fu the once-over and said, "Uncle, that was quite a show you just put on. What were you looking at?"

Qin Fu disregarded this question. Congenially, he took hold of Tiehan's sleeve and asked, "What's up, Tiehan?"

Tiehan was slightly taken aback by Qin Fu's instant chumminess. "Are you coming to the meeting today?" he inquired.

Qin Fu's eyes narrowed. "It's about the new call, right? Has to be. Say, will you really let us get rich?"

"Didn't you hear our village leader explain the new policy? If we don't step up production, how can we do better? How can we build socialism? Of course it's allowed."

Qin Fu nodded. "After all your talk I think I'm finally getting a clue about what you Communists are really up to. Come on in and sit down for a while. I have something important to discuss with you."

Tiehan, somewhat disoriented, followed Qin Fu into the house wondering what would happen.

"Little Abacus" was the nickname pinned on this middle peasant, for he was utterly obsessed with making calculations. Once he finished his computations for the day, he would estimate the next day's tallies. When all his own figures were added up, he would calculate other people's

worth. Longing to make a fortune, he was in a perpetual state of dread lest someone take advantage of him. Even though he worked with his hands for a living, he was prone to illnesses that afflict those who work with their minds: Plagued by headaches and insomnia, he would occasionally lie awake all night, counting sheep. Qin Fu actually was quite wealthy but from all appearances he seemed penniless. He never allowed outsiders to set foot into his pathetic home where his patched quilts and scrawny pillows were piled on a *kang* that was only partially covered with a threadbare mat. The barren house lacked the slightest embellishment. Even the two colorful movie posters his son had pasted on the wall as New Year's decorations had been appropriated to patch some holes in the window, leaving the walls bare. The windowsills and the *kang* frame, normally wooden, were made of clay. Even his table and chairs were nothing but stacks of clay bricks.

Qin Fu sat Tiehan down on one of his makeshift stools and cordially suggested, "Wait while I make some tea. I want you to sample my good tea leaves."

"Why are you so civil today?" Tiehan queried. "No thanks, though. I had some porridge this morning. Who'd want to drink any more than that?"

"Good tea keeps you fit. You should give it a try." Qin Fu pulled out a string of keys from his belt and opened an iron lock on a black box. After fumbling for a while, he took out a small paper packet and unraveled three or four layers of paper before producing a sprinkling of tea leaves. He carefully placed several pinches on his palm, then ordered his wife standing in the doorway to clean out the pot and steep some tea.

The mere mention of the teapot drained the color from his wife's face. She withdrew into an adjoining room and pre-

tended to look for the pot while trying to figure out what to do.

This woman had been married off at the age of eighteen to the then fifteen-year-old Qin Fu. For a wife to be three years older was considered propitious. Yet it was the woman who stood in awe of her husband, a tradition observed for generations. She never complained when she was cursed or beaten. She swallowed insults and humiliation silently and remained docile all her life. With age she grew even more timid. In silence she was her husband's shadow; in speaking, she was his echo. It seemed for the last thirty-some years she had never existed independently of him. Six months ago the son who was working outside the village had come home with his fiancée for a visit and brought along a packet of tea leaves. In rare celebration the family drank some tea. Somewhat disconcerted on the day her son left, she broke the teapot, which had been mended three times before. Well aware of her husband's temper, she now lived in constant fear. Often he chided her for losing a piece of string or kicked her for breaking a needle. How could he overlook a broken teapot?

She contemplated her predicament and finally decided: Tiehian is the kind of cadre who likes to intervene in other people's affairs. He would not stand by idly and watch a beating. If I do not confess now, it will be discovered later. I might as well take a few swats while my son and daughter-in-law are out and a third party is around. She plucked up her courage and prepared herself for the inevitable blows. Standing in the doorway she said in a tremulous voice, "I forgot to tell you I broke that pot."

Qin Fu was not himself today. The news did not seem to disturb him. He simply glared at his wife for a moment, then turned to Tiehian and said with a smirk, "Is

this how a household should be run?" He put the thimbleful of tea leaves back into its storage place, licked up a few flakes stuck on his palm and muttered, "Too bad Tiehian doesn't have the good fortune to savor some fine tea."

"Come on. Give me a break," Tiehian said with a sigh of relief. "If I drank your tea, it might cut years off my life. What did you want to talk about?"

Qin Fu cooed up to him and implored, "Honestly, is it true that there won't be a second land reform?"

"What's the matter with you? The policy is clear. Would we say it if we didn't mean it?"

"You mean you never discussed the subject of a second land reform inside your Party?"

"Are you crazy? The land reform is over and done with. Why should we discuss it again?"

"Then your socialism pitch really means you'll let people get rich? You're not going to level everything out again and make us all poor?"

"Why would we want to make people poor? Haven't people suffered long enough? Socialism and the final communism will only be good for you, not harmful. There won't be anymore exploitation or oppression. Farmwork will be done by machine, houses will be lit by electricity and we'll ride in cars. People will give what they can and take what they need. Life will be great for everyone."

"Is that so? Well, that's all fine and dandy, but all I want is to catch up with Shaohuai. Then I'll be able to rest in peace when my time comes."

"His lot is nothing compared to the good life under socialism."

"I want to know one thing. Aren't there any regulations against him buying a mule?"



"Oh, he bought a mule? So that's why you were peeking over the wall. Ha, ha!"

"Come on. What's the story? Is it all right or not?"

"As long as he doesn't use it to exploit people or break the law, of course we'll let him."

"You're not kidding me, are you?"

"Stop bothering me with all your gibberish. If it turns out differently, blame me."

Qin Fu was ecstatic. He grabbed Tiehan's arm once again and loudly proclaimed, "If this is true, Tiehan, come hell or high water, I'll support the Communist Party's policies. Not only me, but also my sons and grandsons."

"That's more like it! Middle peasants like you should listen to the Party and not keep vacillating."

"You're right. If Shaohuai is allowed to get rich, why should I be afraid?" But then his face suddenly clouded over. With a glance at Tiehan he declared, "This can't be taken lightly. I'd better wait and see for a while."

"Do whatever you want. But how about coming to the meeting?"

"Sure. I'll go take a look."

#### 4

### The Pitch

Right after lunch footsteps, laughter and voices stirred in the streets as people left their warm *kangs* and hustled to the Tall Steps for the meeting.

A slender pipe in one hand, Feng Shaohuai strolled to his

front gate, picking his teeth with a twig snapped from a broom. He paused and looked back into the courtyard. His nephew and the child bride\* were cutting fodder for feed and his wife was cautioning their youngest son not to play near the mule. After a glance at Qin Fu's ramshackle entranceway he walked away engrossed in thought. He could not figure out what had prompted this hastily called meeting; nor could he predict the consequences of his risky venture today. He had spent the first year after Liberation in a state of trepidation, which changed into hatred and resentment over the next year. Then as soon as the call was issued for everyone to enrich themselves — especially once he had been reassured by the district secretary, Wang Youqing, that the policy was sound — he decided to take his revenge. Buying a mule was the first step — his provocation to assess the strength of his adversaries as well as to test how solid this new policy was and whether the *fanshen* peasants would let him rise again. If it turned out well, then he would venture a second step. For unlike most people who were content to do a little better, he wanted to exploit the situation to its fullest. If his test flopped, then he would pull back and bide his time, waiting for new opportunities. He was determined to be a big wheel, regardless of how long it took or what means he had to employ. Ever since he had boldly rented a hundred mu of land when he first came to Greenfields, a new substance had entered his blood; he had to be the wealthiest and could not stomach the idea of anyone getting ahead of him. This desire was so all-consuming it became an obsession, his purpose in life.

As he climbed the Tall Steps, preoccupied with his thoughts,

\* A child bride refers to a young girl taken into the family as a daughter-in-law-to-be, a practice which existed in China, especially in the countryside, before 1949.

someone came up from behind and fawningly greeted, "Brother Shaohuai, you're here early."

Others ahead of him stopped and glanced back, obsequious smiles tacked on their faces: "Shaohuai, how are you doing?"

Shaohuai reciprocated according to the tone of each saluter. Once in the compound he was besieged by more people near the toon tree. "I heard that business in Heavenly Gate market has picked up in the last few days. Is that right?"

"Were the draft animals brought in from Inner Mongolia?"

"Do people really make their own deals or are prices set by the government?"

Shaohuai packed his pipe and lit it off someone else's. Puffing away leisurely he took his time answering these eager inquisitors. He painted the market in dazzling terms and lavishly praised the animals imported from outside the Great Wall and west of Beijing.

Enticed, his audience began to click their tongues and laugh excitedly.

The response to this meeting far exceeded previous gatherings. Practically every spot was taken in the large room. A drone pervaded the hall: women chattered and laughed; young people were roughhousing; middle-aged men in twos and threes seriously discussed daily affairs; and old men sat back, blowing out puffs of smoke and coughing loudly.

Meetings were chaired from behind a large square table at one end of the hall. The *fanshen* peasants sat in the front rows, an arrangement they had found convenient during the land reform days when they made all the decisions through a show of hands. They later became accustomed to drifting toward that end of the hall as soon as they came in. Zhou Liping, who had just finished setting up for the meeting, now stood in the middle of this group reading a newspaper

aloud. Although she had never attended school, she had learned to read through her love of opera and song books as a child and later on during land reform a woman on the work team helped her.

A man in his thirties named Zhu Zhankui nudged Zhou Yongzhen, Liping's older brother, and nodded toward the doorway. "Look, Feng Shaohuai is coming in with a bunch of escorts. What a showoff!"

"Money breeds arrogance," Yongzhen noted. "He's even more vicious than people who were richer than him. The minute land reform was over he crawled out of the wood-work."

"The government won't let his kind get the upper hand, will it?"

"That's hard to tell," said Yongzhen. "Crooked Mouth wasn't shot, just returned to the village. Shaohuai was first classified as a rich peasant but then down-graded to middle peasant status. Even my father, who always keeps up with the newspaper, can't figure out exactly what the government's policy is."

"Regardless of what the policy is, it has to help us poor people," Zhankui declared. "It can't just favor the rich. Today's meeting must be about this."

"Yeah," agreed Yongzhen. "That's what I've been thinking. Seeing as two out of our three Party members were exploited by Shaohuai before the revolution, it's hard to imagine they would let him rise again. That would be as dumb as raising a tiger in your quilt. My father said that if we can't tell what this new policy means, we should keep our eyes open and think carefully. He also said that Shaohuai's buying this mule is only the beginning. It's like a fart that's bound to arouse a bunch of dung beetles."

Shaohuai and his admirers walked pompously to the other

end of the hall laughing and talking, and took their seats along two logs under the back window.

These logs had become the seats of the middle peasants. "Little Abacus" Qin Fu had originally picked out the spot. Sitting here he was a foot lower than those on stools in front and thus hidden from the chairperson's view should he want to take a snooze or let his mind wander. Also the location was ideal in three other ways: near the window, it was cooler in summer; in winter it was just the right distance from the coal stove to be warm but not roasting; and it was conveniently close to the door. Qin Fu could dash out of the room as soon as the meeting was over and reach home a few steps ahead of anyone else.

People immediately took notice of Qin Fu's presence. He frequently skipped meetings, and he had never shown up so early. Today he was even decked out in his seldom-worn sheepskin coat. Especially conspicuous was the change in his manner. He used to come in with a long face and droopy eyes. Not bothering to look around or talk to anyone, he would find a spot at one end of the beam, plunk down, and bury his face in his lap. His calculating mind would go straight to work; he would never raise his head or voice an opinion throughout the meeting. But today after entering the hall he stopped for a moment, pulled out his pipe, looked to the left and right, and then sat down where others had made room for him. He greeted them amiably. Qin Fu was a different person today.

Tough Hide sauntered in in a typically loose, swaying manner. He was not a prosperous middle peasant, but he came over to the beams anyway and wedged his way in. Squinting his watery eyes, he laughed in the direction of Qin Fu and said, "Hey, you're a rare sight. I haven't seen you here since the end of land reform. Seems you've been

ignoring us poor peasants now that you think you are safe."

Ordinarily Qin Fu would have treated such a jab as a warning and responded meekly, but this time he disagreed openly. "I'm always the same regardless of what occasion or who is involved."

Tough Hide assumed a pose as if he was arguing his case before a judge. Putting his hands on his hips, he stuck out his chin and blustered, "That's not my experience. When the land reform work team came to the village, for once you coughed up some cash and bought me half a bottle of wine. If you told me once, you told me a hundred times to come find you if I wanted a snort and was tight on cash. God damn it! I happened to take you up on your offer right after the work team left. But you finked out on me, wouldn't even show your face at the door. You've gone too far! Don't think you're that safe. Some burn their bridges behind them. Seems like you're thinking of burning your bridges before you've even crossed them!"

Qin Fu calmly retorted, "Well, even the sky has its sunny and cloudy days. Can't a wallet have some empty days? If your pocket was always full, why would you bug me for booze money?"

Tough Hide grunted, then railed, "Now don't pull that crap on me. We're so different it's ridiculous to compare the two of us. You only rake in dough and never shell it out. So how can you ever be short of cash? Don't try to pass yourself off as poor. A meat dumpling is always wrapped up. It only has corn meal dough on the outside, but take a bite and it's full of goodies."

Normally an accusation of murder could not have unhinged Qin Fu more, but today he nonchalantly responded, "It's no skin off my back if you call me a millionaire. In fact it would

be a compliment. But of course, I'd have to have a lot more money to deserve it."

Tough Hide waved his hand impatiently. "Come on, stop pulling my leg. The second land reform is still a long way off. You might as well go ahead and spend what you have. Ha, ha!"

Fed up with Tough Hide's caustic remarks, Qin Fu turned to the people beside him and commented, "Hey, Shaohuai hasn't shown up yet. I guess that old bird can't bear to leave his mule."

Suddenly Shaohuai's voice blared out in front of him. "Hey, how come you're thinking about me today?"

Qin Fu perked up. "You bought a mule, didn't you? How many teeth does it have? How much did it set you back?" He stuck his hand under the front flap of Shaohuai's sheepskin coat and, in the customary manner for conducting business, discreetly counted Shaohuai's fingers to ascertain the answer. "Huh, pretty cheap. You got a bargain."

Shaohuai smiled. "You haven't even laid eyes on the beast and you say I got a bargain. You must have a direct line to the gods."

"No need to look," Qin Fu earnestly stated. "Would a smart cookie like you ever be cheated?" Then he whispered into Shaohuai's ear, "Now that you've bought a mule, won't you need some feed? I've got some. You want it?"

Shaohuai glanced at him. "How much?"

The two started counting fingers under Shaohuai's coat again.

"It's this many dollars and this many cents for fifty kilos. Isn't that a good price?"

"Forget it. Is your hay made of gold?"

"I'll give you a bargain. How does this sound?"

"No way. You're just trying to milk me."

"Anyone who can afford to buy a horse can certainly afford the saddle. Why be so sticky over a few dollars?"

Shaohuai never had any intention of buying his hay; he led Qin Fu along only to test the situation further. Under a calm facade his pulse had been racing ever since he walked into the meeting hall and realized that only middle peasants were flocking around him. Neither the village leaders nor any *fanshen* peasants broached the subject of his mule, much less tried to flatter him. They watched him with peculiar expressions; he felt the pressure of their stares. Shaohuai began to place his hopes on the three Party members. He figured that Village Head Zhang's approval this morning could not be counted on because Zhang Jinfa had been put on the spot. The three Party members must have discussed his venture since then. Only after they presented their final position at this meeting would the situation be clarified. He would have to determine how solid the new policy was from the speeches. His small eyes darted all around the room. He particularly wanted to spot Daquan, whom he took as a barometer of the sentiments of the *fanshen* peasants, just as Zhang Jinfa's attitude reflected the directives of his superiors. He bore no illusion that Daquan, who had led the drive to classify him as a rich peasant, might approve of his buying a mule — a clear sign of his intention to rise again. All he hoped to see was a bothered but helpless Daquan, an indication of victory for his first step and a guarantee for his second step.

Continuing to scan the room, his eyes fell upon a ruddy face: Tichan's glaring eyes were fixed on him. If there was one person Shaohuai feared, it was Tichan. During the land-reform struggles Shaohuai learned that he could decipher neither the leadership's directives nor grassroot sentiments from the face of this impulsive man. In order to

shun a potentially awkward encounter, Shaohuai lowered his eyes and did not dare look around anymore.

Tiehan stood up and called the meeting to order, telling people to quiet down, even naming those who were standing around the door, and asking them to come in. Then he clapped his hands to lead a round of applause after asking Village Head Zhang to speak.

Jinfa, who was sitting at one end of the table, nonchalantly tapped the ashes out of his pipe, stood up, walked to the middle of the table, and faced the crowd. He called out "Fellow villagers," paused and scanned his audience with the air of an experienced cadre, then briefly reviewed the leadership's directives. Everyone knew he would elaborate on those points he wanted to emphasize.

Jinfa spoke with passion. "In the past landlords exploited us and foreign imperialists charged over here. Together they robbed us of everything we had, forcing countless poor families into destitution and scattering relatives in all directions. Look around this room. Who didn't want to get rich back then? Who didn't struggle with all their might for it? But what happened? We were barely able to keep our heads above water. We floundered in the Bitter Marsh, getting a bellyful of bitterness. Our hopes turned out to be nothing but empty dreams. And why was this? Because the government then was not a people's government. It was in the hands of dope-smoking crooks. Why should they care whether poor people live decently?"

"Today the situation is completely different. There's a people's government. We have become the masters of our own lives. So we'd better damn well act like the place belongs to us, not like we're outsiders. The government has given tremendous thought to how you can get rich and lead

a good life. If you don't buckle down now and work hard, you'll be letting down the Party.

"Some people are afraid to reveal their wealth, afraid of a second land reform and afraid of a switch in government policy. All these fears have no basis in reality. The goal of land reform was to smash feudalism. Now that we've done it, what would be the point of another land reform? There will be no more land reforms and no one will eat out of a communal pot either. You can count on it. This is not Jinfa's own pledge but one that comes from our top leaders. Socialism and communism are still far off in the future. We might not even see them in our lifetime. Right now we have to fight hard to consolidate our New Democracy. . . ."

Jinfa's speech, dignified by his recently acquired fashionable vocabulary, impressed his audience. The listeners whispered and exchanged glances.

Remembering this morning's argument, Tough Hide went over to needle Qin Kai. "Did you hear that? I told you so. That Shaohuai is a real operator. No one can match him when it comes to figuring things out."

"He sure hit the jackpot again," Qin Kai concurred distractedly, still concentrating on Jinfa's speech.

"There's no getting around it, Qin Kai," Tough Hide went on, "the bold ones always live high off the hog while the meek starve. No matter what comes down the pike, that will never change."

Without lifting his eyes from Jinfa, Qin Kai agreed, "Yeah, he's pretty daring."

Tough Hide found it difficult to pick a quarrel when Qin Kai kept appeasing him. So he turned to bother "Little Abacus" Qin Fu. "Did you hear that? The village head's words are not to be slighted. He didn't just spit them out

of his own mouth. Every sentence is authentic, straight from the district Party secretary and the county head."

Qin Fu nodded.

"You better get a large draft animal too."

Qin Fu blinked.

"And why don't you dig up all that grain you have buried away?"

Forgetting where he was, Qin Fu stood up in a huff, slapped his thighs and roared, "Stop dumping your crap on me. I swear if I have any grain hidden, let lightning strike me down."

His outburst disrupted the meeting and one after another people rose to their feet to see what was going on.

Shaohuai, even cockier after Jinfa's pitch, assumed command. "Hey everybody, quiet down," he shouted at the crowd. "The village head hasn't finished yet. Pay attention."

Shaohuai's officiousness provoked a chorus of hissing. Just as he opened his mouth to again hold forth, someone charged in front of him. Tiehan's voice thundered, "What are you yelling about, Shaohuai?"

Stepping back, Shaohuai ingratiatingly explained, "They are being disruptive. I'm just telling them to pay attention —"

"You are the one who is disturbing the meeting," Tiehan interrupted.

Shaohuai stretched out his hands as if wronged, "I listened the entire time and never opened my mouth. You can ask anybody."

"Do you think this is an animal market?"

"Of course not."

"Is it a trade fair?"

"Who says it is?"

"Then why were you bargaining over prices here?"

"Come on Tiehan. I didn't start the talking much less the yelling. How come you didn't go after anyone else but came straight to me? What do you think I am, a pushover?"

Looking around at the crowd, Liping raised her voice, "Look at what a mess this meeting is. It's all his fault."

"That's right," her brother chimed in. "This meeting is disgusting."

"This meeting is only giving Feng Shaohuai a chance to show off," Zhankui said.

Other people stood up and sneered:

"What's the big deal about buying a mule? Gee, he's getting uppity."

"If you're so high and mighty, let's see you buy a big truck."

Shaohuai refused to back down as these angry voices surrounded him. He viewed them as merely a sign of envy and helplessness in the face of his actions. With an affected self-righteousness he proclaimed, "I earned the money to buy that mule through hard work, not through exploitation. I'm answering the call of the government. Is that breaking the law? Is that not allowed?"

"We are against what's in your head — always thinking about taking advantage of others," Liping declared.

"What kind of bad thoughts do I have? Say what you think," Shaohuai demanded.

"Spit them out yourself if you have the guts," Liping retorted.

Liu Xiang mumbled from a corner, "He still holds a grudge from land reform."

Tiehan was reminded of his feelings of irritation at hearing that Shaohuai had paraded his mule through the streets, and at seeing Shaohuai's smug expression as he strutted into the meeting hall. He charged, "Looks to me like

you want to haul that mule right into this meeting to spite us *fanshen* peasants, don't you?"

Tiehan's words came through loud and clear and Shaohuai dropped his insolent air. In an injured tone he appealed to Jinfa, "No matter what you think of me, I'm not a landlord. If you don't want me to speak out, I'll keep silent. If you don't want me to get rich, I won't try."

Initially Jinfa had ignored this minor squabble in the crowd, but he grew irritated as the bickering dragged on. Shaohuai's avowal made him feel Tiehan's reaction was excessive. By violating the Party's policy, some of the *fanshen* peasants were endangering implementation of the new directive. Jinfa thought that it was not right to rebuke his own comrades and the *fanshen* peasants under such circumstances, but he should nevertheless try to revive the enthusiasm he had just kindled. With an aura of authority he called on everyone to take their seats. "Fellow villagers, from now on making revolution will mean striving for a good life. Everyone who prospers will be heroes while those who go broke will be good-for-nothings. We should immediately kick off a 'get rich' competition in Greenfields. . . ."

Jinfa's pep talk achieved its intended effect. Those on the beams under the window began to smile again. Even Shaohuai calmed down.

But some people were still upset, the most conspicuous being Tiehan. Liu Xiang unobtrusively moved over in front of Tiehan and whispered, "Where's Daquan? Why didn't he come to the meeting?"

"He went to the district office to discuss some problems with Party Secretary Wang," Tiehan answered apathetically.

"If he were here," Liu Xiang averred, "Shaohuai wouldn't be so impudent."

Tiehan gritted his teeth. "You wait and see. Shaohuai won't get away with this."

## 5

### An Invaluable Insight

Barely three months after he had joined the Party and for the first time since the exhilarating land reform days, qualms of doubt besieged Daquan. Unprepared for the new directive, he wondered during the briefing session for village cadres whether Jinfa had misinterpreted the leadership's objectives. His suspicions deepened over the next few days and he finally went to the district office to check out his ideas with Secretary Wang.

Wang Youqing was far too busy to talk extensively with every village cadre who came around. As he tied a sheepskin coat onto his bicycle rack, he rattled off two points in response to Daquan's persistent queries: first of all, Jinfa had not distorted the leadership's directive; secondly implementing this new policy was now the central task. When Daquan questioned why they were not proceeding immediately to socialism, Wang Youqing assured him that socialism was on the agenda but its precise timing was to be determined by the top leadership. For the time being Daquan should direct his energies toward rallying the peasants to take advantage of the favorable conditions to get rich. This work, in and of itself, was building socialism. . . .

On his way home, Daquan tried to figure out whether his questions had been answered; it seemed as if they had but

then again it seemed as if they had not. When the work team had come to Greenfields during land reform, Luo Xuguang's discussions about socialism had captured Daquan's imagination. He envisioned socialist development as being more thrilling, more vigorous and bringing greater happiness to the *fanshen* peasants than land reform had. However the presently unfolding situation bore no resemblance to this alluring image.

A light haze from dinner fires lingered over Greenfields as Daquan walked home against a glowing sunset. Lü Ruifen stopped sweeping the courtyard and watched her husband brush himself off. "Quite a few people came to see you this afternoon — Tiehan, Zhankui and Uncle Liu Xiang. Liu Xiang's not the sociable type. Must have something pretty important on his mind."

"I'll go see them after dinner," Daquan said before walking into the house.

Their simple but immaculately-kept room was furnished with a low table and two waist-high earthenware jars. A board across the jars formed a shelf; Ruifen's mirror, Xiao Long's toys, and containers of cooking oil, salt and spices were arranged at one end and Daquan's books and notebooks at the other.

Daquan set the table up on the *kang*, reached for his notebook and sat down. He wanted to jot down his conversation with the district Party secretary and his thoughts from the past few days so he could sort out his ideas. But his pen froze on the blue-lined paper; he did not know where to start.

The notebook had been Luo Xuguang's parting memento to Daquan. A speeding locomotive was etched on the red lacquered cover. And the first page bore an inscription by Luo Xuguang:

A glorious and totally unprecedented struggle is about to unfold throughout the country!

I hope you will become a true vanguard fighter of the proletariat! If you want to change the world, you also have to change yourself: persevere in overcoming your peasant mentality and strengthen your Party spirit. Devote your life to the struggle for communism.

To share with Comrade Gao Daquan,

Luo Xuguang

As Daquan stared at the train on the notebook, his thoughts scattered momentarily before focusing on the pressing tasks at hand. . . .

With dusk the aroma of cornmeal porridge drifted in. Ruifen carried in a stack of bowls. "It's getting dark. Time to stop working and have dinner."

Daquan put the cap back on his pen, closed his notebook and picked up a bowl. "Where's Erlin?"

"He took Xiao Long out for a visit."

"Let's wait then." Daquan put down his bowl.

"You two brothers are too considerate of each other," Ruifen said with a smile. "Everyone's going to have the same food. What difference does it make who eats first?"

"It's not a question of being considerate," Daquan explained. "We were separated when we were kids. Now we're finally back together, but I'm so busy I hardly get to see him. Mealtimes are about the only chance I have to enjoy his company."

With a fond glance at her husband, Ruifen nodded. She knew he reserved a special place in his affections for this brother, for they had gone through hard times together. She lit the oil lamp and put it on the table. "Why don't you keep on writing while I go look for them."



"Mother, is dinner ready yet?" came Xiao Long's voice from the courtyard.

Ruifen put the serving bowl on the *kang*. The curtain lifted and in came Erlin with Xiao Long on his shoulders.

"Why are you always being carried around by your uncle, Xiao Long? What's the use of having legs?" Daquan teased.

Jumping onto the *kang*, Xiao Long answered, "Uncle wanted to carry me."

"You're never without an excuse."

Erlin, smiling, filled half a bowl of porridge for Xiao Long, and full ones for his brother, sister-in-law and himself. Then stepping up on the *kang*, he squatted down and began eating.

These brothers were both handsome and resembled one another, though Erlin was slightly taller and less hardy than Daquan. Their personalities, on the other hand, were notably different: Daquan was serious, intense, and free-thinking while Erlin was reticent, stubborn, and somewhat narrow-minded. Daquan's character resembled a rushing spring river, while his brother's was more like a tranquil autumn pond.

After downing some porridge and a few mouthfuls of corn bread, they launched into their customary family chat. "Erlin..." Daquan began.

Erlin stopped eating and mumbled, "Hum."

"A new classroom's been added to our night school."

"So Tiehan was saying."

"Why don't you go study there?"

Erlin smiled, then went back to sipping his porridge.

"Do you realize that you hardly ever participate in village activities, Erlin? You won't learn much that way. And if you keep it up, your mind will get dull and you'll start slipping backward. We've only lived in the new society for two

years and our consciousness isn't on a par with those who lived in the old liberated areas. If we don't try to catch up now, then when the socialist revolution begins, we'll fall even further behind. Do you see what I'm getting at?"

Erlin smiled candidly. "You're right. I don't know why but I always get drowsy during meetings. Can't make heads or tails out of what others say. It's like my ears are just there for decoration."

"That's because you're not really interested in finding out," Daquan explained. "If you get yourself seriously involved, you'll feel empty when a couple of days go by and you haven't heard any national news or directives from the leadership. It's worse than going hungry."

"Pushing me is a waste of time. I can't bear to sit next to a lamp the way you do for hours on end. I don't measure up to you guys. I'll just take my cues from you. Won't that be good enough?"

"You should at least go to meetings more often. There are so many new things happening in our new society. Members of our family should be in the forefront."

Suddenly someone called from outside, "Is Daquan home?"

Recognizing Grandma Deng's voice, Daquan answered, "Yes, I'm here. Come on in and get warm."

Meanwhile Ruifen had put down her bowl and gone out to greet her. "Grandma Deng, I heard you were sick."

"I feel much better now that I've taken some medicine."

"Let me give you a hand."

"I don't think I'll go in. Ask Daquan to come out here for a minute."

"Why didn't you ask Jiakuan's boy to fetch Daquan? You shouldn't be running around on a cold, dark night by yourself after you've been sick."

"I don't catch cold easily and the darkness doesn't bother me either, Ruifen."

Daquan came to the doorway and through the gray dusk discerned a shock of white hair and two shining eyes beside his wife.

Despite her sixty-nine years Grandma Deng's eyes were as sharp as any young person's, as evidenced by her ability to thread a needle and stitch layers of cloth into shoe soles. Widowed before the age of thirty, she first worked as a servant for Crooked Mouth and then hired herself out as a seamstress in Beijing. She was well-versed in the ways of the world; her practical knowledge and prowess were rarely found among women. When the Japanese invaded North China in the thirties, she had her only son feign deaf-muteness and together they fled on foot to the guerrilla base in the Panshan Mountains, where the boy joined the Eighth Route Army. Upon her return to Greenfields the villagers were informed that her son had perished along the way and for many years they looked on her as a pitiful, lonely woman. Her secret was only divulged after Liberation in 1949 when a People's Liberation Army (PLA) officer came riding into the village on a grand horse, along with a sentinel, looking for his mother. The entire village was stunned. The news fanned out through the county with people from miles away becoming well-acquainted with the story of the PLA mother. Now her son and daughter-in-law were off fighting in the Korean war while her grandson attended a boarding school in Beijing.

Daquan urged Grandma Deng to come in but she said, "It's almost time for your classes at the night school and I have to be getting back soon, too. There's just one thing I wanted to tell you right now." Nudging Ruifen she suggest-

ed, "Better go finish your dinner. We'll talk right here." Once Ruifen was gone, Grandma Deng stepped closer to Daquan and, gripping his wrist, whispered in his ear, "Have you Party people tried to figure out what's behind Shaohuai's buying that mule?"

"He bought a mule?" Daquan said in dismay. "What's he up to?"

"You're still in the dark!" Grandma Deng exclaimed. "And such a major event." She then described Shaohuai's morning demonstration in the street and his smugness at the afternoon meeting.

Daquan could readily envision what had transpired today and surmised different people's reactions. Refocusing his attention on Grandma Deng, he said with bridled anger, "Shaohuai has a grudge against us because we nearly classified him as a rich peasant. He's trying to aggravate us with the mule."

Grandma Deng shook her head. "That's not quite it."

After another moment of thought, Daquan said, "Right. He has a grudge against all poor people. And it didn't start in the land reform days. He's had it for years."

Again Grandma Deng shook her head. "Still a bit off the mark. That's what I thought at first too. I went looking for Zhou Zhong to figure it out. We talked about it all afternoon. He said I could only explain part of it."

"What was his opinion?"

"He said that Shaohuai wasn't just out to spite the *fansben* peasants when he bought the mule and marched it through the streets. He's testing the policy like a person who takes advantage of a fire to do some looting."

"Taking advantage of a fire to do some looting? What else did he say?"

"Lowering Shaohuai's class status to a middle peasant amounted to letting the tiger run back up the mountain and hide in a cave to recuperate from his wounds. . Now with the new call to get rich, that tiger is charging down the mountain. And he's fixing to eat people."

Daquan felt a sinking sensation. After a pause he said, "Don't worry. He'll never be able to eat people again! Now that we have the Party leadership, the political power, and our own land, there's no way anyone can ride on our backs again."

"You're right. But don't forget that our *fanshen* families are like newborn birds just out of the shell. You Party people have to figure out a way to help everyone grow their wings. Otherwise there's no telling who's going to end up on top."

"We cadres have pledged ourselves to the Party and to the people," Daquan declared. "Your requests will guide our actions. People here in Greenfields aren't like they used to be, they won't allow Feng Shaohuai to get away with his loathsome plan."

"Good. Watch out for him. I'll be going now."

He accompanied her down the alley, then stood rubbing his hands for warmth, absorbed in thought. Joy and apprehension had coexisted in his heart these last few days, with his trip to the district office merely exacerbating rather than alleviating his concerns. This old *fanshen* peasant's insight had opened his eyes while also raising his suspicions that this new "get-rich" policy would engender a series of similar incidents.

Daquan did not return home. Without a word to his wife he walked down the street. Far ahead a person's outline was visible. He could clearly tell this was the man he was

looking for, the man who was capable of working with him to help the *fanshen* peasants strengthen their wings and fly high.

Daquan hurried toward him.

## 6

### A Serious Disagreement

Jinfa stood belching under lusterless stars, a pipe in his mouth. Before Daquan spoke, he grumbled, "Where were you this afternoon? I couldn't find you anywhere."

Unperturbed by the village leader's customary authoritarian tone, Daquan told him he had gone to Heavenly Gate.

"You could have gone there any old day," complained the village head. "How could you skip such an important meeting?"

"Last night when I asked, you said you'd be tied up with your own farm work for the next few days so you wouldn't be calling any meetings," explained Daquan. "How could I know that you were going to change your mind?"

Jinfa realized there was no reason to blame Daquan, for it was the district Party secretary's note that had prompted this afternoon's meeting. Changing his tack, he related, "I was really worried. If you'd been around, you could have helped me keep order and control the troublemakers. As it was, we almost ended up with a real mess."

"A mess?"

"That bullheaded Tiehan started a shouting match with Feng Shaohuai right in the meeting. . God only knows where

all his anger came from. No matter how I tried to reason with him, he wouldn't simmer down —"

"Oh, so that's it! Good thing I wasn't around then. I wouldn't have been any help. In fact I probably would have raised a bigger hullabaloo than Tiehan. Then you'd have had an even worse mess on your hands."

"So you're pretty angry too?"

"Aren't you? Did you feel all that comfortable when Shaohuai put on a big show with his mule?"

"How can you call it a big show? A mule can't be taken home in a basket like a piglet. And even a piglet would kick and squeal and be hard to take home unnoticed."

"He was pompous out on the street and then continued to show his contempt in the meeting."

"It's a once in a lifetime event for a small farmer to buy a draft animal. Who wouldn't be happy? I can't see anything wrong with an excited person showing off a little."

"Is Shaohuai your average small farmer? You yourself once said that he narrowly missed the rich-peasant status. At best his middle peasant classification can be explained as a lenient application of the Party's policy. It certainly can't be used to whitewash his exploiting poor people in the past."

"No matter what you say, his classification was decided in accordance with the policy. We can't stop him from buying a draft animal. Even if he were a rich peasant all we could do is bar him from practicing feudal exploitation; we could not stop him from plunking down his own money for a mule as long as it was done legally."

"There's much more to this than buying a mule. We need to figure it out. Can you wait a moment while I get Tiehan? The three of us can talk it over and come to an understanding."

"This isn't a particularly pressing question," Jinfa said,

holding Daquan back. "I still have to get Qin Kai to hurry up and finish his group's statistical tables. Why don't we wait for a less busy time to talk about it?"

"No, this is an extremely urgent problem," insisted Daquan. "We have to discuss it right now."

Jinfa laughed through the darkness. "You're always so obstinate. Okay, I'll stay and listen for a while." He moved to the side of the road and stopped at the foot of the Tall Steps. Yawning, he stretched his arms, then appealed to Daquan who had followed him over. "I'm bushed. Dug out manure from the pig pen all morning and chaired a long meeting this afternoon. Try to keep it brief and not get all wound up in abstract theories."

Daquan squatted down. He filled his pipe and handed his tobacco pouch to Jinfa. A biting breeze, but so slight the branches and dust remained undisturbed, cut through the cold night. A host of stars twinkled throughout the heavens; near the wall, glass particles sparkled.

During land reform these two had worked hand in hand and were quite compatible. Initially Jinfa had looked down on Daquan: although by then he had abandoned his image of Daquan as a child laborer who tagged around after him, he still viewed Daquan as a mere activist under his leadership. Later when Daquan earned the admiration of the entire village for the wisdom and courage he displayed during the heated struggle, particularly after the movement to suppress counter-revolutionaries, Jinfa's opinion of him improved. When the militia discovered Crooked Mouth's brother, the former puppet township head during the Japanese occupation, holed up in a cellar with food and a gun, they tried to coax him out but he refused. He was only taken alive after Daquan dashed into the cellar with a huge ax, catching his adversary by surprise.

Jinfa kept his mouth shut when the villagers and members from the work team commended Daquan, but he could not help thinking: This young man is quite something. I never would have such nerve.

Daquan's opinion of Jinfa also underwent several changes. At first he disliked Jinfa for his lack of identity as a poor man. After they worked together awhile, he felt Jinfa was quite a good fighter. He began to trust Jinfa and to work more closely with him. When the work team had trouble allocating houses due to a dearth of decent housing, Daquan proposed to Jinfa that they volunteer to live in the two worst quarters. Jinfa agreed right away and presented the idea ahead of Daquan to the work team. But a few days after they moved, an unexpected situation occurred. It was suggested in a public meeting that some good wood stacked in Jinfa's new place, which was originally going to be distributed, should be left there for repairing the house.

In a private conversation Daquan convinced Jinfa to turn down the offer. Jinfa agreed, but when the villagers approved it at the next meeting, instead of refusing, the village head recounted his problems and then self-righteously accepted the wood. Daquan was displeased. But then during the grain distribution, Jinfa volunteered to take his share last. He worked tirelessly while the new village government was being set up, often not taking time out for lunch. With the outbreak of the Korean war, Jinfa led the denunciations against American imperialists, once almost losing his voice when he gave four impassioned speeches in one day. His strong hatred was so genuine it captivated his audiences. In the light of all this, Daquan forgave Jinfa for his past faults.

Now Daquan recounted word for word the concerns of the two poor peasants, Zhou Zhong and Grandma Deng. He

wanted to alert the village head to the schemes of Shaohuai and then the two of them could develop an appropriate strategy.

But Jinfa shook his head in disagreement. "I know Shaohuai was a vicious brute. But who can tell what's on his mind right now?"

"You can tell from his actions. It's obvious that he is charging down the mountain."

Jinfa laughed. "Are you saying that anyone who takes up the new call is a man-eating tiger?"

"I'm just talking about this one particular person, Feng Shaohuai! Didn't you agree that we should classify him as a rich peasant? And weren't you just as angry as the rest of us when Gu Xinmin sent down a directive to reclassify him as a middle peasant? You told me privately that it was very difficult for you to accept."

"I accepted that decision because a Party member is subordinate to the organization. Are you suggesting that we change his status right now? Can Party members act like that? And if we can, are you proposing that we lead a rush into his house to divide up all his possessions and take away his mule? Can we do that?"

"I'm not suggesting anything of the kind. I just want you to keep in mind that we should all be on our guard and watch him carefully. We need to have a broader perspective on this issue — that is, we have to put all our efforts into helping the poor peasants stand on their own feet so that they won't be gobbled up. Now do you see what I am getting at? Is an idea like this so hard for you to accept?"

Jinfa thought for a moment. "You're getting me all confused. Do you want me to practice favoritism and treat some people nicer than others? Is that it? Well, that won't do. I am the head of this village. I'm responsible for more

than a hundred families, not just the *fanshen* families. Except for landlords and counter-revolutionaries, I have to treat everyone in the same way —”

“You’re dead wrong,” Daquan broke in. “You are a Communist village head. The role of Communists is to help poor people gain their liberation —”

“Come on. Land reform is over. That kind of talk is out-of-date.”

“Of course a lot of policies have changed now that land reform is over. But we can’t ignore the basic notion of serving the people.”

Jinfa was becoming slightly aggravated. “How can you say I’m casting it aside? What am I doing from morning to night except serving the people? In meetings half the day — who’s that for? If it’s not serving the people, then I might as well spread a few more baskets of manure on my fields. And what about all those nights I stayed up into the small hours? Who was that for? If that wasn’t to serve the people, then I might just as well have enjoyed my warm *kang* and put in a hard day’s work in my own fields.”

Restraining his growing irritation, Daquan said, “Jinfa, your argument doesn’t hold water. You talk about spreading a few more baskets of manure on your fields or putting in a hard day’s work in your fields, but did you ever stop to think how people like us got those fields in the first place?”

“What do you take me for? My political understanding is not that low.”

“I’m not out to slight you, I’m just trying to remind you. All cadres have to be concerned about the poor peasants.”

“I just said I don’t favor anyone but actually I do take sides. You didn’t see what happened in the meeting this afternoon. The way some of the *fanshen* peasants dealt with

Shaohuai was really violating Party policy. They even went as far as to bully him. I was shaking with anger but I didn’t criticize them in public.”

“I don’t see it that way. When poor people quarrel with Feng Shaohuai, it shows that they are becoming more aware — that they have abandoned their superstition and buried their idols. Now they know who feeds whom and who exploits whom and they don’t want to be oppressed again. That’s why they spoke out so strongly today. Do they have to act like they did in the old days — working like sheep for the landlords — before you can feel at ease?”

“Oh come —”

Jinfa paused as a figure emerged out of the darkness and floated down the road toward them. Noticing a break in the conversation, the man came over and asked, “Is Jinfa here?”

Zhang Jinfa stood up. “Old Fan, are you back home for your day-off?”

“No. I came to fetch something,” Fan Keming, the district office cook, responded. “Who’s with you?”

“Daquan,” Jinfa replied.

“Well, small wonder you seemed so chummy. You two really get on well together,” Fan Keming commented. “I came home to pick up my sheepskin vest and to bring you a note about the district meeting the day after tomorrow.”

Jinfa took the note. “You’re so hard working and now you’ve taken on the job of messenger too.”

“I won’t disturb you any longer. I’ll be getting home now so I can start back early tomorrow morning.” After a few steps Fan Keming called back to Jinfa, “Don’t forget to bring those charts when you come to the meeting.”

Jinfa turned to Daquan, “Are you finished?”

“As long as you hold these views, I’ll always have more

to say. But we can end here for now."

"It's up to you. If you say wind it up, then we'll wind it up. If not, I'll stay right here all night and freeze. I don't want you to accuse me of being bureaucratic and slighting your opinions."

"What's the use of talking if you're going to have that kind of attitude?"

"So how should I be? Do I have to give in to your opinions?" He waved the letter in his hand while he talked. "When you don't hold an office, you don't need to consider the policies. I can't act according to my whims and disregard an official policy. If anything goes wrong, you can shrink into the background. But what about me? The leadership would pin full responsibility on me." Then switching to a milder tone, he said, "To repeat myself, we are not in the land reform movement now but in the strive to get rich movement. Rousing speeches aren't what's needed today. What really counts is putting effort into production. This is the first time you and your family are planting your own land. There are lots of loose ends to attend to. Don't take it lightly. You'd better get busy. If Shaohuai bought a mule today to spite us, then we'll buy two horses and outdo him. This is the real way to show your worth. This is the kind of determination Party members should have."

Daquan stood up. "Neither of us is going to convince the other right now. Let's look into it more thoroughly and talk again when we understand the issues better."

"You're as stubborn as a mule. Drives me nuts. Once your mind is set, nothing can budge you." With a yawn and a stretch of his arms, Jinfa disappeared into the darkness.

## We Will Prove Ourselves

Quarreling voices reached Daquan as he passed the new village office. He was about to go in when someone hurried up behind him. Turning around he saw it was Deng Jiukuan, a sturdy-looking man in his early thirties, around five feet tall with broad features. His movements seemed somewhat cumbersome tonight, maybe due to his bulky clothes, maybe because of the freezing cold. Jiukuan whipped off his hat and plopped it on Daquan's head.

Taken by surprise, Daquan exclaimed, "What are you doing, Brother Jiukuan?"

"Been wearing your hat all winter," Jiukuan cheerfully responded. "Now it's your turn."

Daquan put the hat back on Jiukuan's head. "I've gone around hatless all winter. How come you're worrying about me now that it's about to get warm? Better forget it. I'm used to the cold. Keep it for yourself."

"Well, I wasn't planning to give it back now," Jiukuan said, pressing the hat down on his head. "I figured if my crop was good next year I'd buy you a new one. But then my wife said you didn't have a hat when you came over with the medicine for my aunt and she insisted that I give it back to you."

"Looks like Grandma Deng is doing better now," Daquan remarked. "She even came over to our place for a while this evening."

"Your medicine fixed her up in a jiffy. Now she's praising you to the skies. She goes on and on about how smart

you are and how terrific your medicine is. Says the minute she took it, was like a hand just reached in and took away that sickness of hers. My wife and I really had to laugh. I got her the exact same stuff a few months back. How come yours worked and mine didn't?"

Daquan burst out laughing.

Jiukuan had gone to work at a young age for Crooked Mouth's cousin, a landlord known as the Foreign Squire because he had attended a new-fashioned school. Jiukuan was not particularly clever or adroit and was continually subjected to the landlord's physical and verbal abuse. Once when a prestigious guest dropped in, Jiukuan was sent to buy some cigarettes in Heavenly Gate. It was late by the time he returned and the important guest had left. The Foreign Squire fussed and fumed that Jiukuan had spoiled the visit, then soundly cuffed the boy on the ear. Jiukuan's face immediately puffed up so that he could not chew any food or sleep on that side. Eventually the swelling subsided but his hearing was permanently impaired.

Jiukuan went around with a grim expression on his face, only talking to close friends. When the land-reform work team came to Greenfields and was investigating conditions among the poor, vice-team leader Luo Xuguang solicited his opinions. Jiukuan voiced a peculiar demand: "I don't care about getting a patch of land or a house. All I want is a chance to belt that Foreign Squire in the face. Then my score will be settled." Despite Luo Xuguang's explanation of the Party policy against physical retaliation and everyone else's attempts to dissuade him, Jiukuan remained adamant. Sometime later the Foreign Squire was apprehended. As Zhou Yongzhen and Zhu Zhankui were escorting him to the county seat before dawn one morning, Jiukuan leapt out from behind a kiln, grabbed the prisoner by the collar and

struck him forcefully on the cheek. For the first time a smile crept onto Jiukuan's face. To his close friends he confided, "Now I am liberated."

Jiukuan married a widow named Zheng Suzhi in 1949, the year the PLA seized Beiping.\* She had two children by a previous marriage and then gave birth to another by Jiukuan. An old saying maintained:

It's nice to find a wife  
And a joy to have a boy.  
But you'll never have a penny,  
If the mouths to feed are many.

With one breadwinner feeding five people there was not much to go around. Yet once the land was distributed, Jiukuan felt secure and he walked around all day long with a huge smile on his face.

Daquan wondered what had brought Jiukuan out this night. "I thought you'd be in bed by now. How come you're up so late?"

"Have something I've been meaning to ask you. At the last meeting Village Head Zhang said that a Beijing railroad station was asking our village to send some temporary workers. How come nothing more's been said about it? Didn't hear nothing about it today at the meeting. Has the idea been dropped?"

"We didn't follow through because we thought with most people just getting land, everyone would be busy preparing for their first crop and wouldn't want to leave home."

"Won't be planting for quite a while yet. We have some time on our hands right now."

"Do you want to go?"

\* Beijing was known as Beiping before it was liberated in early 1949.



"Some extra cash for New Year's would be mighty handy."

"I'll talk it over with Jinfa and see who else is interested. You can all go together."

"No, no. My wife won't let me go unless you do."

"Don't worry, no one will treat you like a country bumpkin or give you a hard time. The people are in control of Beijing now. The railroad belongs to us. If you want to go, then go. Why do you always have to drag me along?"

More quarreling came from the office. Daquan put a hand on Jiukuan's shoulder, then opened the door and walked into the warm room.

Beneath an oil lamp seven or eight *fanshen* peasants encircled the coal stove, lit for the first time, in the newly renovated office. Jinfa's speech calling on everyone to get rich had been sufficiently disturbing that they had found it difficult to stay home or sit still on the night school benches. Finally they had collected in the village office and plunged into a heated discussion.

Most folks initially were angry and eager to teach Shaohuai a lesson. Then others argued that such retaliation was out of line with Party policy and besides it would not work. Plucking up their morale, many pointed out how futile it would be to take on such an underhanded cutthroat. In fact they could not even vie with Qin Fu because of his alacrity with figures and his aptitude at money-making, and Shaohuai was even worse. As the discussion continued they became further discouraged.

Among them was Tiehan. The anger he had hurled at Shaohuai during the meeting largely was spent. Now he was trying to think positively by flipping through the illustrations in a beginner's writing textbook. But listening to the discussion with one ear, he was growing progressively more upset as it went on. He suddenly exploded, "Shut up, all you

spineless idiots! Just talking this way, you're humiliating yourselves."

"I think it's much more humiliating that you don't even bother to give a thought to major problems," said Lu Chunjiang.

Tiehan jerked his head up, "What do you mean? I don't use my head? My thoughts are definitely worlds above yours. Don't forget this isn't 1948 or 1949. It's 1950: the second year after Liberation and the first year since land reform. The flag hanging in front of the government office is the five-star red flag. And don't forget that the people sitting here are not hired field hands, child laborers or beggars. We are Party members, Youth League members and *fanshen* peasants! Comrades, it's our sky and our land. The Party relies on us and the government wants us to become our own masters. And you say we can't even make it, that we're going to be crushed by others? Hell no!"

Someone in the back laughed. "This punk can actually spit out a few decent phrases, can't he?"

Right away someone else piped up, "But he makes a lot of sense."

Hearing these approving comments and seeing Yongzhen and Chunjiang fumbling for words, Tiehan began to laugh delightedly.

"It's not that easy to get rich you know," Yongzhen said after a moment of hesitation. "You never had to shoulder the responsibility of maintaining a farm and feeding a family."

"All you can do is scoff and boast. Get rich yourself and show us," Chunjiang chimed in.

Tiehan rebutted, "So Shaohuai has one head and two hands but we only have half a head and one hand, huh?"

Why do you sell yourself so short. We should be tough and get our minds set on competing with them. We can't anticipate defeat before we've reached the battlefield. Besides, we've got a lot going for us. For instance, in terms of working in the fields or being able to shoulder hardships, who can match the *fanshen* peasants? You don't believe me? Just wait and see. As soon as we get down to work, we'll outrun them."

Sitting to one side of the room smoking silently was Liu Xiang. Now he knocked out the ashes in his pipe and said, "Tiehan, don't argue just for the sake of arguing. You're a few years younger than most of us and can't judge the situation from all angles. Before land reform Shaohuai was so well-off that even a law suit didn't ruin him. Then not even one straw was *reformed* out of him during land reform. Just sweeping his floor would pile up more grain than we have in our bins and cupboards. We *fanshen* peasants came into the new society with nothing. We were so weak, it was like we were badly wounded. The Communist Party saved our lives. You have to realize that though we survived, we are far from strong. And we won't grow strong overnight. It will take time to recover from our wounds and get new muscles."

His opinions immediately received overwhelming approval. Both Yongzhen and Chunjiang nodded their heads eagerly.

"Finally we're hearing someone speak from experience."

"Yeah, that's exactly what we were worrying about."

"Tiehan, you'd better stop all that gibberish. You Party members have to think of a way to get us through this difficult period. This is no laughing matter."

"That's right! But it looks like we're too big a burden

for the village head. We'll have to depend on you and Daquan."

At this point people noticed Daquan standing in the doorway.

"Come on in. You're just the person we've been waiting for."

"Yeah, if you hadn't come by, we'd have gone and pulled you out of your house."

Yongzhen walked over to Daquan and putting his hands on his shoulders, said with great feeling, "Quite frankly Daquan, this get-rich slogan hasn't encouraged me at all. In fact I've found it quite demoralizing. The other day after the village head explained the gist of it, my father called the whole family together to try and figure it out. We stayed up to the wee hours but still couldn't make head or tail out of it. Today's village-wide meeting was even more discouraging."

Chunjiang looked longingly at Daquan. "I've been wondering about this too. Most of the *fanshen* peasants never had a patch of land before. We're starting from scratch. This will be our first battle. You Party members just have to think of ways to keep the rich families from sweeping us under."

Nodding his head vigorously, Liu Xiang said, "That's right. If the cart flips over along the road, it's not merely a shame but it shows that we neglected our responsibility. If we're going to get back on our feet, we need to get a strong start, work hard until the autumn harvest and bring in one crop. Once our wounds have healed, and we've built a solid base, we won't be afraid of them. But until this happens, we're going to be very vulnerable."

Wedging himself between people who had squeezed out room for him along a bench, Daquan picked up a poker and

stirred the coals. The fire crackled and blazed; a red glow bathed everyone's hands and faces. Looking around at his very dear comrades, he compared their heated discussion and burdened looks with Grandma Deng's warning and Jinfa's apathy. Trying to probe deeper into the problem, he questioned: Shouldn't the striving-to-get-rich policy have aroused the *fanshen* peasants like coal fed to a fire? Shouldn't it cheer them up rather than add to their worries? Suddenly he wondered whether striving to get rich was part of building socialism or not. "I understand what's bothering you and you are perfectly right. I have to admit that even though I've been wondering about the new call for a while, it wasn't until this evening that I began to see some of its implications. Though we've shaken off our bonds, we're no better than fledgling birds. Some people are going to stand by and laugh at our blunders — others will help themselves during the confusion. But what about us? We can't let this get us down. We must prove ourselves. We must strengthen our wings so we can fly freely."

"Say, Tiehan, you have to take this more seriously. We should stay up tonight and think about ways to deal with this problem," Daquan continued.

Tiehan pulled over a chair and said seriously, "I'm no numskull. I just thought we shouldn't exaggerate our problems and mope. Whoever hopes to amuse himself with our blunders can go blind for all I care. And is there someone who's waiting to help himself? Just let him try. I'll rap his knuckles the minute he makes a move and he'll have to pull back his bloody hands howling." Then Tiehan raised his voice. "Come on everybody. Let's hear some words of courage."

Yongzhen poked him and said, "Give your voice a rest and let Daquan finish."

"Yes, Brother Daquan," Chunjiang said. "Give us some ideas of what to do."

"What Uncle Liu Xiang just said made sense," Daquan responded. "As long as the *fanshen* families can bring in one good crop, we'll be standing on our own feet. That's how we'll grow our feathers and fly. I figure that by planting time most families will have used up all the grain they got during land reform. They will have to start worrying about where their seeds and food will come from."

"We need fertilizer too," Chunjiang chimed in. "We'll just be playing in the mud without fertilizer. The best way to get it is to raise a pig, but I can't afford a piglet."

Daquan pensively suggested, "Let's talk about how we can scrape together some funds for implements, food and seeds during spring planting. If we want to prove ourselves, we need to lay the groundwork for our new life. This first step is crucial. But how can we do it? We don't have any goods to peddle. None of us have any skills to start earning some cash."

"No problem," someone spoke up from the doorway. "I have just the thing for you guys."

Everyone turned around. There stood a man in a big padded overcoat and a padded hat with a cloth bag slung over his shoulder. As he walked over, the cold night air still clung to him and sweat matted his hair where his hat had gripped his head.

"Oh, Comrade Li."

"Where did you come from?"

Li Peilin, assistant for the district agricultural department, took off his hat and wiped his sweat. "I come to discuss something with you. Our transportation system is overloaded these days, what with the needs of industry for raw materials, the needs of agriculture for industrial goods and

the needs for supplies on the Korean war front. A train station in Beijing is trying to cope with all this in addition to its normal work load. It's short of hands and has sent people to our county several times asking for help. I think you should get together a group and go. That way you can help them out and earn some cash for spring planting — like killing two birds with one stone."

"Comrade Li," Yongzhen joyfully exclaimed, "that's just the sort of thing we needed to hear. As long as others are game, I'm up for it. I don't even care about the money so much. Just going there will help my family save some grain."

Chunjiang said, "We need someone to lead us who knows what he is doing. None of us have ever gone very far from home. Getting around in a big city won't be easy."

Li Peilin looked at Daquan and asked, "How come you look so glum? Oh, I bet it has something to do with your visit to Secretary Wang this afternoon. Well, cheer up. I was at a loss the last few days myself but when I visited our old district head in the hospital yesterday, he said with land reform just drawing to a close and our fighting in the Korean war, too many things are all happening at once. Some things aren't quite on the right track yet. He also said not to get rattled or muddle-headed. We should do things as we think best and see what happens. It seems to me he makes a lot of sense. What do you think?"

Identifying with Li Peilin's sentiment Daquan revealed his concerns. "Recently some of us have been feeling that something was wrong but we couldn't quite pin it down."

"Don't worry," Li Peilin assured them. "Things will get set straight in a while. Do you know a new Party secretary is coming to our county? His name is Liang Haishan. Like Luo Xuguang he's being sent from the regional office. Secretary Liang has been working in Yanshan District for

a long time. Now he's been assigned a permanent position in our county. He's a very capable veteran cadre and the land reform in his district was outstanding. He's the one who issued the directive to send temporary workers to Beijing. He said this will give peasants a chance to learn from the working class."

The phrase "learn from the working class" instantly appealed to Daquan. He recalled that Luo Xuguang had used this same phrase in his explanation of the nature of the Party when he proposed Daquan for Party membership.

Regaining his spirit, Daquan remarked, "There's not much to do in the fields right now and there's no pressing work in the village either. We should definitely send people. I'll go too."

Everyone's eyes lit up.

"We're set then," Daquan declared. "Go home and discuss it with your families and make the necessary arrangements. Also see if anybody else is interested. I'll bring it up with the village head tomorrow. We'll go as soon as it's all decided so we can get back in time for spring planting!"

Jiukuan asked, "Can I go too, Brother Daquan?"

"We wouldn't think of leaving without you."

Elated, Jiukuan stated, "I don't need to discuss it with anyone. Just tell me when it's time to leave."

"Isn't your wife pregnant?" questioned Daquan. "And Grandma Deng hasn't been feeling well lately. They won't be able to manage the house by themselves. I'll ask my wife to look after them. Your family doesn't have enough quilts to go around so don't bring any. I'll share mine with you."

"Daquan is really considerate," Liu Xiang remarked.

Li Peilin commented, "Comrade Luo Xuguang praised Daquan very highly to County Head Gu and Secretary

Wang. He said that Daquan would become an outstanding cadre. His judgement is usually pretty good."

Ill at ease Daquan called over Tiehan and said, "Don't get too excited. You can't go anywhere. You have to keep tabs on the village affairs. Why don't we all sit down now and ask Comrade Li Peilin to tell us what details have to be taken care of."

Everyone felt like a huge rock had been lifted off their shoulders. The anxieties and depression each had experienced over the last few days, especially since this afternoon, evaporated. Crowded around the blazing fire, they talked all night in the encouraging fashion and confident tone Tiehan was so fond of.

## 8

### In the Still of the Night

Greenfields outwardly maintained its composure after Shaohuai's acquisition of the mule and Zhang Jinfa's push for the get-rich campaign, yet beneath the surface the village seethed like the Bright Cloud River after a June thunderstorm. People nervously sequestered themselves at home to discuss recent events; many tossed and turned like flapjacks through sleepless nights. Those usually out in the streets enjoying the midday sun were nowhere to be seen and there were less people out visiting during the evenings. In just two days a dozen potholes appeared in the two village sludge ponds, the dirt removed for compost. Early one morning people streamed over to the market, held every fifth day

in Heavenly Gate, selling their ware to buy necessities for spring planting. Families having recently announced their son's engagements hastened to hold the weddings to bring in the sorely needed additional hand.

Early one morning Jinfa went to the district office to hand in his report. He was the first—in fact the only village head—to submit a chart spelling out each family's plan for getting rich. When Secretary Wang commended him, Jinfa's self-complacent expression caused some embarrassment to the other up-and-coming young village heads. After the meeting, Wang Youqing invited Jinfa to lunch. During the meal Jinfa answered questions about events in Greenfields and received a great deal of encouragement. On his way home strangers greeted him as "Village Head Zhang." The manager of a recently opened grain shop offered him a cup of tea; the owner of the Heavenly Gate General Store invited him in for a smoke; even people in the far away barber shop called out their regards. Jinfa had always frequented this town, but how different it seemed today. No longer was he looked down upon as a country bumpkin with sorghum fluff in his hair, nor was he seen as the head hired hand who catered to the slightest whim of the landlord, a reputation from earlier days when he worked for Crooked Mouth. Now as the head of Greenfields he was in charge of over a hundred families. The main street through Heavenly Gate was not particularly long, yet it took him almost an hour to reach the other end of town. During this time his sense of self-importance and stature heightened enormously. As he walked home his smile never left his face.

Jinfa's wife, Chen Xiuhua, was the adopted daughter of a wine shop proprietor. A tall woman with thin lips and a flat face, she moved with such agility her hips seemed to

be joined by ball bearings. She was competent, outgoing and well-liked by other women. Her personality dovetailed perfectly with Jinfa's, reminiscent of the proverb, "Those who fit together seem to get together." From all appearances she was subservient, strictly abiding by the age-old adage "the wife should sing the husband's tune." But actually she had a mind of her own and during the dozen years of their marriage she manipulated Jinfa with kid gloves. Even when Jinfa invited a guest to stay for dinner, he had to consult her before issuing a "command" to cook some extra food. Now, seeing her husband coming home in high spirits, she quickly sailed into the kitchen.

Jinfa sat down on the edge of the *kang* and unbuttoned his padded jacket. "Don't bother. I've already eaten."

Xiuhua glanced disbelievingly at Jinfa. "I thought you didn't take any money with you."

"Money?" Jinfa snickered. "Not to brag, but I could hang around Heavenly Gate for a week or two and not worry about meals. I wouldn't even have to go without meat."

His smugness infected Xiuhua. She affectionately said, "Don't take off your jacket. You'll catch cold in this chilly room."

"The wine's gotten to me. I feel hot and dry. Pour me some water, will you?"

"I'll go boil some." She worked so diligently she might well have been tending to a special guest.

Jinfa leisurely looked around his well-kept room. Through the glass window he could see the pile of wood in his courtyard, every log thick and straight. Such good quality! At the end of 1948 when the People's Liberation Army (PLA) was sweeping in from the Great Wall, the Kuomintang reactionaries started digging trenches and throwing up

fortifications around Heavenly Gate. Landlord Crooked Mouth ordered his hired hands to cut down timber for these Kuomintang strongholds. One day as Jinfa and two other men were driving carts loaded with wood through Lihua Landing, they were stopped by Wang Youqing, who had been sent ahead to map out the work in this new area. Wang told them about the great might and victories of the PLA, the impending collapse of Chiang Kai-shek's regime and the role of the Communist Party as the people's savior. He urged them to oppose their enemies instead of working for them. Jinfa was quick to grasp the situation. He drove home, confronted Crooked Mouth and refused to deliver the wood. Before long the entire area was liberated and land-reform work teams were sent into every village. Again Jinfa took the initiative; he searched Heavenly Gate with Tiehan and discovered Crooked Mouth's hideaway. Later Jinfa played a leading role in the investigation of Crooked Mouth's crimes and in the struggle meetings. . . . Shortly afterward twenty-five mu of land, a three-room house and that stack of wood came into Jinfa's possession. He became "Village-Head Zhang," well-known and influential throughout the district.

From the kitchen he heard the fire crackling and his youngest son, Fulai, whining. A few minutes later a sudden scream sounded from his wife, followed by two loud slaps. Fulai began to howl.

Jinfa jumped off the *kang*, lifted up the door curtain and went into the adjoining room. "What's the matter? Why did you hit him?"

Xiuhua was holding the fire poker in one hand, her other hand outstretched ready to strike again. Her entire body shook with anger. "I could kill that good-for-nothing brat. He stuffed down his lunch, then came back for more. I told

him these two corn buns were for you, but he refused to go to school unless he got them."

Jinfa picked up his whimpering son and wiped the tears from his eyes. "I've eaten. Let him have them."

Xiuhua, sticking the fire poker against the stove, snapped, "I did. But by then that brat didn't want them."

Jinfa picked up a corn bun lying on the edge of the stove and put it into Fulai's hand. "Daddy doesn't want it. Fulai can have it."

The first grader wriggled all around, frantically pushing away his father's hand. "I don't want this kind. I want *that* kind."

Jinfa's eyes moved in the direction of his son's pointing finger. In the street before their house stood a boy around Fulai's age with a new book bag and wearing nice clothes. He was nibbling on a piece of white bread, seeming to savor every morsel.

Fulai's tears again flowed. "I want that kind!"

"So that's the kind you want," his mother screamed. "Well, where am I going to get white flour?"

"You have it, you have it," Fulai fussed. "His family has had it for days. They even have meat with theirs."

Jinfa casually inquired, "Whose kid is that?"

"Whose?" said Xiuhua. "Shaohuai's. Who else's?"

Jinfa's heart tightened at the mention of the name.

"You may be the village head, but when it comes to prestige and power, you have to stand back for Shaohuai," his wife grumbled.

Letting go of Fulai, Jinfa went back into the other room, his good mood soured by his son's plaintive wails and his wife's disparaging remarks. This trifling family squabble hit the powerful village head surprisingly hard. He had publicly supported Shaohuai's acquisition of the mule in ac-

cordance with the new policy. However, once at home, Jinfa began to consider the issue from the angle of a small landowning peasant and felt a tinge of regret.

After fretting over it for a while, Jinfa fell asleep. He dreamed he got into a brawl with Shaohuai on the Tall Steps; neither could get the upper hand. The two of them rolled all the way down the steps to the edge of the Bright Cloud River. . . .

Xiuhua shook her husband. "What's going on? You're yelling and throwing your fists all over the place!"

Jinfa rubbed his eyes and said awkwardly, "I was dreaming. Is it dark already?"

"I'll fix you some dinner. Are you going to a meeting tonight?"

"Leftovers will be fine. I don't feel so well. I won't be going out tonight."

The Zhang family spent their most depressing evening since land reform. When the three children came home and saw their father in a bad mood, they all slipped off to bed, afraid he might lose his temper and beat them the way he had before the revolution. Initially Xiuhua had hoped to find out what was bothering her husband, but when she failed to engage him in conversation, she sighed and went to bed. Jinfa tossed and turned for a long time before he too fell asleep.

The night grew dark; the village, quiet.

Someone moved along the street and stopped at the Zhang's gate. The person stuck his hand through the fence and after fiddling around a bit, unlatched the gate. He slipped in, closed the gate, walked across the courtyard to the window and put his mouth against the window pane. "Jinfa, Jinfa," he called out in a low voice.

Jinfa sat up with a jolt. "Who is it?"

The intruder anxiously replied, "Me. Don't you recognize my voice?"

The voice sounded familiar. Jinfa thought it might be a district messenger, so he threw a jacket over his shoulders, stumbled through the dark into the next room and opened the door. The man entered, then closed the door by leaning up against it. After panting for a moment, he abruptly fell to his knees and threw his arms around Jinfa's legs.

Jinfa, bewildered, stepped back and demanded, "Who are you? What are you doing?"

Xiuhua had thrown on her clothes as soon as her husband left. She came out carrying a lamp while still buttoning up her jacket. Though she could not see the person's face, the sight of a man kneeling on the ground stunned her.

When Jinfa saw who it was in the light, he was shocked. "What are you doing here, Crooked Mouth?" he yelled.

Still on his knees, the landlord said, "Brother, I-I-I came to ask a favor."

Jinfa was livid with anger. Stepping back, he put his hands on his hips and scowled. "A favor?" he roared. "Me do you a favor? You've come to the wrong house. Don't you know who I am? The Communist Party liberated me from a life of hell. I'm a Communist. And I'm the head of this village. Do you understand that?"

"I understand, I understand," Crooked Mouth said. "And you're so capable you'll rise even higher! I'm so happy for you."

"Happy," Jinfa sneered. "You can't be happy for me. You hate me. We're enemies. Let's go talk in the village office. What sneaky trick are you trying to pull by coming here in the middle of the night? You're in for some trouble if you don't level with me."

Crooked Mouth's pumpkin-like face twitched, his mouth

drooped to one side and tears streamed from his eyes.

Xiuhua was the first to soften. "Can't you talk in a nicer tone? You'll scare the kids with all your yelling."

"How can I help it?" Jinfa shouted. "Don't you know what kind of guy he is?"

Crooked Mouth blew his nose. "Well, what kind of guy am I? I'm a friend who grew up with you. We played together when we were kids. It's true that you had some hard times. And I took the wrong road. But quite frankly, Jinfa, I never turned against you from the time we played together through the years you worked for me. We drank and gambled together. Whenever I had some special treat, I never forgot to give you a taste. We were friends. I trusted you with my house and my guns. I-I.—"

"Do you want me to barf it all up for you?" Jinfa interrupted. "You're here to settled accounts with me, aren't you?"

"No, no, Brother Jinfa," Crooked Mouth hastened to explain. "I wouldn't dare even if I had your courage. I just spoke about the old days to show that I was never against you. I know that you have a lot of integrity and you are as kind as a Buddha. The higher you rise, the more lenient you are with those below you. It's all to your credit that the land reform was well handled in Greenfields according to policy. I wholeheartedly believe this even though I haven't said it in public. It was inevitable that my property would be divided up. That's the way things go. No one could have stopped it. I know you have already given me the biggest break possible — my life and some land. You treat me like a human being. For this I feel nothing but gratitude. Only a heartless wretch would hate you. With heaven as my witness I swear —"

"That's over and done with!" Jinfa waved his hand.



"There's no point in digging up the past. Everyone has to adjust himself to the changing times. The Communist Party has treated me well and I have to treat it the same way. It has given me honor. Who would be so stupid as to take nice face powder and put it on his butt? No one can steer me down the wrong road. You're blind if that's what you are up to. What are you trying to get out of me?"

"Oh my brother, how can you ask such a thing?" Crooked Mouth said anxiously. "Do I have to pull out my heart to convince you? I'm halfway to my grave. How could I dream up any outlandish schemes? I only hope to live my last years in peace. All I want is for you to give me a break."

Jinfa was growing impatient. "You've got a house and some land. All you have to do is reform yourself through work and become self-supporting. What's the problem? Why do I have to give you a break?"

Crooked Mouth explained, "Ever since land reform Shaohuai's been in high heaven while I've been in the dirt. I really don't have a leg to stand on anymore. I can hardly scrounge enough together to start farming my land. And it's hard for me to ask for help. I'd like to sell the wall behind my house. You remember. The one I was allowed to keep. I planned to build a house but then the Japanese came, so you and others piled the bricks into a wall for me instead. I don't need them now and lots of families want to build houses. There are enough for five rooms if anyone wants to buy them."

Just then footsteps were heard coming up the street. From outside the gate came an urgent call, "Brother Jinfa, Brother Jinfa."

Jinfa instinctively moved in front of the lamp, blocking the light, then answered, "What is it, Tiehan?"

"Daquan has asked everyone going to Beijing to come to the village office," Tiehan said. "We heard you were back from the district and would like you to come tell us about any new directives."

"There is nothing new." Jinfa answered. "I've already gone to bed and I don't feel like getting up again."

"Then we'll just end the meeting after our discussion?"

"Fine. There's nothing else to talk about."

Tiehan's steps faded away. Jinfa glared at Crooked Mouth before walking into the next room.

Crooked Mouth remained on his knees with his bottom resting on his heels. "What can I do?" he softly pleaded to Xiuhua. "If I don't get the okay from the village head, I wouldn't dare sell the wall."

"Keep trying," Xiuhua suggested.

Crooked Mouth brightened up slightly and asked, "Will it work?"

"I don't see why not," Xiuhua replied.

Crooked Mouth quickly stood up, let out a deep sigh, and walked humbly into the next room.

## 9

### Going with the Tide

Jinfa rose before daybreak, slapped his drowsy head and rubbed his bleary eyes, puffy and caked from a bad night's sleep. He went out to the courtyard and then back inside. He picked up the carrying-pole, only to put it down again before attaching the buckets. He swished the broom around

several times, threw it down on the ground, went inside for the feed pail and walked toward the pigsty.

Xiuhua quickly guessed why her husband was acting so peculiarly. While feeding firewood into the stove she urged him, "You'd never come across such a good bargain even if you went searching for it with a lantern. You can't pass it up. Just do it my way."

Jinfa furrowed his brow and shook his head. "Don't be in such a hurry. We have to think this one through very carefully."

As Xiuhua walked over toward her husband, she said, gesturing excitedly. "What more is there to think about? Just look at our shabby hut. It's so puny! There's no storage space and barely enough room for us. Look at the walls, the ceiling. They won't hold up for too many more years. Don't you worry about this house falling down on us during a rainy spell? Besides, Fuwang will be old enough to get married before too long. Without a new room, where will his wife live? If you pass up this bargain, we'll have a tough time saving enough out of our food money for new bricks."

"I'm a Party member and the village head. I'm well-known through the district and the county. I don't want to give people anything to gossip about."

"What is there to talk about? He came to us. We didn't run after him. There's no reason to feel guilty. Why shouldn't a Party member, a village head, live decently? Do you think this dump adds to the prestige of a famous village head?"

"It seems unlikely that Crooked Mouth has any ulterior motives behind this particular offer. He must be just trying to butter up to me. There's not too much room for him to maneuver now that land reform is over. But even if he is up to something, I'll never fall into his trap. . . . Then again,

it never hurts to be careful." Jinfa said this more to convince himself than his wife. He desperately wished he could calmly think this through.

Jinfa's three children were now up and around. Fuwang, the oldest son, picked up the carrying-pole, hooked on two buckets and went for water. Qiaogui, the daughter, started to sweep the courtyard. Last of all, Fulai ran out and grabbed the pig-feed ladle from his father's hand.

There was nothing left for Jinfa to do but wait for breakfast. He lit up his pipe, stood in the middle of the courtyard, and enjoyed watching his children full of life and busy at work. Then his eyes fell on his small house and the pile of wood which had already started to discolor. His good mood was dampened. He tapped his pipe against the sole of his shoe, cleared his throat and strolled out of the courtyard.

"Breakfast is almost ready," Xiuhua called out. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going to see someone," Jinfa answered without turning around. "After breakfast everyone will be out in the fields."

Jinfa began to consider whom he should approach with his problem: Daquan is always willing to help people but he has a one-track mind, Jinfa reflected. He will definitely object and might even become alarmed over this trifling matter and make it a public issue before anything is actually decided. As for Tiehan, he thinks in simple terms and will not be able to supply any profound ideas. Fan Keming might be okay. He is sympathetic, reasonable and well-off. Besides he is well-informed about government policies. He is just the person to count on for reliable advice.

Yesterday at the district meeting Jinfa heard Fan had come

home for his day off, so he hurried toward the north end of the village.

Fan was a recent settler. One foggy morning in the autumn of 1948 a man in blood-stained clothes came running into Greenfields with a knapsack on his back. He asked everyone where he could find the PLA and Communist Party cadre. Not wanting to get involved, the peasants closed their doors as soon as they saw his attire and heard his questions. But Tough Hide, normally a late sleeper, happened to be up early that morning and came upon this peculiar fellow. He led the stranger into a small wine shop and began an interrogation.

"I am the Communist Party cadre. What do you want me for?"

"Are you really?"

"I look poor enough to be one, don't I?"

"I-I killed someone."

"A murder? Where are you from? Who'd you kill?"

"I'm from Fan Village near Tangshan. I was a hired hand there for a collaborator-landlord who later headed up the 'landlord revenge squad.' My name is Fan Keming. I have no family and I've had a pretty rough life."

"Speak up. Who did you murder?"

"That rotten boss of mine was a real cutthroat. When he heard that the PLA had broken through the Shanhaiguan Pass, he was scared to death. In order to keep his power in the village, he thought about taking off for Beiping to seek some powerful backing. That way he could go back and keep on with his evil —"

"So who'd you kill?"

"My boss forced me to carry his pack. We walked for a month. Then last night we came to a shed in a melon field north of here. He wanted to rest awhile, then run all

the way to Beiping that same night. He was pulling me down a dead-end street! Nearly all the villages and towns were occupied by the PLA and guarded by the people's militia. It was impossible to get through to Beiping. I couldn't stand it any longer! I am poor but I wasn't going to let him push me around anymore. So I picked up a brick and bashed in his head while he was asleep."

Tough Hide scowled. He jumped to his feet and slapped Fan across the face with a full swing of his arm. Then he opened his large buck-tooth mouth and bellowed, "You punk! You killed a man for no good reason. I'm going to make sure you pay for this with your life!"

The blow knocked Fan to the ground. Holding his face, he loudly protested, "The Communist Party is the poor people's savior. Aren't they the enemies of the collaborators, the Kuomintang and the landlords? I killed a bad guy. Why are you hitting me? You're not a Communist cadre. You lied."

"None of that matters to this Party of mine. All I care about is upholding justice!" He turned around and shouted to the curious onlookers in the doorway. "Come on in here. I want you to tie him up for me and take him to the Tall Steps."

No one budged.

"All a bunch of damned sissies," Tough Hide sneered as he tied up Fan and hauled him out.

Everyone came running onto the street as Fan yelled, cursed and rolled around on the ground.

At that time Jinfa, Tiehan and other villagers were already in contact with the PLA cadre Wang Youqing. They hurried over, locked up Fan and went to examine the shed in the melon field before dispatching someone to the district office for instructions.

Fan settled in Greenfields. When the story of his struggle with the collaborator-landlord was publicized by Secretary Wang at a land-reform struggle meeting, it became the talk of the town for quite some time. Fan later asked for a job as a cook, having learned the skill while working in the landlord's kitchen; on Jinfa's recommendation he was hired by the district office.

As Jinfa tramped through a frozen reed swamp, he saw a two-room hut behind a distant grove. He cheerfully stepped up his pace and called out, "Brother Fan."

A fifty-year-old man dressed in a faded jacket and pants appeared. He had a long face and hook nose, and one eye was larger than the other. Though skinny, he looked strong and sharp. He flashed a warm grin when he recognized Jinfa walking into his courtyard. "Well, Brother Jinfa, you're up and around quite early this morning."

"When I was at the district office yesterday, I heard you were home for a few days. What a fellow you are! Traipsing all the way home rather than going to the opera and having a good time in town. Why do you keep running back home in the cold when you don't even have a wife to cook for you?"

Fan said with a smile, "I don't have a family here but I really miss my friends after a while."

Jinfa paused, then said, "I've come to ask you a favor. I'd like you to help me make a decision."

Fan looked Jinfa in the eye and said, "I'll do anything I can."

"You know that house of mine isn't going to last much longer," Jinfa began in a roundabout fashion. "And if I don't do something with that stack of wood, it's going to rot. I heard that Crooked Mouth wants to sell the brick wall behind his house. The price isn't bad. Some people were

encouraging me to buy it but I refused because —"

"Don't you want to buy it?" Fan interrupted.

"Well to be honest, I do. This is an ideal opportunity. But I'm afraid that with my position in the village, this kind of deal will spark a lot of gossip and ruin my reputation."

Fan threw his poker aside. "Come on. You, a Party member, the village head, should take the lead to get rich rather than live in poverty. Do you think you'll get a good reputation when your house collapses on you in a storm or when your wood rots? Jinfa, you're great in every way. But your courage falls way below your high goals. You worry too much. A real man should show more gumption in dealing with the world. When I heard that someone in our village bought a mule, I assumed you were taking some initiative. But it turned out to be Shaohuai. He's not half the man you are but he surpassed you. Why? You're not aggressive enough. Oh, Jinfa, it will look bad if you keep on this way. Secretary Wang has great hopes for you but he also worries that someone else will outdo you."

These disapproving words could not have been more welcome to Jinfa. He felt hot and flushed, his face turned beet-red. When Fan finished chiding him, he stood there like a primary school student who has been admonished by his teacher. With an embarrassed smile he said, "Sounds like I should buy the wall. There really isn't a problem, is there?"

"When one person wants to sell and the other wants to buy, it's all fair and square. After all, you're not taking advantage of him: you're paying. It's all on the up and up. If you could be more decisive in taking care of your own affairs, you wouldn't be in a bind now. Both Secretary Wang and I are concerned about you. I can't wait to see Village Head Zhang build a new house, get a big draft animal and

become the hero in the striving-to-get-rich movement."

"I do have the drive but I have to take it slow. You know I don't own much of anything to help me get started. This is a whole different ball game than leading a political struggle. One has to have the goods."

"Now you're being petty again. If you can't make it alone, come see me. I've no family and don't spend much. I've put some away. I'd even borrow for you if need be. I'm much obliged to you for saving my life. Once you get rich, we can all depend on you."

"You make me feel much more confident," Jinfa gratefully acknowledged.

"You should never have had any doubt. There's no more war, no more land reform. What else should you do beside strive for a better life? A man can only feel alive when he has a goal to strive for and is competing to get ahead."

"Fan, you really know me," Jinfa smiled. "That's just what I've been thinking lately."

Jinfa felt tremendously invigorated. A few minutes later he was sitting with Fan at a small *kang* table. As he tipped his cup, downing the wine, Jinfa fantasized that before long he would not only be the village head in Greenfields, but also its richest member.

10

## Beating Around the Bush

Lunar New Year 1951.

For the first time in their lives, the *fanshen* peasants in

Greenfields stopped calling this holiday "debts due day" and treated it as a time of celebration. Despite a strong urge to start this year's work ahead of schedule, they deferred to tradition and, much to the pleasure of the young people, ceased work for a few days of relaxation and enjoyment.

The new atmosphere was apparent at every door; pairs of large red scrolls inscribed with poetic couplets, colorful New Year's pictures, and bright papercuts fluttered in the breeze. People passing through these doors were dressed in new clothes, hats and shoes.

"Happy New Year," they would greet one another. "How's everything?"

"Just fine. This is the first time I've enjoyed New Year's."

"Same here. This is the first time we've had enough to eat. And it's the first time we don't have to run away from bill collectors."

"Right. It's also the first time the year ahead looks promising."

"Thank heavens the Communists came."

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An old proverb says, "Loved ones are particularly missed during holidays." At least thirteen families in Greenfields were thinking about their family members working in Beijing. Many people, especially the energetic youth and the fun-loving old, missed Daquan as well. They grumbled that holiday performances would have been ready by now if Daquan were around, that they would already be setting up the stage.

One afternoon during the holidays, Jinfa sat at a red lacquer table on his *kang* holding an old-fashioned tin wine jar. As he filled two walnut-sized cups, he boasted to his

cousin Tough Hide, who was sitting on the edge of the *kang*, "I know how bored you must feel. Don't worry. Once I give the word, that cultural center and drama team will be whipped into shape. Daquan ran his butt off trying to convince people when he was around. But he couldn't get the damn thing off the ground. It was so frustrating to watch. A cadre has to throw his weight around sometimes. Otherwise how can you get anything done? Have another drink, brother."

Tough Hide lifted his cup and emptied it in one slurp. He rubbed his palm across his lips, picked up his chopsticks again and dived into the food. "That Daquan is really strange," he said. "He's one of the smartest people around. And he's in that Party of yours. Too bad he's carrying that card around for nothing. If he keeps on in this muddling way, he'll never climb high or get rich. He'll end up just like me — envying others' fortunes and waiting for the next land reform to *fanshen* again."

Jinfa shook his head impatiently and waved his hand. "Land reform, land reform, all you can think about is another land reform. I don't want to hear you say that again. It's out-of-date. You will make my work in the village difficult if you keep it up. Don't you think you should start paying some attention to your own reputation?"

Tough Hide rolled his eyes and sighed. "How am I going to get by if there isn't another land reform?"

"Just forget your wild ideas and do some decent work."

"I've been suiting myself since the day I was born. I've feasted, gambled and whored all I wanted. When did you ever see me in the fields? And now you want me to work? Impossible."

"You know the saying, 'When a good-for-nothing turns over a new leaf, he'll outwork an ox.' You can't get some-

thing for nothing. No one has ever enjoyed the sweetness of honey without first tasting some bitterness. I was just thinking about this myself recently. In the old society I worked for others in vain and didn't get anywhere. Now with the new society, I'm going to put myself out and strike it rich. I want to live up to the hopes of the leaders and open a path for our children. And you, you should do the same. You can't let others get ahead of you. I'll even look bad if you don't make an effort. Start tomorrow. First get a pick and dig some compost —"

Tough Hide's face grew sullen. He flung his chopsticks on the table. "Huh! Are you trying to force a donkey to dance? Well, I have something to say about that. I've never had to work hard, even in the old society, and you're expecting me to put up with it now? Now that I'm supposed to be liberated and I've gained my *fanshen*? Why should I support you Communists if this is what I get?"

Jinfa also slapped his chopsticks down and scowled. "Is that a threat? Listen. If you do as I say, I'll treat you like a relative. But if you don't behave yourself, I'll get tough. Today's government is a people's government. Those who don't work won't eat. If you refuse to work hard and live decently, I'll order some strong men to arrest you as a bum and stick you into a labor reform team. You'll get two bowls of watery gruel a day and still have to work. You don't believe it? Just try me. Let's see who's afraid of whom?"

When it came to a showdown, Tough Hide's bark was always worse than his bite. At these unequivocal words, he glanced to his side and saw Jinfa's stern face. He meekly picked up his chopsticks.

Xiuhua, who had been sitting on a stool watching this

dramatic encounter, almost burst out laughing. She hurried off to get more food.

Her daughter Qiaogui, who had been watching this squabble from the kitchen, whispered to her mother, "My Uncle Shou is the toughest person in Greenfields. How come he's afraid of dad?"

"One thing always succumbs to another," Xiuhua said, rattling off a proverb, "Lye curds the bean juice, scorpions fear roosters, millet sprouts are prey to the mole cricket."

Laughing, Qiaogui put her arms around her mother's neck and whispered, "Yesterday we went to Grandma Deng's to wish her a happy New Year. She gave us melon seeds. Then Wan Shuhua came over and told stories. She said once there was a bum whom no woman would marry. He got desperate. One day he paid a young widow to come over and wash and mend his clothes. Just as she sat on the kang, he raced to his front gate, pulled out a string of firecrackers and lit them. Bang, bang, bang. The noise attracted lots of people. Then he yelled, 'Fellow villagers, I'm getting married today.' He ran back into his house, grabbed the widow by her arm, and started the marriage ceremony, bowing to heaven and —"

Before Qiaogui could finish, Xiuhua pushed her away. "She is such a gossip. Why does she have to pull out all this garbage in front of kids? No wonder people call her a walking telegram." Then she warned her daughter, "Don't repeat that story to anyone."

"You have to tell me," Qiaogui persisted, "is that bum my Uncle Shou?"

"Who else would pull such a lowdown trick?"

Qiaogui kept prodding. "Is my aunt that young widow?"

"Can't you see," Xiuhua said with a sigh, "she doesn't get along with him at all? They lead separate lives. She

doesn't even bother to make clothes for your uncle. You'd better watch what you say to your aunt. You hear me?"

Qiaogui nodded, then asked, "Behind his back everyone says that my Uncle Shou is like a hunk of gristly meat that's too hard to chop, too tough to boil, can't be chewed and can't be swallowed. How come dad keeps an upper hand with him?"

"Because your father's the village head."

"But when uncle didn't get any grain in the last relief handout, he went to the village office with a cleaver in his hand and raised Cain. He kept yelling and screaming even after the old district head came. Why would he be afraid of the village head if he's not afraid of the district head?"

Xiuhua was quite pleased to see how intelligent and articulate her daughter was. She patted her on the forehead and said, "You really know how to get to the bottom of things. Your father was smart just like you when he was growing up. He always knows the right thing to say and what tack to take. He's never been fooled, never gotten the short end of the stick. That's why your uncle is afraid of him."

Tough Hide staggered out and almost fell over the water jar. Jinfa followed him while putting on his worn padded jacket.

"You've been drinking all this while. Don't you want something more to eat?" Xiuhua asked.

"I've had enough. Don't bother about him," Jinfa replied. Then he shouted to Tough Hide, who was already in the courtyard, "Go over to Crooked Mouth's and tell him. Then wait for me at Qin Kai's place. Don't you dare lean up against a stack of hay and fall asleep. If you mess up my plans, you've had it! You hear me?"

"Yes, yes, I hear you," came Tough Hide's garbled response from the main gate.

The street was full of people talking and laughing. Young men playing soccer were running all over; a bunch of girls were playing badminton near the millstone; Shaohuai's boy had attracted a crowd of kids with his humming bamboo diabolo.

Jinfa left his home and soon caught sight of Tiehan walking down the street with Chunhe, Chunjiang's brother. Jinfa asked, "How's the play coming along? Can you put it on tomorrow?"

Tiehan walked right up to him and complained, "It doesn't look good. The cultural center hasn't done anything all winter. It's not easy to pull it together again. You're so impulsive. Suddenly you need some entertainment so you try to dig a well with one scoop of the shovel. How can that work?"

Jinfa responded, partially explaining, partially reprimanding, "Instructions from higher up came all of a sudden. We were told to activate our drama team in three days. I'm not a fortune-teller. How could I help but be caught off-guard? Get everyone to think up some ideas. That will solve the problem. And if anyone refuses to participate, tell them I'm the one who gave the orders."

"It's no problem getting people," Tiehan explained. "Everyone can't wait to put on some performances. The hard part is the program. The leadership is demanding too much of us. We couldn't think up any new skits, so we pulled together some old ones. Chunhe, show Jinfa the list."

Chunhe, who was a shade shorter than Tiehan, had a nice-looking face. He was somewhat shy, but extremely intelligent. He handed Jinfa a slip of paper from his pocket.

Jinfa could hardly read but he officiously glanced over

the note, then asked Chunhe to read it for him. Afterward he thought for a moment, blinking his eyes, then commented, "Fine. The only problem is that skit about Crooked Mouth hounding Uncle Le to death. That has to be cut."

"That's the one we made up ourselves," Tiehan protested. "We know it best. And it's everyone's favorite. We can't cut it."

"I'm not saying there's anything wrong with it," acknowledged Jinfa. "Too bad it's out-of-date. At the last county meeting, the drama team wanted to perform *White-Haired Girl* but County Head Gu wouldn't allow it. Now, with the call to get rich, if you keep putting on plays about struggling against the rich, people might misunderstand and see it as a warning. They might think we were beating a mule to scare the horses. That wouldn't be good." Jinfa talked on and on, quoting the district secretary and the county leaders to show how correct his opinion was.

Even though Tiehan was very stubborn and hot-tempered, he tended to obey his superiors readily. To him, they represented the Party. He could not imagine a Party member refusing to go along with the leadership. Nevertheless, he now had trouble accepting Jinfa's bidding. He frowned and argued, "The leadership wants us to put on some performances during the holidays. Of course we'll try as hard as we can. But you're making it difficult for us. You won't let us use a skit that's ready to go and then you pressure us to invent new ones. There's no way I can deliver that. You'll have to deal with the problem yourself."

Jinfa responded in a noticeably stern voice, "Listen to what you just said. Does that sound like a Party member? Haven't you heard Secretary Wang read the Party Constitution? A Party member should obey the organization unconditionally. Since I'm the village head and leader of



the Party cell, I am the organization. But look how you're behaving? I say something's not appropriate and you insist on it. What's going on here?"

Tiehan wanted to explain himself but Chunhe interceded, fearing their quarrel would drag on interminably. "Let's talk it over with Liping and Wenqing. Maybe we can work something out."

Jinfa's tone mellowed. "Well, that's more like it. Now you're showing the right attitude toward the organization." Then he informed Tiehan, "I'm calling all the group leaders to a meeting. You might as well skip it though and work on the performances. One vote won't matter much anyway."

Tiehan, still frustrated, left with Chunhe.

Soon after, the group leaders met at Qin Kai's house. As both Daquan and Tiehan were absent, most were Jinfa's strong supporters, particularly Qin Kai and Zhou Shiqin.

Qin Kai, now forty years old, was the brother of Little Abacus Qin Fu. Yet since he had a harder life before Liberation and took part in more village activities afterward, his temperament differed significantly. Qin Kai started supporting Jinfa even before he joined the Party and became village head. Although Qin Kai was quite familiar with Jinfa's checkered past, his unfavorable impressions and resentments vanished with Jinfa's courageous defence of the village during the war of liberation, his determined struggle against the landlords and his enthusiastic dedication to the public. Qin Kai was also impressed with Jinfa's increasingly apparent abilities. Others were won over to support Jinfa because of Qin Kai. Jinfa knew this and showed his appreciation by suggesting that Qin Kai be a group leader, by holding important meetings at Qin Kai's home and by especially consulting Qin Kai before he closed discussions. Any peasant would be flattered by this kind of attention.

Zhou Shiqin, two years older than Qin Kai, was a small and spirited man. He had a good head but he never used his sharp mind indiscriminately, particularly not on matters unrelated to his crops and his family's livelihood. His parents died when he was thirteen, leaving him with the entire family burden — sowing and harvesting, frequenting fairs and markets and handling the complexities of village connections. He found himself a wife, married off his sister, held on to his three rooms and ten mu of poor land inherited from his father, and even managed to buy five more mu on the eve of Liberation when landlords were dumping their land. Owing to his single-minded drive, he became an expert farmer, thereby earning tremendous prestige in the village. He expressed his admiration for the village head by claiming that "heroes naturally are attracted to other heroes." What impressed him was that Jinfa had been Crooked Mouth's head laborer. Jinfa could not have lasted in that job under such a shrewd cutthroat without considerable ability. Zhou Shiqin also believed that only an expert farmer deserved to be in charge of the farmers. No other cadre could be so trusted and readily followed. For these reasons Zhou supported Jinfa. Jinfa likewise held Zhou in high esteem, though he seldom involved Zhou in village affairs as he did Qin Kai. Rather he frequently sought Zhou's assistance in personal matters. By fitting the round peg in the round hole, Jinfa was able to count on Zhou any time of day for a favor.

The men were all sitting on the *kang*, some huddled around a charcoal hand-warmer, others leaning against a stack of quilts. They exchanged pipes, sampling one another's tobacco, and sipped Qin Kai's good tea bought specially for the New Year.

From a stool beside the cupboard Jinfa cheerfully stated, "Even though there is no pressing business, I've asked you to squeeze out some time today to discuss a few matters. After all, we work according to democratic centralism. Everything has to be talked over. The collective decides, the collective holds responsibility. No one person should have the last word."

As usual, the village head first touched on the all-too-familiar subjects of the world situation, the national situation and recent victories on the Korean war front. Then he once more enunciated the policy to step up production and enrich every family. Regardless of whether people were paying attention, Jinfa droned on, seeming to have trouble getting to his point. At last the speaker paused, and everyone leaning against the quilts straightened up, alertly waiting for the real topic.

Jinfa seriously proposed, "Let's discuss whether we should dig sludge from the east pond or north pond first. . . ."

Everyone was baffled. This was a trivial matter usually handled through convention; it hardly required a democratic discussion, as either way the decision bore no ill-consequences. Why call a meeting with such great to-do and give such a long-winded introduction during the holiday to discuss such trivia? It sounded a bit spurious. With any other cadre, complaints would have poured out. But since everyone respected the village head, no one even cracked a joke to cut through the business-like atmosphere. They offered their opinion in turn as if it mattered.

The decision was made in no time: Start with the east pond, then move to the north one, no digging in places with reeds.

There was nothing left to do now but adjourn the meet-

ing. The group leaders began to scoot off the *kang* and put on their shoes.

Suddenly Jinfa stood up and urged, "Please wait a second."

People noticed an unusual embarrassed expression flash across his face.

Jinfa waited until everyone was seated again. "As long as you are here, I'd like to ask for your help with a personal matter." With tremendous hesitation, he continued, "It's almost spring. Pretty soon June will be rolling around. The weatherman at the county agricultural department has predicted heavy rains and strong winds for this year. You all know that my family still lives in a crumbling shack. If those rains do come, my house will collapse on the spot. Someone might get killed. I don't know what to do."

Now people started to understand.

"Yeah, your house really needs work," Qin Kai sympathetically commented. "Why don't you rebuild it after planting. We'll all pitch in."

"Don't worry about getting help," Zhou Shiqin added. "When the time comes, just let us know. My two sons and I are good at carpentry and masonry."

"That's just what I've been thinking about," Jinfa went on. "But I can't make up my mind. The wood I was allotted in land reform is enough for a few sections of housing, but I can't afford any bricks right now. Of course this shouldn't be a big problem. After all we're in a new society. This is a good time to build up one's own lot. If I weren't tied down as a cadre, I could easily scrounge together some money and buy a few thousand bricks. But one can't worry about these petty gains and losses if one's serving the people. And I'm not going to be like those who back down from their responsibilities in order to advance

themselves. I'll have to somehow get that house going while still tending to both public and personal matters. It will look bad for the village as well as the upper leadership if the village head can't even afford a decent house."

Everyone joined in. Some suggested that if Jinfa could not afford bricks, everyone should chip in a few dollars. But the real problem was that bricks were scarce these days, what with all the new houses being built. It was not easy to get bricks without connections at the kiln. Others said that the county had opened a public kiln where reasonably priced bricks were available as long as an official letter from the village was presented. The only drawback was that the kiln was rather far away. Everyone expressed the same concern — it would look bad if their beloved village head could not leave his precarious shack and move into a sturdy new house.

"Whatever I do," Jinfa went on. "I can't let myself get carried away and spend more than I can afford. I have to get a shoe that fits. I think I'll try to make do with some used bricks."

Qin Kai immediately supported this sensible plan. "That sounds good. You shouldn't go beyond your means. Old bricks must be easier to get than new ones."

Zhou Shiqin also approved. "Old bricks will build the same house. And I bet you'll cut your costs in half."

Jinfa saw that this was the appropriate time to take the lid off the pot. "I've heard that Crooked Mouth wants to sell his back wall. Some folks have encouraged me to buy it. But that bastard landlord hates me. We're bitter enemies. I have to watch out for him. I don't want to get involved with him in any way. Right? But then I thought about it another way. What if Crooked Mouth sells his bricks to some stranger. Who knows what kind of tricky

business that might lead to? Greenfields could get dragged into a lot of trouble. But we can't stop him from selling, since we decided during land reform that he could keep the bricks."

No one had ever thought about such matters so they did not know what to suggest.

"What do you think about this?" Jinfa suggested. "We'll swap. If one of you has some old bricks, sell them to me and buy Crooked Mouth's. The money will work out the same. Since none of you are in a sensitive position like me, there'll be nothing wrong with one of you doing it."

No one had bricks stored away. Besides, even if they did, who would bother exchanging used bricks for used bricks?

With no suggestions forthcoming, Jinfa sighed ambivalently and said, "The problem's not big but it's sure hard to handle. My wife has been nagging me to buy those bricks for days. She made such a fuss that even Fan heard about it."

Zhou Shiqin quickly asked, "What did Fan say?"

"He thinks there's nothing wrong with me buying them."

"I don't think it matters either," Zhou Shiqin declared. "Just buy them if you want to."

Jinfa quickly said, "If no one thinks there's a problem, I'll go ahead with it. I want to bring Crooked Mouth here to close the deal in front of you all. That way I won't have to worry about anyone jumping on me. You can explain if someone makes an issue out of it." He spewed this out in one breath, leaving no time for others to react. Before anyone figured out exactly what was happening, Jinfa dashed to the doorway and yelled to Tough Hide in the courtyard, "Brother Jin Shou, bring Crooked Mouth here."

Qin Kai grumbled to himself: Oh, Jinfa, do you have to beat around the bush even with us? What a thing to do!

## I I

### A Curious Discovery

Using an elm stick, Shaohuai mixed the feed in the wooden trough while pondering his next move. A conversation in the next courtyard drifted over the wall and attracted his attention. Qin Fu's oldest son, Wenji, was saying, "Dad, there's some more news!"

"What's got you so riled up?"

"Village Head Zhang is going to build a new house."

"Nonsense. He doesn't have any bricks. Is he going to pull them out of thin air?"

"He's going to buy some used bricks, Crooked Mouth's back wall."

"Really?"

Shaohuai was astounded. He threw down the stick, locked up his storage shed and hurriedly left his courtyard. Puffing on his pipe, he mulled over the conversation between Qin Fu and his son. His heart started to pound but then a smile came to his face. He shook his head.

This news was a boon. If Jinfa could really buy Crooked Mouth's bricks with the approval of the higher leadership, it might mean that the new policy would also obliterate the lines drawn between people during land reform and restore the old ways. Shaohuai felt he could not have prayed for anything better. This change was tremendous indeed. But

upon reflection, Shaohuai found it inconceivable that Jinfa would do such a thing, much less with the approval of the leadership. Shaohuai sized up Jinfa as a real slick character. Now that the lucky star of officialdom was shining down upon him, how could he risk a position in the county government for a few thousand bricks? In trying to pick up a few small seeds, would Jinfa let a big watermelon slip out of his grasp?

Shaohuai headed toward the Tall Steps. He had heard that Jinfa would be directing a play rehearsal in the cultural center tonight. Jinfa's pals were sure to be there. Shaohuai decided to go over and try in some roundabout way to confirm this rumor.

He mounted the steps, proceeded to the village office in the inner courtyard and found it locked. Realizing he was too early, he went back to the outer courtyard where a group of young people were intently watching Erlin light a kerosene lamp. No one bothered to greet him.

Erlin looked full of pep on this holiday occasion with his new padded jacket and new haircut. He hung the big kerosene lamp on a branch. Holding it steady, he worked an oxygenation blower. Then he unwrapped an asbestos screen and carefully laid it over the wick. He struck a match and held it against the screen while slowly releasing the kerosene jet. Initially a red flame embraced the screen but then it dimmed and turned grey. The onlookers thought it had gone out. Erlin's big but nimble fingers adjusted the blower until the wick gradually became yellow, brightened, turned blue, then white. Light immediately flooded the dark courtyard, the dazzling rays forcing people to look away.

The young people clapped and cheered; even Shaohuai

was impressed. He impulsively called out, "Hey, Erlin has quite a knack."

Erlin turned around. When he saw who it was, he smiled faintly and continued fiddling with the lamp. Then he carried it into the cultural center. With great commotion the young people poured in behind him. The light streamed through the window, casting into moving silhouette numerous figures.

Shaking his head, Shaohuai sighed and walked down the steps into the street. A few people greeted him with a nod but no one who could answer his questions.

Wood chopping sounds cut through his preoccupation. Shaohuai found himself in front of Qin Kai's threshold and stepped into the courtyard.

Although there was a brisk evening breeze, Qin Kai's shirt was tightly matted to his back with sweat. As he hacked away at the wood, pebbles danced around on the ground beside a pile of chopped firewood.

Wary of the flying chips, Shaohuai stood off in a corner and remarked, "What a hard worker. You don't even let up for the New Year's holiday. And it's already dark."

Qin Kai stopped and wiped his face. "I caught a cold and felt lousy. I wanted to work up a sweat. Come on in and sit down."

"No thank you," Shaohuai said. "I'm on my way to the cultural center to join in the fun." He stepped forward and whispered, "I heard Crooked Mouth wants to sell his wall."

"That's right," Qin Kai nodded. Then he smiled and noted, "You have pretty big ears."

Taken aback, Shaohuai declared, "A fire can't be wrapped up in paper." Then he inched closer to Qin Kai and asked, "Say, I was thinking of buying that wall for a mule shed. Will you be my go-between?"

"You're too late. It's already been sold."

"Who got their hands on it so fast?"

"In any case you can't get it now."

"Some folks say that it was the village head who managed to swing this good deal. Is that true?"

"You've seen the village head's house. It does need a lot of work."

"So, it's not just a rumor?"

Qin Kai realized that he had not handled this very well. He gave himself an opportunity to gather his thoughts by bending over and picking up some scattered wood chips. He figured that regardless of how badly Jinfa had handled the matter, he was still a cadre, still a leader. His prestige had to be upheld in front of people like Shaohuai. Besides, the village needed someone like Jinfa who was able to deal with all the complicated problems. His authority should be defended. Qin Kai straightened up and saw that Shaohuai's eyes were still fixed on him, so he said, "What's the big deal? One person wants to sell and the other wants to buy."

Shaohuai scoffed. "The magician can fool the audience but not the gong beater standing behind him. I know what's really happening."

Qin Kai quickly defended the village leader. "Don't jump to conclusions. We cadre discussed it at our meeting."

"Well, group leader Qin Kai, there are more than a hundred families in Greenfields. Everyday there must be lots of transactions. Do you discuss each one of them in your cadre meetings?"

"You know that Crooked Mouth is not your average peasant."

"There are new and used bricks for sale all over the place. So why is Jinfa buying bricks from the old landlord? What did you cadre have to say about this at the meeting? Why

did you agree to it? Can you give me an explanation?"

Qin Kai was at a loss. "Shaohuai, you're, you're. . . ."

Shaohuai stared at him. "Well, what about me?"

Qin Kai wrinkled his brow. "You're making too wide a sweep with your carrying-pole. Besides, what business is it of yours?"

"I'm not trying to be nosy," Shaohuai demurred. "After all, everything is so new in this new society. My head's too old for all of this. I have to ask lots of questions to keep up with our village head and be progressive like him."

Qin Kai felt incapacitated by Shaohuai's sarcasm. Not able to explain any further, he smiled begrudgingly and said, "You're too smart for your own good."

Right away Shaohuai's wily expression disappeared from his face. He squinted and after a pause waved his hands. "You say I'm smart? But actually I'm a first-class fool." He left Qin Kai's courtyard and stepped into the street now enshrouded in darkness.

Music and singing came from behind him. He felt like bursting into song too but was worried he would attract attention, so he hurried home. Once inside his gate, he leaned up against the winnowing machine and lit his pipe.

When Shaohuai declared himself a first-class fool in front of Qin Kai, he was not saying it out of frustration. He felt that a person like himself with such great aspirations should have expected Jinfa's move. Now that he was back inside his own courtyard smoking his pipe, he subjected events, both recent and past, to close scrutiny. Suddenly he stretched his neck, widened his eyes and patted himself on the forehead. He mumbled almost as a chanting monk, "Now I understand! After all, Jinfa and I have similar intentions: we're heading down the same road. No matter what kind of society, the motto 'a man will die for money

like a bird will die for food' is the highest principle. It will never change. Regardless of how progressive someone seems, money will always appeal to him and command his actions. With no fear of suspicion or repercussion, the village head hooked up with his old master for material gain; also Party member Daquan abandoned his fields and led a whole crowd away from their families to Beijing for money; and Qin Kai, the acknowledged progressive middle peasant, was out on a cold day like today stripped to the waist chopping wood because of money . . . that's right, that's right. That's what it is all about!"

Shaohuai further reasoned: Now that these two Party members have taken steps to enrich themselves, it is clear that this new government policy is sound and stable; "New Democracy" will last for a long time and "socialism" is a long way off. Good! I can proceed much more boldly. I'll go all out to compete!

He walked to his inner courtyard with irrepressible joy.

Qin Wenji came out of the house and bumped into Shaohuai. Wenji, about twenty-five years old, had married a year ago and now had a son. Not as handsome or refined as his brother Wenqing, he resembled his father. He was also as calculating as his father, but as timid as his mother. Through his father's teachings, which had prematurely wrenched him away from the carefree innocence of youth, he became well versed in the skills of handling people, watching out for his own interests and getting ahead.

Wenji was the first one to speak. "I came over to see Guozhu. I'd like him to go to the cultural center with me."

Shaohuai informed Wenji that his nephew had gone home to Lihua Landing for the New Year. Then he asked, "What's wrong with your father these days? Is he still scared of his own shadow?"

Wenji responded in a hushed voice, afraid that his father might hear him over the wall. "He only calculates, he never acts. He changes his mind three times a day. Who knows what he wants to do?"

"He seemed a little bolder at the meeting pushing for the get-rich competition. It looked like he was going to jump right in. How come I didn't see any rain drops after all that thunder?"

"He was all gung-ho before the meeting," Wenji explained, "but his spirits shriveled by the time he came home. It unnerved him to see Tichan get into a big quarrel with you."

"Go tell him that there's nothing to fear. The ox can glare and swish his tail all he wants but the gadfly will still sting him. The big guys in the world won't necessarily win out over the small fries who are smarter. Even I dare give it a try. So why should your family hold back?"

"He always wants to see what other people are going to do."

"Other people? Aren't the Party members good enough for you? Didn't you see that one of them took off for far away places to rake in money and the other is building a new house, all to get ahead? They were even encouraged by the leadership. What better guarantee can you ask for?"

"He just told me that he would like to first build a house like the village head. He said this would be safe. Then he would feel his way before deciding on other purchases. I'll tell him what you said. Or better yet, come give him a prod yourself sometime."

Shaohuai readily agreed. He escorted Wenji to the front gate, then went back inside. His wife greeted him with a flattering smile. She handed him his tobacco, poured some tea and brought him the hand-warmer,

She was a small skinny woman with a purple tint to her face and eyelids. A long pipe hardly ever left her thin purple lips. Her fondness for slicking down her thinning hair against her scalp with oil accentuated the roundness of her head and the sharpness of her chin. Behind her back, folks called her "Purple Eggplant."

Holding his hands over the copper hand-warmer, Shaohuai savored his curious discovery.

After Purple Eggplant had performed her ritual of welcoming her husband, she sat on a stool facing him, took a few puffs from her pipe and whispered, "That shopkeeper from Heavenly Gate just sent word again through the oil peddler. He wants you to go discuss some business with him. I figured it must be about the grain. You'd better find time to see him."

"I'm in no hurry," Shaohuai replied. "I have more pressing business."

Purple Eggplant looked at her husband out of the corner of her eye. "So you still don't feel like you're standing on solid ground. No wonder you seemed so fidgety these last couple of days."

"From now on we're going to be sitting very safe and sound." Shaohuai asserted. He paused, then went on, "I will use that grain. But the time's not right yet. We'll wait till later."

Purple Eggplant took a few more puffs and said, "What about hiring help? Your nephew from Lihua Landing is planning to get a job flicking cotton. Without him you and the child bride will never be able to manage all this land. Even if the government allows us to hire seasonal workers, it's still too much for us to handle. And it will be harder if we get a cart."

"I've figured all this out," Shaohuai assured.

"I won't stand for your bringing back your son. You'd better have that straight."

"Don't worry," Shaohuai said. "There are plenty of hands for hire as long as we have money. With money one can even pay the devil to push the millstone. Anyone can be bought. I'm sure about this now." He motioned to the next room with his head and asked in a low voice, "How come it's so quiet over there?"

"I sent her out to push the millstone while there was still moonlight."

Realizing that his wife was referring to the child bride, Shaohuai shook his head. "I was asking about your cousin Caifeng."

Purple Eggplant sighed. "That girl's pretty face and clever head aren't doing her any good. Her luck's always been bad. When she was young, her father ignored her and her stepmother didn't like her. My father's sister casually married her off to a sleazy barber. The two of them never spent one pleasant day together. They fought all the time. She nearly committed suicide. Luckily Liberation came. Under the new Marriage Law she was able to escape that fire pit. . . ."

"Have you asked her if she's found another provider?"

"She's only been here two days. How could I poke at her wounds? Nothing has happened as far as I can see. After all, no matter how young or beautiful a woman is, it's not that easy to leave one household and join another. Who knows what kind of scoundrel she might meet up with."

Shaohuai snickered. "There are lots more men who can't find wives than women who can't find husbands. Just use your discretion and marry her off."

"It all depends on you," Purple Eggplant pushed, eager for Shaohuai to take some interest in the affair. "You have

to give her some good advice. She can't handle it herself and my aunt and I are only two helpless women. What can women do? We've never been anywhere, never seen anything. What do we know?"

"Don't worry," Shaohuai said, immersed in his own thoughts. "Of course I have to help her. The old saying goes: If you are related, your hearts are together. Yes, if we want to connect hearts, the way to do it is to make relatives. Did she go out visiting?"

"Who does she know? There's no place for her to go. She's probably pushing the millstone with the child bride."

"Take her over to the cultural center. A lot's going on there. She'll have a good time."

Purple Eggplant slapped her leg. "That's right. You always have good ideas. I'll go get her."

## I 2

### Pandemonium at the Cultural Center

Directing the cultural performance was not as easy as the village head had assumed. Despite three days of persistent effort, a core of activists failed to either line up a cast or finalize the program. Right at this troublesome time the district office instructed them to hasten their preparations so their performance could be included in a district-wide ensemble in Heavenly Gate slated for the Lantern Festival on the fifteenth day of the Lunar New Year holiday.

Normally undaunted, Tiehan was now beside himself. His



throat grew sore; his eyes, bloodshot. He would not touch any food.

"Your meal's getting cold, hurry up and eat it," his mother pushed.

"My throat's on fire. I can't swallow a thing."

"What's worth all this agony?"

"I can't bear letting this project fail. Ever since I understood the meaning of revolution and became involved in village activities, I've never turned down an assignment. And I've never dropped one in midstream."

His mother sighed, well aware of this idiosyncrasy in her son. "Too bad you're stuck with all these problems. If Daquan were around, he'd be a great help."

"If I had gone to Beijing with him," Tiehan moaned, "I would be enjoying the New Year holiday in a movie house."

Shoving a bowl into her son's hand, his mother enjoined, "Take one thing at a time. First eat, then worry about solving your problems."

Just as Tiehan took a bite, Chunhe came rushing in.

"I thought you were in charge of the rehearsal," Tiehan remarked. "What are you doing here?"

Beaming gleefully, Chunhe said with one hand behind his back, "I came to celebrate."

"What's there to celebrate? I've got nothing but problems."

"Look at this," said Chunhe, producing a rolled up manuscript from behind his back and waving it. "That Wenqing is really something. He shut himself up in a room for three days and cranked out a script."

Tiehan jumped with joy. "Wonderful. What a lifesaver. Now we can fulfil our assignment. That's something worth celebrating."

"Thank heavens, thank heavens," exclaimed Mother Zhu.

Tiehan, suddenly hungry, wolfed down several large mouthfuls of food, then said between bites, "Let's rehearse the new play. We'll assign the parts right now."

"Wenqing wants you to read the script and discuss it first," Chunhe said.

"My reading it isn't worth a fart. The village head assigned the theme and gave Wenqing detailed instructions. If he says it's okay, we'll use it."

Chunhe rolled up the script and said with a smile, "Tiehan, I have something else to tell you. Please don't blow your stack."

Tiehan was taken aback. "What's gone wrong now?"

"The actresses came by one at a time asking to be excused."

"Have Liping go find out what's bothering them. Have her tell them they only need to hang on a few more days. Whatever difficulty, it has to be overcome. The leadership's assignments must be carried out unconditionally."

"Liping was the first to quit," Chunhe said. "I thought that was a little strange, so I went to her house. And you know what I found? A whole bunch of girls talking and giggling in her room. They were just fooling around like they didn't have a care in the world."

"They got bored waiting around. Haven't you told them the good news? As soon as they hear about the new script, they'll be wild with joy and show up in no time."

"Liping doesn't need me to tell her about the script," Chunhe said. "She was at Erlin's this morning helping Wenqing copy it. Suddenly she threw down her pen and left. Then she said she couldn't come to the rehearsal. I've never seen anyone express their joy quite like that."

"I imagine she's afraid that the village head will also ax

this one. I'll go see who's missing. As soon as the word's out, everyone will show up."

Chunhe, relieved to see that Tiehan had kept his temper, did not pursue the subject. He sat down on the edge of the *kang* and urged Tiehan to eat so that they could work late into the night and whip the play into shape fast. But Tiehan was in a hurry. Leaving his bowl of porridge half-full, he broke off a piece of bread, snatched some pickled turnip and ran out with Chunhe.

Erlin, conscientious about his duties, had come early to light the kerosene lamp and prep the coal stove in the cultural center. The room was brightly illuminated and comfortably warm. Wenqing was hunched over a table, rapidly proofreading a carbon copy of the play which was written in a rambling scrawl. The young men avidly read the script while the girls sat quietly along two rows of benches like pupils waiting attentively for their class to start. Crowds of enthusiastic spectators, mostly children, stood in the doorway and in the corners. The atmosphere in comparison to the bubbling chatter and ear-shattering music of previous occasions seemed hushed and subdued.

The minute Tiehan and Chunhe walked in, they noticed that all the actresses were present. Chunhe was quite surprised; Tiehan, elated.

Erlin brought in a stack of bowls.

"Comrade Erlin," Tiehan jested, "are you giving our drama team a treat?"

"Treats come later on," Erlin answered, spreading bowls on the table. "Right now you can have all the hot water you want."

Steam rose from the bowls. Erlin told everyone to help themselves, then carried one bowl over to Wenqing.

"Look at that," Tiehan remarked, "Erlin doesn't talk very

much but he sure thinks of everything. Of course the first bowl should go to our great playwright. Without him, our performance would have gone down the drain and the Lantern Festival would have been a hard day for me to live through." He patted Wenqing on the shoulder and said, "Stop poring over that script. You wrote it, didn't you? Time is precious. I think we should read it aloud, then assign roles so people can begin to memorize their parts. Let's try to have it ready in three days so we'll have time to show it to the villagers first. They deserve some entertainment."

Wenqing's eyes were more bloodshot than Tiehan's and cold sores festered in the corners of his mouth. He quickly glanced through the last few pages, then carefully clipped the script together. Straightening up, he let out a deep sigh of relief. "Thank heavens, it's finally finished. I did it in such a rush I haven't the faintest idea if it's any good. Please give me all your suggestions."

"Famished people are never picky about food. A new play is better than nothing. We don't have much time. Let's start reading," Tiehan said.

Wenqing pulled his stool slightly forward, sat up very straight, and drank some water. He looked over his patiently waiting audience, then picked up the script. "This is a musical set to the tune of *The Joy of Fanshen*. The title of the play is *The Young Couple Striving to Get Rich*."

A burst of laughter came from the actresses.

Tiehan felt it was a good sign that the mere mention of the title could evoke laughter. "Go on, go on," he urged Wenqing.

The audience continued to laugh throughout Wenqing's reading. As the conflicts intensified the audience sighed and fretted vicariously. Wenqing became more and more dramatic, alternately mimicking a man and woman, adding

animated hand gestures. From all appearances, the play was a hit.

As soon as Tiehan heard the final line, he asked for people's opinions. "Speak up, comrades! Does anything need to be changed?"

"No one should hold back," Wenqing modestly remarked. "We need everyone's ideas to improve the play so we won't embarrass our village when we go to Heavenly Gate."

The spectators whispered and chattered, and the children parroted the lines they had just heard, but no one in the drama team said a word.

Tiehan looked around, reiterated his request for suggestions, then clapped his hands. "Okay, if there are no problems, we'll divvy up the parts now. Just volunteer. But don't compete for the lead roles. Judge your abilities and volunteer for a part you can handle. Then we'll discuss it. The performance is as important as the script. If we put on a lousy show, a good script won't do us too much good. Come on, who is going to play what?"

A moment of confusion ensued as the men pushed and shoved each other. Jinfa's oldest son, Fuwang, began to taunt Chunhe. "Chunhe would be good for the male lead. He's low-key, calculating and effective."

"I can't play it. You do it."

Fuwang, employing a customary put-down, derided, "I'll play the male lead's father."

"Damn you!" Chunhe cursed.

"Chunhe is not aggressive enough to be the male lead," Wenqing interjected. "Fuwang, you should do it."

Chunhe slapped Fuwang's shoulder. "How about that! Then I can play your father."

"You rotten egg!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The male rôles were quickly assigned. Now it was time to discuss the female characters. Normally the girls giggled and chattered but today they were as subdued and quiet as shy young brides. They were looking at each other, doodling on slips of paper, picking their fingernails, braiding their hair, or twisting handkerchiefs. Not one talked, not one laughed, not one participated in the discussion.

Tiehan became irritated. "What's going on? Who's going to volunteer? Usually you're a real noisy bunch. Why are you all so tongue-tied today?"

Wenqing was even more puzzled. "Yesterday everyone was upset because we didn't have a program. Now that we've got something, how come you're acting like this? Are you afraid that the parts are too long to memorize? You can't let yourselves be scared off so easily."

The kerosene lamp hissed overhead, the fire crackled and the wind rattled the window paper. The atmosphere in the packed room was uncomfortably quiet.

No longer able to contain himself, Tiehan invoked his authority as secretary of the Youth League. "Youth League members, volunteer."

No one uttered a word.

Tiehan pounded the table and stood up. "If you don't volunteer, I'll assign parts. I'm warning you, whoever I pick will have to do it. So now you —"

Before Tiehan had finished, a girl with round rosy cheeks suddenly stood up and shouted in a high-pitched voice. "I disagree. You can't just assign parts like that! I'm also warning you that if you assign me a part, I'll refuse."

Tiehan was piqued to see that it was Liping speaking. You are even a Youth League member, he fumed to himself, but instead of doing your best to fulfil the task from the leadership, you are the first one to spoil things. You have

a lot of nerve shooting your mouth off like this. He glared furiously at her and blasted, "Why are you making such a fuss? Did anyone assign you a part? Sit down, sit down!"

"Don't cut me off, I haven't finished yet," Liping protested.

"You interrupted me," Tiehan insisted. "What makes you think you are so special?"

Liping sat down in a huff.

"Comrades," Tiehan continued, "we should learn from those who set good examples, not the troublemakers. Are you going to volunteer? I'll have to pick people if you don't. . . ." His eyes fell on Lu Chunfang, Chunhe's younger sister.

She shrieked as if shocked by electricity. "Why look at me? I'm not going to take a part."

Tiehan's eyes moved on to the girl behind her who was looking down, playing with a handkerchief. She was Xiaohuan, Aunt Chen's daughter. When she felt someone poke her in the back, she shrugged her shoulders, and shook her head begrudgingly. "What's the matter? No one's picked me. In any case I won't do it."

The rest of the people began to wonder.

Tiehan glared contemptuously at Liping as if saying: I know this is all your doing. These girls always tail after you. So you're forming a clique to make things difficult for me, to make me look bad. Well, good work. His hand rounded into a fist and he pounded the table. The bowls jumped up and down, spilling the water. "Zhou Liping," he roared, "you organized this plot behind my back to give me trouble, didn't you?"

Liping looked him in the eye. "It's not a plot. I convinced them —"

"So what are you trying to do?"

"Nothing. This play can't be put on."

"It has to. If you won't do it, someone else will."

"That's right. Of course there are people. In fact I have a proposal. We should ask two people who aren't in the drama troupe. They are very talented and will do an excellent job."

Liping sounded serious enough and Tiehan was not interested in continuing the quarrel so he said, "Say who and I'll see if they'll be all right."

Liping looked around the room then pointed at the frowning Wenqing. "Let his mother and father do it. They fit the roles perfectly."

Laughter ripped through the room. Despite his best efforts, Erlin was unable to restore order.

Tiehan almost laughed but he maintained his grim expression: What a thorn she is. If it was not for this task, I would never take such abuse.

Wenqing's face turned livid as he protested, "Liping, that's not fair. Everyone's discussing serious business. Why are you making me the butt of your insults?"

Liping looked at him and coolly responded, "I'm also talking about serious business. I'm not trying to ridicule you, but if that's how you want to take it, it's fine with me. After you've made such fun of us by presenting this trash, can't we return the favor and do the same to you?"

Her remarks cut deeply into Wenqing's ego. His flushed face turned white as he said through quivering lips, "I never knew you were so horrible. I used to think you had some common decency! I don't want to start recounting my merits but at least you could grant me a little courtesy. Regardless of how bad this script is, I've put a lot of work into it over the last few days and nights. I didn't do it for myself but for the village, I wouldn't go through this kind of trouble,

let alone stand all this abuse, just for myself. We are all members of the Youth League. You should come right out into the open with your criticisms. Why go after people in such an underhanded way?" His anger grew as he talked. He crumpled up the script and threw it in the stove.

Erlin was quick to react. He pulled the script out of the fire, almost burning his hand, and flung it into a corner.

Tiehan began to shout at Liping. "You bully, you! He worked hard to put this script together. You didn't help. You didn't offer any encouragement. And now you pick on him and call his work a piece of trash."

Undaunted, Liping replied in an identical tone, "You don't need to show your fangs. No one is afraid of you. Yes, I do think it's a pile of stinking trash! Yesterday when I went home and talked about writing a new play, my dad told me not to get involved with those people. Who knows what kind of raunchy stuff they might turn out. I said that can't be. There are two Party members and one Youth League member working on it. Today I eagerly went to help copy the script. I was outraged when I read it. What kind of play is this? It just features two selfish money-grubbers who work away on their abacus, totally fixated on getting rich. They don't show the slightest trace of poor-peasant character. What's the point of putting on this trash, much less having anybody watch it?"

She glanced around the room, then went on, "Comrades, our cultural center was set up with the help of Comrade Luo Xuguang from the land-reform work team. Just think about the kinds of performances we've put on. They've been about struggling against landlords during land reform, the war to resist America and support Korea, or praising model workers. They were really exciting. And we wrote our own skits about how Crooked Mouth hounded Uncle Le to death

and about the popularization of education. When those themes were on stage, the actors and actresses were emotionally involved and the audiences were moved. Look at what we've got today. Nothing but get rich, get rich. How nauseating! This stuff is plain insulting."

Her speech moved quite a few people, including Wenqing. All his resentments instantly turned to remorse. Why is it, he wondered, that I first felt this kind of play was impossible and was disgusted by all the fanfare about getting rich? But then after the village head prodded me along in this direction, the more I wrote, the better I felt about it. Oh, how complicated it gets! Now Wenqing was too embarrassed even to read it again by himself, let alone read it with such great delight before a crowd. He stood up, put away his pen and papers, then admitted to Liping, "You're right. This script is just a pile of trash. I'm washing my hands of it." He skirted around the table and the crowd of spectators and left the tension-filled room.

Tiehan, having completely failed to grasp the complexity of Wenqing's feelings, blasted at Liping with added fury. "Look at what you've done! Now it's impossible to fulfil the task from the leadership. It's all your fault. Do you think you're behaving like a Youth League member should?"

Liping threw back her shoulders and declared, "I have done exactly what a Youth League member should do."

"If you're not going to participate," Tiehan ordered, "get out of here."

"You couldn't keep me here." Liping swung around, stepped over the bench, waded through the spectators and ran out.

The rest of the girls chased after her. Chaos broke out in the room and in the courtyard.

"Wait a minute!" Tiehan yelled after Liping. "Let's get

one thing straight. You're the one responsible for our failure to carry out the leadership's assignment."

Chunhe held Tiehan back and said in a low voice, "Calm down. There may be something to her criticism."

Tiehan looked at him and said after a moment, "This play isn't all that good. But the village head... why should he push for a thing like this?" He plopped down on the bench so hard it creaked.

### 13

## Snowflakes

The next evening as clouds slashed the orange sky, a nippy northwest breeze set in, sending dust and smoke from dinner fires down the street. Chirping sparrows contended for space along a squat wall; chickens scurried under the trough, the time to return to their coop at hand; the small donkey neighed skittishly, pounding all four hoofs in turn against the ground.

Erlin came home after collecting some animal dung on the road. Putting down his basket, he went into the shed for a shovel and came across Ruifen carrying sorghum stubs in her arms. "Getting kindling to cook dinner?" Erlin asked.

"Dinner's ready and waiting for you."

"Then why are you gathering these stubs?"

"Your *kang* didn't seem warm enough. I want to heat it up."

"Don't bother. Save the fuel."

"Didn't you notice that the weather is changing? If you

catch cold, how am I going to explain it to your brother when he comes back from Beijing?"

"All that thick bedding you gave me is more than enough to keep me warm."

"You keep out of this. We can save on fuel when the weather gets warmer."

"Half this will do," Erlin said, pulling out a bunch of stubs from Ruifen's armful and tossing them back onto a pile of firewood.

Ruifen laughed at Erlin as he walked away. "Look at you. You're more finicky than a woman. When you get married, you sure won't take any grief from your wife."

Erlin picked up a shovel and came back. "If I end up with a woman who can't run a house, I'll beat her three times a day," he said with a grin.

"We'll see when the time comes. I'll bet you'll kowtow to her three times a day instead. Hey, aren't you going to eat now? What's that shovel for?"

"I want to clean the manure out of the donkey shed first," Erlin replied as he walked away.

"I'll take care of that later. Exciting stuff is going on at the cultural center these days. Eat your dinner and go join in the fun."

"The cultural center is about to fold," Erlin replied.

"I heard that the village head himself met with Liping's crowd this morning. Haven't they settled their differences yet?"

"What do you expect when you scrape a copper pan with an iron brush? Each is more stubborn than the other. You know it's bad news when those two confront each other."

"But weren't you going to Heavenly Gate for a joint performance?"

"That's what's so frustrating. Tiehan was already weighed

down with the problems in this performance, then the village head simply dropped the whole thing in his lap. Tiehan was worried that it would end up a failure, so he decided to see the district cultural assistant who's now stationed in Wild Goose Village to get some scripts."

"Nothing seems to go smoothly in Greenfields. You'd better go to the center early. If the kerosene lamp isn't lit, Tiehan will be even angrier."

When Erlin arrived at the Tall Steps compound, some eager spectators were already waiting by the locked door. He quickly lit the kerosene lamp and the stove, then arranged the table and benches.

The actors trickled in. They began to discuss last night's altercation and Tiehan's trip to Wild Goose Village. After a while people grew bored; some left, others began to read or write.

A few hours passed. Suddenly Chunhe dashed in and announced, "There's no rehearsal today. You can go home."

Everyone surrounded him, inquiring about Tiehan.

"I've been waiting at his house since dinner time," Chunhe said. "I don't know where he is. I was afraid you would get restless so I decided to call things off tonight."

People asked whether they should tell the village head.

"On my way here," Chunhe said, "I heard that Liping's crowd was quarreling with the village head. They are insisting on performing our old skit but the village head won't have it. I'm going over there now and see if I can keep them from fighting all night."

Disappointed, people grumbled as they followed Chunhe out of the Tall Steps compound and went home.

Erlin remained. While others could leave as they pleased, he was obliged to stay and put everything in order, especially

the kerosene lamp and the stove. He did not want to leave the responsibility to others, though tonight no one had even offered to help.

His first thought was to finish up quickly, but then he decided to wait for Tiehan. He liked Tiehan, particularly for his forthrightness — a quality he himself lacked. He found himself siding with Tiehan during last night's quarrel but he was helpless, not knowing how to intervene. He wished the cultural center would recover its vitality. If it folded, he would have nothing to do in the evening except play with Xiao Long.

Erlin finally stood up, stretched and let out a sigh. Looking out of the door, he saw tiny snowflakes fluttering in the courtyard, blanketing the walls and the Tall Steps with a satin white. He began to pile the bowls together and sweep the floor. Unlike other young men who usually swished the broom around a few times, Erlin meticulously cleaned every inch of the room. He finally banked the stove, picked up the padlock and was about to turn off the kerosene lamp when he heard someone outside.

"Who's there?" Erlin asked.

No answer.

Again he called out, "Who is it?"

He rushed to the door and from the light seeping through the window he saw a woman standing under the eaves. Snowflakes swirled around the bright red scarf on her head like a swarm of bees.

Assuming a milder tone, he asked, "How come you haven't left yet?"

She moved slightly.

Once again Erlin spoke. "Better leave now. I'm going to turn off the light and lock the door."

The woman started giggling.

Erlin was bewildered. At a loss for words he stood there uneasily. A man and a woman alone here might become a topic of village gossip but it would be rude to abruptly switch off the light and lock the door. After a moment of silence, the woman stamped her feet and said, "It's cold. Have you put the fire out yet?"

"No," Erlin answered mechanically.

"I'd like to warm my hands," the woman said. She walked by Erlin into the room, pulled over a stool and sat before the stove. She slowly removed her scarf and put it on the table, then put her hands over the fire.

Erlin looked into the room and saw that she was in her early twenties with thin curved eyebrows, large attractive eyes and dark shoulder-length hair. Her patterned jacket enhanced the curves of her healthy figure. He immediately recognized that she was Qian Caifeng, Purple Eggplant's cousin, who had come from Temple Village to visit her relatives during the New Year festival. Although Caifeng had been around the cultural center a lot these last few days, they had never talked before.

Caifeng picked up a jumbled play script and carefully spread it out. "I heard this script last night. It wasn't bad. If I were from Greenfields, I would take a part. What do you think of it?"

Erlin perfunctorily responded, "It was quite dramatic."

Turning the pages, Caifeng said, "Why condemn it? That girl really has a sharp tongue. She must have spent lots of years in school."

"She has never been to school," Erlin said. "She learned to read at home."

"Is her father a scholar?"

"No, Zhou Zhong's just a poor farmer."

"She doesn't act like a peasant girl. She seems so arrogant, throwing around all those new words."

"She's a Youth League member. During land reform a woman from the work team stayed at her house and talked politics with her family all day long. Everyone in her family is like her."

"They say people learn from those who are close to them. It's really true."

"That's right."

"You must have learned a lot from your brother too."

"I'm not too bright."

"You're really weird. Most people are afraid of being called dumb. Why don't you come inside. It's cold out there."

"All right."

"I'm waiting for Shaohuai to pick me up. If you are in a hurry to leave, I'll lock up for you. I promise to do it right."

"I'll lock up. I've always done it."

"No wonder Shaohuai says you are a reliable guy."

Erlin was too embarrassed to look at Caifeng but he sensed her eyes fixed on him and felt awkward. He stepped inside and leaned against the door looking out.

The sizzling kerosene lamp sounded like cicada bugs in midsummer with the flame in the stove sputtering like a naughty kid sticking out his tongue. A snowflake coasting on the wind flew onto Erlin's sleeve, melted and disappeared.

"Who made your clothes?"

"My sister-in-law."

"And your shoes?"

"She made them too."

"She is good with her hands. Your clothes fit well."

"Yes. She is pretty busy with all the work around the house."



"Is she good to you?"

"Of course. How could we live in the same house if she weren't?"

"Your brother hasn't come back yet, has he?"

"He'll probably be back soon."

"I thought he might stay there and become a worker."

"He wrote that they wanted him to stay but he's anxious to come home."

"I heard that he's not at all like you. A little strange. What's so attractive about this poor village anyway?"

"The family needs him."

"But you're around. You don't ever leave home, do you?"

"I'm not good enough to manage a farm by myself."

"Are you going to hang on to other people's coattails all your life? The way I see it, no matter how close two brothers are, they can't live under one roof forever."

Erlin did not know what to say, nor did he want to continue the conversation, as he felt very uneasy talking to a woman. As he stood in the doorway facing the wind and, watching the snow flurries, he stamped his feet to keep warm.

Caifeng also looked out. Shaohuai was nowhere around. Since it was getting rather late, she threw the script onto the table and picked up her scarf. "I've heard all about you but never been to your house. I know where it is. You have a big courtyard but the house is pretty run-down. They say everyone in your family is capable. No problem if you want to build a new brick house. Don't laugh. Really, I know all about your family. I've even heard stories about your childhood." She sighed, then continued in a subdued tone, "Poor fellow. It wasn't easy to grow up in those times. I've had it hard myself. My mother died when I was small. My stepmother was very mean to me. When they moved to the Northeast, I didn't go along. Who would want to go with

them and suffer? My widowed aunt was very kind to me so I stayed with her for a few years. But no matter how well you're treated, you never feel quite at home. Later on. . . . Oh well, with no parents, no one really cares about you. I always feel sorry for kids growing up without parents. I know how it feels myself."

Erlin unwittingly looked at Caifeng. Other people say she is intelligent and good with her hands, he reflected, but who would have imagined what she has been through. And she is such a kindhearted person.

Caifeng sighed as she talked, then stood up and asked Erlin, "Don't you ever go visit people?"

"Sure I do."

"Why don't you ever go to Shaohuai's house?"

"Why should I go there?"

"Do you need to have a reason to pay a visit? I know what you are thinking. That grudge is ancient. Why keep it up?"

"I don't hold a grudge."

"Then why don't you come over and see me. I'm going to be around for another month or so. I'm not a landlord or a rich peasant. I won't hurt your reputation. You needn't be afraid —"

"I'm not afraid."

Caifeng had already walked into the courtyard, treading very carefully as the steps were covered with snow.

Erlin all of a sudden called out to her, "Wait a minute. I have a flashlight. I'll walk you home."

"I don't want to trouble you," Caifeng declined.

Erlin explained earnestly, "Your house is pretty far away and it's slippery now."

Caifeng stopped at the gate, turned around and said, "Well, thank you then."

Erlin quickly turned off the lamp and locked the door. Holding the flashlight he accompanied Caifeng down the steps and turned into the darkness.

#### I 4

### Arrange It Right Away

Caifeng was kicked around like a rag doll for the first twenty-two years of her unfortunate life. Her mother died when she was eight, her father who earned his living as a cook was never home and her stepmother maltreated her. At the age of twelve she went to live with her father's sister but her uncle viewed her as a freeloader and was quite nasty to her. When she was seventeen she was casually married off to a barber. He turned out to be a worthless bum who neither cared for nor supported her. A carouser, he frequented gambling joints and whore houses, then would come home drunk after losing his money and beat her.

With Liberation and land reform, Caifeng left her husband. Desperately longing for happiness, she envied those who married of their own volition. She hoped to find a loyal and loving husband who could provide for her so that she would never have to endure such misery again.

She was a capable young woman with deft hands who knew how to look out for her own interests. From cloth that normally would only suffice for a jacket, she could turn out a pair of uppers in addition. A scarf she had made from old sheep wool was thought to have come from a department store. Once she obtained her divorce papers a host of

matchmakers appeared at her door and she was flooded with marriage proposals. She coolly announced that she was not interested, though she was actually searching for an eligible man.

Caifeng originally came to Greenfields to elude the matchmakers, but Shaohuai's invisible hand unexpectedly shoved her toward Erlin. For seven consecutive nights she closely scrutinized him in the cultural center and during the day she asked around about him. After they exchanged a few words that snowy evening she started to fall in love with him.

One morning she rose early to push the millstone and bumped into Erlin out collecting manure. She took the initiative to greet him. "You're really a hard worker."

Erlin smiled. "I thought you were Wenji's wife. She always gets up early."

"I'm used to it. What self-respecting farm girl sleeps late?"

Erlin smiled. "Yes, yes."

"Would you mind helping me push this millstone?"

Erlin glanced around and seeing no one, agreed.

Early one evening Caifeng was washing clothes at the well when Erlin came to fetch some water. In a very forward manner she remarked, "Don't you ever take a break?"

Erlin did not look at her, embarrassed with other people out on the street. As he cranked the pulley, he replied, "I never see you idle either."

"If you want to eat regularly, you have to work that way."

Erlin grabbed the bucket he had hoisted from the well and nodded, "That's true."

"My hands are all soapy. Can you help me get a bucket of water?"

Erlin poured the water into her tub discreetly when no one was looking.

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Their feelings for one another deepened with these encounters. Yet Tiehan, Erlin's closest friend, was unaware of their budding relationship. Even the well-informed local gossip Wan Shuhua did not catch wind of it. Only Shaohuai and his wife knew.

"Let's arrange it right away," Shaohuai pressed his wife.

"What's the big rush?" Purple Eggplant questioned. "It just started three days ago. Nothing is set yet."

"It only takes one match to light a bonfire when the wood is dry. Besides if we don't arrange the marriage right away, something might go wrong once Caifeng returns to Temple Village. Don't forget what a good housekeeper she is. If we can get her to stay, you'll have a free helper."

"It takes two to make a marriage. How does he feel about it?" Purple Eggplant asked.

"Oh, he'll be even more eager. Who wouldn't be delighted to have a wife delivered to his doorstep?"

"What I'm really asking is do you really think Daquan will forget his old grudge against you simply because of this marriage?"

"Blood is thicker than water. If the fire gets hot enough, the wood will burn. That's the way things are, that's the way it's always been. Nothing can go wrong."

"That's not what I'm getting at. When you originally considered arranging this marriage, you hoped to get a cart driver out of one of the Gao brothers. Will they work for you?"

"What's the problem?" Shaohuai said. "Daquan traveled more than fifty kilometers with his bedroll to make money. Doesn't my money jingle the same as anyone else's? Won't the firewood bought with my money burn just as well and the flour bought with my money taste just as good? Didn't I tell you my new discovery? With money you can make the devil

push your millstone. What reason is there for living except to make a buck? That applies to everyone. So why won't he take my money, especially when this marriage will bring us closer? Ha, ha, ha!"

Purple Eggplant smiled too. After some thought she said, "I hear that Daquan is strange. He won't be bought off so easily. Besides, you've had run-ins with him before."

"The way I see it," Shaohuai said, "it was precisely my money that made him go after me during land reform. He wanted to be an activist in the limelight so he could get a bigger share of the redistribution. Now land reform is over. It's a new scene. With the 'get-rich' competition in full swing, everyone's going to think a different way. Look what happened to our village head Jinfa."

"Very well, let's arrange it right away."

As Shaohuai was walking his mule along the reed swamp, he saw the district office cook, Fan Keming, hurrying his way. Just when I need a bridge, Shaohuai mused, someone carries over a plank. I will ask this old flunky to act as a matchmaker and kill two birds with one stone. He will save me the trouble of sending gifts and throwing a banquet. This is a real stroke of luck. Shaohuai stopped and amiably called out, "Hey there, Fan, is this your day off?"

Smiling, Fan replied, "Yeah. I'm also bringing the village head some messages. How is the mule? He has a pretty good appetite, doesn't he?"

With obvious satisfaction, Shaohuai said, "Not bad."

"Both the owner and the animal are prospering," Fan complimented.

"I owe it all to the Communist Party," Shaohuai asserted, giving the correct-sounding response.

Fan looked right at Shaohuai, then smiled and said, "That's

right. I always have said that regardless of your status, whether you are a poor or middle peasant or whatever, you should support the Communist Party and adhere to Party policies."

Every muscle in Shaohuai's face instantly came to life. Assuming a sincere and enthusiastic expression, he said, "Fan, you stole the words right out of my mouth. Only two years since Liberation and everything is becoming as clear as day. Anyone who still feels halfhearted toward the Party must have no conscience. They've got holes in their heads. Not only do I support the Communist Party, I even try to push my relatives and friends to support the Party and be more intimate with Party members and village leaders."

Fan noticed that Shaohuai spoke so seriously that the veins in his neck bulged with blood rushing into his face. He encouraged, "Exactly. I am positive the Communist Party will not let you down. Don't worry a bit."

"I really take this seriously. You can see from my actions, old Fan. When the government put out the call for families to get rich, many folks hesitated but I went right ahead. The government's policy is for free choice in marriage, so when my wife's cousin showed an interest in Erlin, I immediately supported it."

This bit of news, as anticipated, caught Fan's attention. "Oh, Caifeng is getting involved with Daquan's brother?"

Shaohuai looked around mysteriously and said in a hushed voice, "Just a glimmer. I didn't even notice until my wife pointed it out. Then it was quite obvious that they are falling for one another."

"Do you really want to help them?" Fan asked curiously.

Shaohuai nodded his head vigorously. "Of course. As long as both sides are happy, I'd even part with some money for their sake."

"Good thinking. You can never lose getting closer to a Party member."

Not wishing to be so transparent, Shaohuai asserted, "It's not a question of loss or gain. It's the person that counts. Erlin is a promising young man. His charm would win anyone's heart."

"It's a good idea for people in the same village to be connected by marriage so that everyone's nice to everyone else. It makes it easier for all to get ahead," Fan said.

"Old Fan, if you think this is a good marriage, you should give the young couple a hand too."

"Fine. I'm always willing to help a worthy cause. When I see Daquan, I'll bring it up. I don't think there will be any problem. I'm pretty certain that we'll all be going to this wedding."

"I'm leaving the matter with you. It concerns their life and happiness. Better arrange it right away," Shaohuai said.

Soon afterward Fan Keming strolled into Jinfa's courtyard to discuss a few other matters.

A fast and light walker, Fan was accustomed to barging into people's yards without either knocking or calling out. By the time you discovered him he was right in front of you.

Jinfa was sitting on his *kang*, counting money.

Taken by surprise, he quickly regained his composure and asked with a smile, "When did you come back, old Fan?"

"Just now. I've taken a day off just to help you."

"Why?" Jinfa questioned.

"You bought Crooked Mouth's wall. Aren't you going to tear it down?"

"Not until I've found a carpenter, knocked down this old house and built a new foundation. Then as I tear down the

wall, I'll build my new house without having to move the bricks twice. I'll save a lot of money that way."

"It makes sense. But the longer the night, the more bad dreams. Is anybody talking about you around the village?"

"Yes," Jinfa replied. "That Grandma Deng sent some people to talk me out of the deal. But I've outargued them all. No one has dared bring this up in the last few days."

"Someone from Greenfields has already reported it to the district office."

Jinfa rolled back his eyes and flung the stack of bills on the *kang*. "They can report it right up to the province for all I care. God damn it, how come so many people are jealous when I get a good deal?"

"There is no need to get worked up over this. As our lives improve, many more people will be jealous."

Jinfa's heart began to pound. With a forced calmness he asked, "Do you know who reported it?"

Fan stiffened. "Well, actually, I should keep my mouth shut about these things. It's really not right to spread it around. But we see eye to eye and I know you are broad-minded enough to take such things."

"Just tell me. I have to know who it is."

"All right. But you have to keep it to yourself. Don't tell a soul or even let it show on your face."

"I promise."

"I honestly never imagined he would do such a thing. Guess who. That old peasant Zhou Zhong!"

"Hum. He has been running around here like mad talking to people but he never stepped foot outside the village. He didn't even go to the fair. Are you sure it was him?"

"He didn't go himself. He wrote a note."

"What? Slandering me with a secret note. Who did it go to?"

"When Secretary Wang came back, I brought food into his office and saw a letter on the table. I can't read but I recognized Zhou Zhong's name. The paper was covered with characters."

"Then how did you know it was about me?"

"I didn't leave right away. Secretary Wang asked me if I had heard anything about Jinfa buying bricks when I went back to Greenfields. I played dumb. So he put away the letter. Isn't this connection quite obvious?"

"What did Secretary Wang say?"

"He didn't say anything then, but later when I went to pick up the dishes he was discussing it with the district head. The district head was quite annoyed and wanted to call you in to talk it over. But Secretary Wang kept trying to calm him down. He argued that as long as you paid a fair price for the bricks, the district had no business interfering in private deals. That's all I heard."

"Did Secretary Wang look like he was angry?"

"No."

Jinfa's spirits soared. He pounded the *kang* with his hand and said, "How strange. No treasures in Greenfields. All we get are people with horns on their head and daggers in their mouths."

Fan agreed. "There are zillions of bugs in the grass and all kinds of birds in the forest. What do you expect?"

"Daquan was like that when he was around," Jinfa noted. "After the important policy to get rich was handed down from the leadership, he dragged his feet and even made trouble for those who tried. He got me completely bogged down. Once he left I thought I could enjoy a few carefree days. Who would have known that when the mother-in-law cleared out, a bunch of fathers-in-law would barge in! These old fuddy-duddies are so suspicious they get together all day

long and grumble. They come around in turns nit-picking. They're a pain in the neck."

"That's why you have to be extremely careful," Fan Keming warned.

"How can one person keep track of this crowd?" Jinfa said. "Even if I were as strong as iron, I could only handle so much. I used to respect Zhou Zhong. I always praised him and thought he was great. And now he's more vicious than Daquan. At least Daquan comes at you openly. If you do something he doesn't like, he argues with you. He never stabs you in the back. This Zhou Zhong plays tough from the word 'go.' He got a bunch of old ladies to go bad-mouthing the get-rich competition. He used his daughter Liping as a ring-leader to fan up a whole gang of girls. They made a mess at the cultural center and got everyone upset. There are only two days until the joint performance but the Greenfields' drama team is still in a shambles. What will I do if the district summons our troupe?"

Fan suddenly clapped his hands and said, "Oh Jinfa, I almost forgot. Secretary Wang wanted me to tell you personally that the Greenfields' drama team must be in Heavenly Gate tomorrow before noon. The district leadership wants to check out the program first. The following day it will go on stage. He is counting on your team to be the main show since it was started during land reform and should be more organized."

"These things are killing me," Jinfa complained. "Look at this. I'm being squeezed from both ends. Where can I go?"

"There's an answer to every problem. You can't just worry and get angry now that you are in trouble. Calm down and think of a way to deal with your problems."

"I've tried everything. Zhou Zhong has stirred up so much trouble that it's damaged my prestige. Nothing ticks like it

used to in the good old days when everyone obeyed my orders and moved as soon as I waved my hand."

"You have to vary your methods. You are the village head. You don't have to take charge of every single task. Just set the guiding principles and leave the shit work to others. What's the use of Tiehan if you don't push these things onto him? Let him deal with the play."

"I did leave it to him. But Zhou Zhong wouldn't give him a chance either. Then Tiehan came back empty-handed from Wild Goose Village."

"Simply wash your hands of it and let Tiehan take the drama team to the district. If it's a flop, he'll have to face Secretary Wang. He's officially in charge. What can people say about you when it fails? Doesn't that make sense?"

This idea immediately appealed to Jinfa. He slapped his leg and said, "Great. I should have thought of it myself. All this fuss over the bricks fogged up my brain. It's really true that an outsider sees things clearer than the one involved. I'll send Tiehan to report to Secretary Wang. At least he'll try to faithfully carry out Secretary Wang's directives. That way he can put pressure on the people opposed to Secretary Wang's orders and clear the road for our central task."

"There is no time to waste. Go tell Tiehan he should attend a meeting in the district. I'll go back now and fill in Secretary Wang so he'll know what to expect."

Jinfa felt tremendous admiration and gratitude toward Fan. Recharged with energy, he put on his shoes and was about to walk out when Fan held him back. "What about the bricks?"

"As long as Secretary Wang didn't get angry," Jinfa said, "I'm not worried. And even if he were angry, there's nothing he can do — what law have I broken?"

"Just the same, someone has already reported on you

behind your back. It's better to be more careful. The bricks won't belong to you until you've piled them in your courtyard. My advice is to arrange it right away."

## 15

### Eager to Try

The ice thawed, the geese returned and the slumbering earth came to life as the sowing season approached.

The thirteen Greenfields peasants bid farewell to Beijing and returned to their home in the marshland.

At their departure everyone looked smart. White hand towels emblazoned with the character "award" in red — a present from the railroad station — were tied around their necks. They carried bedrolls tied neatly and compactly into squares in PLA soldier-style.

Alighting from the bus at Heavenly Gate, they landed in the midst of a farmer's market. Their pay bulging in their pockets, everyone was anxious to browse and buy some farming goods. Everyone, that is, except Daquan. He set a time and place to regroup, then headed for the district office located in the abandoned distillery that had been commandeered by the Japanese during the war. A stream of people flowed in and out of the front gate where donkeys were tied and carts parked. Both the courtyard and the civil administration office were crowded with people waiting to talk with the district officials.

Daquan proceeded directly to the rear courtyard where he found both Wang Youqing's and the district head's doors

locked. He turned around and went into an office where Li Peilin and his secretary were mimeographing. His hands smudged with black ink, Li Peilin cheerfully greeted, "I figured you'd get restless in Beijing as soon as you heard the geese. Have a seat. I'll be through in a minute. Let's have a good talk."

Daquan sat on the edge of a cot and glanced at the stack of mimeographed material, the headline of which read "Improve Leadership, Prepare for Spring Plowing, Win the First Post-Land Reform Battle in Production."

"The Party branch at the railroad station wrote twice praising your work in Beijing," Li Peilin told him. "You did very well. The district head even talked about your activities at a joint cultural performance in town several days ago. You must have learned a lot."

"It was a real eye-opener," Daquan said. "We learned a great deal from the workers. They have qualities which peasants lack. Probably the most important thing I learned was that we can't just concentrate on getting rich."

"That is significant."

"I'd like to hear what the district leaders think I should do when I get back."

"They've been very busy these last few days and might not have time to talk with you now," Li Peilin explained. "At the last county meeting Secretary Liang criticized the leaders of Outer City District for their lack of vision and their blind optimism. They left the *fanshen* peasants to their own devices. As a result in one village usury reappeared and people started selling their land and houses. Secretary Liang said he was experimenting with a method which had been used in the old liberated areas to stop this from happening. He feels that since the peasants only believe in what they see

with their own eyes it's important to get some practical results before publicizing the method throughout the county. When Secretary Wang reported these points to our district, he said our district had successfully followed up on land reform and hadn't left the peasants stranded. He also said since County Head Gu is paying particular attention to our district, we'd better be extra sure that nothing goes wrong. So Secretary Wang sent all the cadres out on an inspection tour."

"I have some new thoughts myself that I'm not quite sure about. After hearing you, I feel I'm on firmer ground. I'll come back and talk to the district leaders in a few days."

The slant of the sun's rays told Daquan the time had come to rejoin his group.

Most had already made their purchases — shovels, hoes, prized hybrid seeds — and were talking in front of the carpenter's shop waiting for the dawdlers.

"Daquan, come here. Look what I've got," Chunjiang urged, pulling Daquan's sleeve.

Daquan turned around and saw a new carrying-pole. A bedroll was fastened at one end and at the other, an old jacket was tied into a pouch with two tiny black heads poking out.

Daquan exclaimed, "You bought piglets!"

"Don't you remember when we got land, I told you I wanted to buy a piglet so we'd have more fertilizer?" Chunjiang said, gleefully stroking his stubby fingers over his chin. "But I couldn't afford it then. Now I've splurged and bought two."

Daquan squatted down to take a closer look. Suddenly his friends started shouting. He glanced around and spotted Yongzhen wading through the crowded fair toward them. Right away Chunjiang realized why there was such a commo-

tion and joined in the outcry. "That smart son-of-a-gun bought a calf."

Daquan left the piglets and followed Chunjiang over to Yongzhen. All gathered around the calf, admiring its square head, long sleek body, tall legs, golden back, and white belly.

"I can tell from the build it's going to grow into a big strong ox."

"Yongzhen, you're a smart calculator. You'll have a big draft animal in no time but you only paid the price for the leg of an ox."

Envious looks from passers-by along with this praise from his friends so excited Yongzhen that his hand started shaking. He wiped off nervous sweat from his forehead and grinned. "Quite a few people were looking it over. I had no time to come to you for advice so I just grabbed it."

"Don't worry. You didn't get cheated."

"Before I left for Beijing," Yongzhen said, "my father talked about buying a calf to raise ourselves since we couldn't afford an ox. But he didn't say to buy it right now."

"Oh, don't worry. He can only be happy when he sees this."

Yongzhen said, "Now I've spent all my money."

"You're so happy," Chunjiang commented, "you don't know what you are talking about. Even if you'd thrown in your bedroll, it still would have been worth it. When my two piglets are grown, I'll buy a calf too."

"That's right," Liu Xiang chimed in. "Now that we have our own land, we need our own animals."

Yongzhen's eyes traveled to Daquan who had not spoken. "Brother Daquan, what about you?" Yongzhen anxiously asked. "No word from you yet. Do you think I've done the right thing?"



Daquan lifted his eyes from the calf and looked around at his friends. "Everyone else has said it already. I completely agree." He emphatically added, "I think this calf entering the village with us is much more impressive and promising than Shaohuai's mule."

These thirteen peasants strode home talking and laughing, bubbling with joy.

Daquan scanned the ubiquitous marshland. Flocks of birds soared through the skies and draft animals traversed the fields. The outline of Greenfields came into view — tree branches and roof tops in bold relief against the sky; the all-too-familiar corner of the grey wall around the Tall Steps compound and the huge poplar tree standing at the edge of the village seemed strangely new and attractive, beckoning him.

Suddenly Yongzhen shouted, "Hey, Jiukuan, what's the big hurry? You've been away for months. What's a few more minutes now that you're almost home?"

"Don't worry Jiukuan, your wife's still there," Chunjiang teased. "She won't run away. Right now she is leaning in the doorway longing for your return."

Looking around, Jiukuan scowled at them and retorted without the slightest slackening of pace, "Speak for yourselves. All you young guys ever think about is women."

Everyone burst out laughing.

The sudden outburst tore Daquan away from his free-wheeling thoughts about what he would be doing in Greenfields during the next few months. Seeing Jiukuan hurrying ahead, he asked Liu Xiang, "Did I miss something? Jiukuan seemed so cheerful a while ago. How come he's so grim now?"

"He walked around the fair with me and looked at every-

thing but didn't spend a penny," Liu Xiang said. "He turned others' purchases over and over again without comment. I couldn't tell what he was thinking."

"Look at that fellow! What is he doing?" Yongzhen called out.

Discovering that Jiukuan had left the road and taken a shortcut north while they were joking, the group stopped. Some reprimanded Yongzhen, "Are you out of your head, Yongzhen? Why don't you think before you open your big mouth? Now you've made Jiukuan angry."

"He's stubborn. He won't talk to you for a week."

"But he didn't look mad and he doesn't usually get pissed off so easily."

"How strange! What do you think he's doing?"

Jiukuan sped across the fields, then slowed down and leaped over a ditch. He squatted down and scratched the dirt with his hand. Scooping up a handful, he stared at it as if in a trance.

The sun cast tree shadows across the furrows. Blotches of light filtered through the branches and played on Jiukuan's shoulders. A breeze rustled the dry grass, caught a red leaf and twirled it around Jiukuan before whisking it high into the clear blue sky.

The group was spellbound by Jiukuan's infatuation with the land. Even the more exuberant ones like Chunjiang and Yongzhen stopped joking and watched.

"That's his land," Liu Xiang muttered, breaking the silence.

"You're right," Daquan nodded. "I helped him place the markers the day the land was given out."

Liu Xiang added, "His parents are buried there."

"No wonder he insisted on getting that particular piece," Daquan remarked.

Somberness replaced their elation as they recalled Jiukuan's past.

One rainy June day twenty years before, the beggar Deng Laoliu died of starvation. His friends came over to help with the burial. They sawed shelves from an old cupboard for a casket, wrapped the body in a reed mat and poured a few drops of oil in a saucer for a funeral lantern. His ten-year-old son Jiukuan knelt in front of the casket, sobbing.

Time came to bury old Deng. Uncle Le ran in, drenched, and announced that the village graveyard was submerged in water, some spots waist-deep, others overhead. It would be impossible to dig a grave there. His friends could not bear to leave Deng Laoliu's body in murky water, much less to rot on his *kang*.

Those who were willing went to beseech the Foreign Squire to give them a burial spot. The landlord was intractable on the first day but grew less resistant on the following day and by the third begrudgingly agreed — not as a gift but for a fee. They could rent a three-by-six-foot plot at the edge of the field for fifty kilograms of corn a year. They all knew it was a rotten deal but there was no getting around it. Thus the dead was buried and the ten-year-old orphan Jiukuan entered the Foreign Squire's compound as a child laborer.

The graveyard remained flooded for the entire year so Deng Laoliu's casket could not be interred there. It flooded again the next year and by the third the ground became a permanent swamp. Jiukuan slaved for the Foreign Squire for eight years without remuneration; only in the ninth year, when he was upgraded to a full-fledged hired hand, did he begin to receive a wage with the fifty kilograms of corn deducted. Each spring on Memorial Day, Jiukuan lugged a basket of dirt from the reed swamp to repair his father's

grave because the Foreign Squire forbade him to dig up any soil nearby.

This debt was not canceled until land reform.

Looking at Yongzhen and Chunjiang, Liu Xiang said with great feeling, "You are too young to know how hard it was for poor people to get land in the old society. A man might as well have climbed into the sky as own a patch of land or even a few clumps of dirt. You can't possibly understand how Jiukuan feels. To a peasant, the dearest and most precious thing is land."

One after another, these men squatted down and scooped up a handful of dirt. Each reflected on his own past. Though each had unique experiences, all their sufferings had centered around the land.

"Land is our life."

Daquan clenched a handful of dirt so tightly in his palm it became warm. Suddenly he heaved it into the air and, watching the golden mist fall, vehemently declared, "This land is what gives us the power to stand up. Only by holding on to our land can we hold on to our power."

Jiukuan rejoined his friends, still kneading dirt in his palm. Fine grains sifted down between his stubby fingers.

Everyone stopped conversing and looked at him.

He carefully studied everyone's face with squinted eyes, his lips tight. Suddenly he seriously announced, "I'm not buying anything now. Going to stock up on grain. A man may be made of iron but it's food that makes him strong. A man can look after his land only when he's got a full stomach. You are all full of strength now, huh? I felt strong from the moment I got my land. Land is what my grandfather and my father spent their lives trying to get. Now after going to Beijing I feel ever stronger. I'm going to pour all my energy into the land."

## They Came Back with a Fortune

Daquan and his comrades parted at the crossroads in front of the Tall Steps and headed home.

The village still retained traces of the New Year festival. In the square by the Tall Steps, bricks and rocks used for seats were scattered around the opera stage which was propped up on four wagon wheels. Bright couplets adorned each door, clean paper covered the windows and the children's new clothing was still spotless. Manure and dirt piles had proliferated in preparation for spring planting; two mud homes had been torn down while scaffolding had been erected here and there for new houses; though it was lunch time, quite a few people were out digging up sludge in the reed pond and carrying it away; many courtyard walls and picket fences had been mended.

Walking home, Daquan pondered how he would implement his new plans once he was resettled. Suddenly he came upon a man in a blue jacket crouched down beside Shao-huai's gate painting slogans on the wall. From the man's height, his black leather shoes and his graceful movements Daquan immediately recognized Yu Baozong, the primary school teacher. "Oh, Teacher Yu," he called out.

Yu Baozong slowly turned his head and pushed up his thick spectacles. After staring for a moment, he smiled. "Comrade Daquan, you're back from Beijing?"

"I just got back."

"How did you like spending New Year's away from home?"

"It was the most meaningful New Year's holiday that I've had."

"I heard that you were going to stay at the railroad station."

"I never even considered it. Our job is to raise more crops."

Yu Baozong, smiling congenially, said in passing, "Drop by the school when you have time."

Daquan, however, replied in a businesslike manner, "Yes, I would like to discuss some plans with all the teachers in the next day or two." Then he walked along the clay walls reading the slogans painted in a lime whitewash:

Seize the time of spring;  
Strive for a bumper harvest.

Step up production to  
Enrich the family.

Want to get rich?  
Switch to cotton!

Daquan found these slogans rather distasteful. They concurred with the spirit of the mass meeting a few months ago to launch the get-rich competition while seeming to conflict with the spirit he felt in Beijing.

Daquan hurried back toward Yu Baozong, who was painting the walls further down the street. "Hey Teacher Yu," he called out, "how many of these slogans have you done?"

"I've painted them on all the walls except those at the west end. I'll probably get those finished this afternoon."

"They're no good," Daquan said waving his hand.

Yu Baozong was taken aback. "No good? Did I write some of the characters wrong?"

"No."

"Well then, does my handwriting look bad?"

"It's the content, not your handwriting."

Yu Baozong felt a sense of relief followed by a surge of contempt. You are nothing but a peasant who learned to read a few words in night school, he sneered to himself. You probably can't recognize all the characters in these slogans, yet you are quick to find fault with the content. What gall! But he replied, "I'm only responsible for painting the slogans on the wall. I didn't think up the words."

"These slogans are not good politically," Daquan stated bluntly. "At best they are one-sided. Slogans on the walls are a call to the masses. A call from the Party can't be written haphazardly. We need to write about increasing grain production to support industrialization, to consolidate the worker-peasant alliance and to support our troops in Korea!"

Yu Baozong was shocked to hear such words from this former beggar and hired hand. He took off his glasses, blew on them, wiped them off and put them back on again, then scrutinized Daquan.

After Daquan poured out his concerns, his tone softened. "Teacher Yu, could I trouble you to write a few more new slogans along the lines of what I just said?"

Yu Baozong quickly replied, "Comrade Daquan, you just said we can't write slogans on the wall haphazardly. Not just anybody can formulate them. I certainly wouldn't dare. This is no joke."

"Stick to the points I just made. Nothing can go wrong."

"It doesn't work that way. When Village Head Zhang assigned me this task, he told me to copy the words exactly. I'm not supposed to tamper with them."

Daquan thought for a moment and said, "Take a break.

I'll go discuss the matter with the village head and tell you our decision."

"Good enough."

Daquan leaned his bedroll against the wall and asked Yu Baozong to send it to his home with anybody going in that direction. He hurried toward Jinfa's house and met an elderly woman in a blue knee-length coat with silky white hair and a cane hobbling along in a tremendous hurry, though not moving very fast.

Daquan ran over and fondly clasped her arm. "How are you, Grandma Deng?"

She looked up and lifted her knarled hand to shade her eyes from the glaring midday sun. Squinting, she stared at him for quite a while before she laughed, revealing gums with several missing teeth. "Daquan, it's you. I didn't expect you home so soon. You just seemed to have dropped out of the sky. Some folks spread the rumor that you were going to become a worker in Beijing so you could get rich. Zhou Zhong and I reassured everyone that it wasn't true, that as long as Greenfields was in this state, you wouldn't desert us. We guessed right, didn't we?"

"How could I leave Greenfields? We haven't even started to change things here."

Grandma Deng nodded. "That's right. That's right. Other people can spread all the lies they want, but we trust you completely."

With an appraising glance, Daquan remarked, "You look much better now."

Grandma Deng patted Daquan on the chest and declared, "I'm not going to die that easy. I'm stronger than ever. I plan to enjoy a few more years of socialism. I want to see what Greenfields turns into before I'll be willing to die. But

that medicine of yours sure did me a lot of good. I felt better as soon as I took it. My nephew Jiukuan insisted that he bought the exact same thing, but I didn't believe him. I've lived more than seventy years. No one can fool me. I told Jiukuan, 'Are you as smart as Daquan? Where could you get medicine that works like magic?' She started laughing.

Daquan laughed along with her, then asked, "What brings you over to this side of town? Shouldn't you be taking your nap?"

Grandma Deng looked around. Seeing no one, she sighed. "What a mess. It's one of those situations where no matter what you do to try to help, you only get blamed. Whenever I see things that are bad for the *fanshen* peasants, I can't help but speak up. It happened around New Year's. I heard Wan Shuhua say Jinfa had bought Crooked Mouth's back wall to build a house."

Daquan was astounded. "He wants to buy Crooked Mouth's wall? What's going on?"

"Don't know myself. He can buy bricks anywhere. Why get involved with the landlord? He was mixed up with Crooked Mouth in the old days. It was all to the good that he broke off his ties, but by getting into this business, most people are going to think that something fishy is going on even if there is no bribery involved. It's easy for him to try and explain it away, but it's pretty hard for people to believe him. I didn't want to interfere myself. I know he thinks I'm an old nag. First I went looking for Tiehan. But that child is so naive. He insisted nothing was wrong. After I gave him a good scolding, he went to talk to Jinfa. But Jinfa completely outtalked him. Then I thought maybe Zhou Zhong could persuade Jinfa since he has a lot of prestige.

But Jinfa dodged the issue. A few days later I asked Qin Kai to talk Jinfa out of the deal. But Qin Kai is the sort who likes to smooth things over. Since he knew he couldn't convince Jinfa, he didn't want to be put in an awkward position. Then I thought about Fan Keming. He and Jinfa are good buddies. He could do the job. But Wan Shuhua told me that it was Fan who lent Jinfa the money to buy the wall. Lucky I found out or else I would have gone all the way to the north end of the village for nothing!"

With a pat on her thigh, Grandma Deng went on, "As all else had failed, I decided to talk to Jinfa myself. I was determined to have a heart-to-heart talk with him. I was even going to beg him if I had to. After I walked all the way over to his house, his wife said he had gone to the village office. But the office was locked and there wasn't a soul around. I didn't give up. I went to a few homes that Jinfa often visits, but I couldn't find him anywhere. That louse has been leading me on a wild goose chase!"

Daquan was moved. The image of this white-haired old woman fervently trudging along the icy streets flashed through his mind. He remembered how she had come to his house despite her illness one evening last winter to tell him about Shaohuai's mule. A feeling of warmth ran through him. He felt fortunate to be supported by these old people. Daquan held Grandma Deng's two arms and said, "I understand now. I'll take you home and then go find Jinfa. On behalf of you and everyone else, I'll tell him what we think of his actions. I'll agree to all his terms as long as he drops the deal."

"But I found him," Grandma Deng said.

Daquan's eyes brightened. "Did you talk him out of it?" Grandma Deng shook her head. "It's hopeless."

"There has to be hope. I'll go and find him."

"It's too late."

"Why?"

"You can't unscramble an egg. A bunch of people are helping Jinfa tear down the wall right now."

Daquan felt a burning pain in his chest. His gaze fell upon the newly painted slogans; his eyes stung. Across the street a few women working at the millstone chattered and laughed. The grain crackled under the mill.

Wan Shuhua's face appeared over the next wall. "Who's the last one in line? I'm after you," she shouted to the women.

"Come on over," they called to her.

"I'm washing my dishes."

"Having lunch this late?"

"I was out visiting."

"So what news did you pick up this time?"

"The men who went to Beijing are back."

"Is that right?"

"Every last one of them marched into town looking like they had eaten a hog. They learned to talk a mile a minute and use big words. And they all made a bundle. The Lu brothers bought a pig and Yongzhen a calf. Daquan came home loaded with cash. What a sight!"

Aware that Daquan was standing across the street talking to Grandma Deng, the women roared with laughter.

Wan Shuhua was puzzled. "Why are you laughing? It's true. They all came back with a fortune," she shouted.

Daquan rallied his spirits and replied, "Sister, this time your news is a little bit off. I did come back with a fortune, but not in cash. I brought something much more precious. Something we will all share in the future."

## Tearing Down the Wall

Eager helpers flocked around the village head when he embarked on his construction project.

Zhou Shiqin, an ungregarious sort who usually cloistered himself at home, came out. So did Tough Hide, who never deigned to lift a finger and would often get a stiff neck from indolence. And Fan Keming showed up as well, though he normally was busy with his job in Heavenly Gate and could rarely find time to come back to the village. Little Abacus Qin Fu sent his eldest son. Qin Kai made an appearance for the sake of maintaining friendly relations. Even landlord Crooked Mouth was out, unobtrusively picking up bricks.

.....  
A whole bunch gathered — a work force to help the village head raze the wall.

Clinking picks, squeaky cart wheels, clouds of dust and a harangue of voices generated the aura of a grand project underway. Since the wall originally had been built merely as a way to store the bricks, once the outer layer of plaster was chipped off, a few knocks with a pick brought rows of bricks tumbling down. The hardest job was to wheelbarrow them over to Jinfa's place.

Jinfa's face and shoulders were covered with dust as he ran back and forth nonstop. He pointed out where the bricks should be stacked in his courtyard, personally laying the bottom layer of the pile. At the wall he urged people to be careful not to break bricks or get hurt. Jinfa was delighted as he looked at these sturdy grey bricks. Because he had

been able to borrow money without interest from Fan to buy them at such a low price, he had secured a house without much trouble. Now he would be able to use the money, originally put aside for a house to purchase a draft animal for the next step in his program to get rich. This year he wanted to plant more cotton and use the clay from the old house to fertilize his fields. With hard work he could expect a good harvest. He might even be able to buy a cart in the fall. Such a rubber-wheeled cart would serve as his money tree, thereafter enabling him to make sizable capital improvements.

Jinfa felt the new tide compelled him to get rich in order to maintain a dignified stance in front of his superiors and enjoy the respect of the masses. He was tremendously satisfied by this venture which would benefit both the public and himself.

"Say Zhou Shiqin," Jinfa called out, "I'm really no good at construction work. I don't have the faintest idea where to begin. I'm depending on you completely. You tell us what to do and we'll carry out your orders. You be the overseer."

Zhou Shiqin smiled and modestly disclaimed, "I've never done anything on such a big scale. Since you've put your trust in me, I'll do all I can. But I want to warn you now that something might go wrong."

"No problem, no problem," Jinfa said, shaking his head. "Just do your best. How can anything go wrong with all your skill? I have complete faith in you." He then ran over to help push a wheelbarrow. "Brother Jin Shou, can you borrow another wheelbarrow and work with Wenji? The faster we finish up this last stretch, the sooner we can get to the wine."

Tough Hide opened his mouth wide. It was hard to tell

whether he was laughing or crying. Ostentatiously wiping off his sweat he said, "Where can I borrow a wheelbarrow? Who would lend me one?"

"Just a while ago," Jinfa said, "Shaohuai said he would lend me his mule if I had a cart. What about the cart you and Jiukuan got in land reform?"

"Would I ever get anything good?" Tough Hide said. "God damn axle was broken. It was useless. I'll chop it up for fuel at the August festival."

Jinfa looked over at Fan, who was picking up bricks, and sighed. "Listen to him. How will he ever get his life together this way? What can I do?" Jinfa turned around to Qin Wenji. "I hear your father was over at the brick kiln not too long ago. Is he building a house?"

Wenji rested his hands on the shaft of the wheelbarrow, looked around and then answered in a subdued voice, "When he heard you were building a house, he started to get ideas, but nothing's definite yet."

"If my house could last a few years longer," Jinfa said, "I would buy more good land instead. Without a wife one can't have children — Without land, one can't raise crops. Land is basic. You already have a main house with an addition. That's good enough. Why follow me and build more?"

"Of course our house is fine right now," Wenji seriously replied. "But in a few more years it will get pretty cramped. Just think, I have a family already. And my two brothers will start to have families before long. When it comes time to divide up the property, each family will only have one room. We'll be much too crowded. Besides, the old couple will need a place to stay too."

"Your father is really something," Jinfa exclaimed. "He never thinks big. He'll piddle around his whole life and

never get rich. The way I see it, the only thing he lacks is courage. Last winter after the meeting announcing the competition to get rich, I noticed he wasn't so timid anymore. I figured he was going to use his head for once and aim a little higher. I never thought he would cool down in a few days. All winter he sat on the sidelines watching the fight and never sent in his soldiers. If he doesn't even dare believe me, how long will it take him to make a move?"

"Wenji," Fan added, "tell your father that I said he should hurry up and answer the call from the district. Nothing will go wrong. Working in the district office, I've heard endless examples of people getting rich. At Temple Village, where Secretary Wang has taken direct charge of the work, there are three brothers who have acquired a rubber-tire cart, two new pig pens and five mu of land since New Year's. Secretary Wang wrote a report to County Head Gu about their fine work. He recommended that the three brothers be sent to the Labor Heroes Conference to get a reward. Won't that make them feel good?"

Fan's story attracted a lot of attention. Those at the wall listened with wide eyes and a few onlookers standing around the work site were greatly impressed. Row by row the brick wall was dismantled. The workers could see and step into the next courtyard. Soon there would be no barrier.

Some primary school pupils walked by in a line singing, and stopped, curiously watching this demolition crew. Then a skinny boy with a large head ran over to the huge pile of bricks. His mouth tightly shut, his eyes wide open, he surveyed the group, skipping and hopping between the bricks. He went into his small mud hut and came out a few minutes later with a large bowl and a teapot.

Tough Hide, kept looking around, waiting for the work to end so he could enjoy a good meal. Naturally he was the

first to notice Crooked Mouth's youngster, Qishan, walking over with the tea. "Hey, the kid's learning how to wait on his elders," he yelled. "Just when Old Man Shou gets thirsty, he brings something by."

But Qishan did not come his way.

"Hey, come on over here," Tough Hide bellowed.

Qishan shook his head and kept on walking.

Wenji, who was pushing a wheelbarrow, remarked, "I bet that little bastard is taking it to the village head."

Tough Hide cursed a few times, then said, "Some people know how to butter up to officials before they know who their mother is. They are born that way. These things won't change in a thousand years. I know how it is."

But Qishan passed by Jinfa.

Everyone's curiosity was aroused. They ceased work to watch this trivial yet rather intriguing incident. No one could imagine to whom this child would present the tea.

Zhou Shiqin's eyes glistened with laughter as they followed Qishan's shuffling feet. He was hoping the tea would be put in front of him as he liked to feel important.

Qin Kai turned his back on the child. He tensed, afraid that the landlord's son would publicly present the tea to him. It would look bad and might lead to some misunderstanding.

Qishan wound through the work site. Everyone was taken by surprise when the boy handed the bowl to Fan and urged, "Have a drink."

Fan affably greeted the landlord's son and took the bowl. "What a good pupil. He's learned his manners well and takes care of the oldest first." He then said to Qishan, "You better go home and eat your lunch now. Put the teapot down here."

Qishan merrily skipped home.

"That son of a bitch landlord's kid," Tough Hide cursed



loudly. "He certainly knows it's smart to pick the most powerful person. Huh! Looks to me like the land reform wasn't harsh enough. We should have twisted the little bastard's head off and upped the roots with the weed."

Wenji said with a laugh, "That kid took Fan to be a district official. Of course district officials rank a few notches higher than the village head."

Zhou Shiqin drably joked, "He's the officer in charge of pots and pans."

Village Head Zhang was the only one who understood. He recalled the morning when he had gone over to Fan's and found that the chimney had been covered with a rock. When they discovered the prank was done by Qishan, Fan did not react with anger but rather offered the boy some food. The steam bread did the trick, Jinfa mused. A young child is like a puppy. He will snuggle up to the one who feeds him. This Fan is really good at uniting with everybody around him.

After Fan sipped some water he wiped his mouth and carried the bowl and teapot around. When the pot was empty, he shook it and walked toward the small hut.

Crooked Mouth hurried over. "Give it to me," he called out. "Don't bother taking it back. Did you have enough? I could boil some more water."

Without turning around Fan stopped and waited for Crooked Mouth to reach him. Handing over the teapot, he said with a stony face, "I haven't seen you since land reform. You don't look so bad. Even healthier than before!"

"Uh-huh," Crooked Mouth mumbled, bowing and nodding.

"You won't ever die, will you?"

"Hmmm?"

"This place is much more open with the wall down, isn't it?"

"Hmmm!"

"It will be much easier to walk over to the village head's house now, won't it?"

"Uh."

"You are openly trying to buy off the village head, aren't you?"

"Oh, Brother Fan —"

"Shut up! You can't fool me. You haven't given up yet. You're still dreaming for a change in the skies. You're dreaming of rising again!"

"No, no —"

"Of course you do it in the dark. But if you get uppity and forget to cover up your tracks, we'll catch you. We won't let you off the hook easily!"

"Now, now this. . ."

Fan shoved the bowl into Crooked Mouth's hand and said harshly, "I dare you to be so smug again." He walked back to the group working on the wall with giant strides.

Crooked Mouth's eyes glazed over. He lost his bearings until Fan started to work again. Then he turned Fan's reprimand over in his mind.

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## A Test of Strength

Daquan walked down the road as if he were carrying a heavy load, his half-worn sneakers squeaking with every step.

Yongzhen ran up from behind and hailed, "Hey, Daquan, where are you going?"

"To Crooked Mouth's back wall."

"You already know about it? My dad told me the minute I got home. I was just looking for you. Boy, this isn't such a good thing for the village head to do, is it?"

"It's very bad." Daquan stated emphatically. "It's totally wrong."

"He's usually clearheaded," Yongzhen said with disappointment. "What made him do such a thing?"

"It's not all that surprising. He's been pretty fuzzy lately. His head's all clogged up with ideas about getting rich. He was already heading in the wrong direction when the competition to get rich started and now he's sliding right down that path."

"You've got to talk him out of it."

Shaking his head, Daquan said, "I've thought about this carefully. The problem has gone much too far to easily pull him back."

"We'll have to try as hard as we can."

Daquan said pensively, "I had the same reaction at first. But after I thought it over, I decided a head-on collision wouldn't work. Remember how the workers at the railroad station tackled the easy loading jobs with full steam but when it came to the heavy loads, sheer strength wasn't enough. Complicated situations require complicated methods."

"Is this that complicated?"

Daquan lowered his voice. "If you think about the policy being pushed in Greenfields right now, and look at all the slogans painted on the walls and get a feel for how some people are thinking, you'll see what I mean. Jinfa is riding the wind and we're going against it. If we clash directly with him, he won't listen and some people will resent it. Even the district won't support us. What will happen? We won't get rid of this evil wind. In fact we'll give them a

chance to squelch us."

Yongzhen was quite shocked. "Oh, it really is complicated."

"Don't worry. The situation isn't the same as it was before the New Year. We've learned a lot since that lousy meeting. We won't let this evil wind get out of hand."

Nodding, Yongzhen said, "That's right, I never would have taken this so seriously in the past. Now I know better."

As they walked on they saw Wenqing standing by the roadside looking upset. "Brother Daquan," he called, "you're back at last. I need to talk with you."

Daquan assumed his despondent look was due to some family problem. Smiling warmly he said, "We'll find time to have a good talk real soon. I'm busy right now."

"Fine. I can wait. But the sooner the better." Daquan and Yongzhen cut into the next alley. Wenqing surmised from their strained expressions that something must have happened and followed along. When he came upon the crowd tearing down the wall, Daquan was already standing face to face with Jinfa, who was drenched in sweat and covered with dust.

Jinfa had stopped working and was greeting Daquan. He was about to express his surprise that Daquan had not stayed in Beijing and become a regular worker, but he modified his words as they came to his lips. "I thought you wouldn't be back until planting time. Did you finish the job ahead of schedule?"

"I thought I came home too late," Daquan said as he tried to walk between the bricks toward Jinfa.

"You must have gotten an eyeful during this trip."

"Yeah, I learned a lot."

"Well, we'll have to talk about it sometime. I'd like to

learn something too." Jinfa rubbed his hands, indicating he wanted to go back to work.

Having finally managed to get near Jinfa, Daquan said, "There is something I want to talk about right now."

"This isn't a good place to talk and I can't leave right now. Let's wait till this evening."

"If your time is so precious, I'll make it very brief." Daquan's eyes swept over the intently listening crowd. He coolly stated, "I have an important criticism to raise. The walls —"

The word *wall* had an electrifying affect on Jinfa. "What about the wall?"

"The walls in the village have just been painted with slogans which are not quite appropriate," Daquan continued.

"What are you talking about? What slogans?"

"Those slogans written all over the village walls. At best they are one-sided."

Jinfa smiled with relief. He had never expected that Daquan's first blast would be unrelated to his tearing down Crooked Mouth's wall. Jinfa queried, "Are they inappropriate? What do you mean by one-sided?"

"Their content, their political content. It's not just for personal enrichment that the government and the Party are calling on the peasants to increase production and plant more cotton."

"That's new. Then what's it for?"

"They are mainly asking the peasants to support the reconstruction of our country, to aid the volunteer army defending our motherland and to consolidate the worker-peasant alliance."

"Well, I guess that is part of the government's idea."

"Not just part of the idea. This should be the main point. We need to put forward these ideas so that the peasants

will understand patriotism and be inspired to increase production and plant more cotton. That's the way to lead people forward."

"There is something to these high principles you are raising but let's discuss it another time. The slogans being painted on the walls were handed down from the district."

Daquan continued, "Even though they came from the district, can't we modify them if they are not appropriate or not quite complete?"

Jinfa was growing disgruntled. "In my opinion, every word is appropriate and complete."

"That's because you're slipping. You're caught up in little maneuvers to advance yourself."

"Of course I'm not as smart as you are," Jinfa said with a sarcastic smile.

"It's not a question of being smart but of being correct. Jinfa, a lot of the ideas you have been pushing need to be changed. Quite frankly, the public meeting you held last year and that competition-to-get-rich tune you piped so strongly are both wrong."

Jinfa's face tightened. "You really are keeping a file on me, aren't you? Well, it's true. I did pipe that tune. But do you think the idea just popped out of my own head?"

"It sure struck roots in your head."

"Of course. And I'm going to let it bloom and bear fruit. Why? Because that's what Secretary Wang and County Head Gu have instructed. I'm really worried about you, Daquan. It takes a lot of gall to sing a different tune behind the backs of our leadership. You'd better think it over. What does this conduct mean?"

"The Central Committee is our highest leader. It is clearly written in the Party Constitution that we have to fight for

communism. That's what you swore to do when you joined the Party. But as soon as you took the oath, you threw it aside and only talked about consolidating New Democracy. Which one of us is singing a different tune from the leadership?"

"Well, well. You can't stick me with that one. We haven't reached that stage yet."

"So what stage are we at? The stage to strive to get rich?"

"Of course."

"Fine. Show me."

"Show you what?"

"Show me where the get-rich competition is written in the Party documents and where it says the ones who get rich deserve honor and the ones who go broke will be despised."

"You, you! Don't take everything so literally."

"You are the one who used those exact words in the public meeting and implemented them literally in your actions. You say you're worried about us! Actually we are really worried about you."

A shiver ran down Jinfa's spine. In an affected tone he said slowly, "Come on. This kind of talk is useless. Let's get back to the slogans. In short, no changes, no additions. We'll stick to the leadership's formulations. Supporting industry and resisting American aggression in Korea is important, but you know that peasants only care about eating and sleeping. There's no room in their mind for that kind of stuff."

"Don't make such gross generalizations," Daquan said in a milder tone. "And besides, we Party members should educate those peasants who think that way. I never thought about these things before either. Only when I went to Beijing

and saw things with my own eyes did I begin to get the picture."

Jinfa shook his head. "It's not so easy to get peasants to understand such principles."

"The way I see it," Daquan quickly pointed out, "the problem isn't that peasants can't understand these ideas, but that you don't want them to."

Jinfa was piqued. "What? I don't want them to? I'm against resisting American aggression in Korea? I'm against the worker-peasant alliance? Do you have some other big hats to put on me? Go ahead. Just bring them out. I'm not afraid."

"You have actually educated people in the past. You practiced what you preached then. But now you only compete to better your own lot. You've taken the lead to blur the lines between friends and enemies. You've formed your little clique of people who are scrambling to get ahead of each other. What's all this leading to?"

Losing his patience Jinfa charged, "You can blab all you want, but it won't mean a thing unless the peasants compete with each other to produce more grain and get rich. If I listen to you and then can't collect enough public grain in the fall, who will listen to me? It hasn't been easy to mobilize people these last few months. Now that you're back, don't just shoot off your mouth as you please. Think about how your words might influence people."

Daquan was also getting upset. "All I want to tell you is the situation isn't the same as it was last winter. If you keep on doing what you please, I'll keep trying to convince you otherwise."

"And let me tell you something. All kinds of wrong tendencies are being repudiated in our district now. We had

a meeting the other day. Someone in Greenfields already got into trouble and was ordered to rethink her mistakes."

Daquan shook his head. "The way I see it, building patriotic sentiments among people is never wrong. Secretary Liang has instructed us to launch a large-scale patriotic education movement when the volunteer army delegation tours our county. My ways are the same as his."

Jinfa stood up, stamped his numb feet and said, "We will faithfully carry out whatever directives come down from the leaders. But before a directive is issued, we shouldn't take matters into our own hands just to show off. I have to get back to work now. Under no circumstances can those slogans be changed."

"Fine," Daquan said as he stood up. "I'll change them anyway. It doesn't matter whether or not they are written on the walls. I'll make sure the words will get to each and every peasant in Greenfields. You'll see."

Disconcerted, Jinfa reached for his pick, then said loud enough for everyone to hear, "Go ahead if you have the nerve."

"Wait a minute," Daquan called after him. "There's one other thing."

Jinfa turned around and scowled at Daquan.

"I've been gone for several months. Our Party branch should have a meeting right away to discuss problems and exchange ideas."

Without answering, Jinfa took a few swings at the wall. When he looked around again, Daquan was already in the street talking with Yongzhen. Jinfa wiped his nervous sweat and regretted that he had been too soft. I lost some prestige in public, he thought, while Daquan easily gained some political capital. I should have been tougher on him at the end and squelched his arrogance.

A string of invectives flowed from Tough Hide. "That son of a gun, Daquan. He gets more outrageous every day. Just because he lives in a little mud hut and can't afford a big brick house, he's jealous of others buying bricks. But he won't keep those airs for long. I'm going to push him into line sooner or later."

"Stop grumbling," Fan Keming said. "They are both cadres. We should try to get them together when they squabble, not throw more roadblocks between them. Otherwise how will Jinfa be able to lead the village?"

Jinfa swung his pick and gnashed his teeth.

Suddenly Wenji called out, "Look, they are going to Crooked Mouth's house."

Jinfa looked up and saw Daquan and Yongzhen standing in front of Crooked Mouth's door.

"They are going to pick on Crooked Mouth," Wenji said.

"Damn it," Tough Hide cursed. "They know where to find a scapegoat."

Daquan and Yongzhen marched Crooked Mouth out of his house like a prisoner. As they passed through the side gate and went onto the main street, Crooked Mouth glanced over at the work site and grimaced pitifully.

Jinfa threw aside his pick and rushed over. "What are you doing," he began to yell angrily.

Yongzhen poked his head through the gate and, clearly enunciating each syllable, said, "The village security team is carrying out its responsibility to make this crummy landlord report his thinking. We are exercising people's democratic dictatorship to reform him and other counter-revolutionaries. Do you have any instructions, Village Head?"

Jinfa was at a loss for words.

"If you have time, come and join us. You are more than welcome."

Jinfa was infuriated but he could not think of a thing to say.

Yongzhen gibed, "Why did you come after us then?"

Fan Keming hurried over and helped Jinfa out of his quandary by waving his hands at Yongzhen and saying, "Go ahead. There is no problem. The village head just wanted to remind you to explain the Party policy to him thoroughly."

After they had marched off, Fan said, "Oh Jinfa, this mess shows you are far from mature. More difficult problems will be coming along. You can't afford to lose your head so easily."

Having calmed down slightly, Jinfa realized he had overreacted. He began to wonder why he had been so impulsive. He shook his head with embarrassment at Fan's criticism and said in a low voice. "Daquan's hullabaloo got me all mixed up."

"Never let yourself get mixed up. Regardless of all your good intentions, once you lose your head, you're sure to make a mess of things." Fan glanced at the gate and insightfully commented, "I heard bits and pieces of what Daquan said. He's not to be underestimated. He came after you for buying bricks, but he deliberately skirted the issue and snapped at something else."

"If he gives me trouble about the bricks, I'll take him to Secretary Wang."

"That's exactly what Daquan expected. Once he saw that it was impossible to unscramble the egg, and that you were completely in the right, he started pulling tricks on you. This is worse than coming directly at you. It looks like this trip to Beijing added more steel to his blade. He's simply trying it out on you now."

## Discretion

Picking up Crooked Mouth in full view of Jinfa and his crowd was an idea which suddenly occurred to Yongzhen out of his fury. It was readily supported by Daquan, who had been thinking along the same lines. Once they paraded the landlord down the road, Yongzhen deliberately slowed down. When Crooked Mouth was out of hearing-range, he nudged Daquan with his elbow. "What shall we do next?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"Not much. Just pull him aside and scold him."

"I also thought of that. But it's not enough. There is something more crucial."

"Questioning him about his schemes?"

"That's hard to do right now," Daquan observed. "First of all, to all appearances he's merely conducting a simple transaction. Without evidence we can't expect him to tell us his schemes. Secondly, if we question him too closely, I bet the village head will be implicated and will flatly deny it. After all, if Jinfa views himself as an ordinary peasant rather than a Party member, he wouldn't be doing anything wrong. Besides, we've been out of touch with the situation in Greenfields for the last few months. We should be fairly cautious."

Yongzhen suddenly realized why Daquan had not directly confronted Jinfa about the bricks and admired his ingenuity.

Daquan continued, "I think the only thing we can do today is let Crooked Mouth have a taste of our strength. Giving him a hard time will boost the moral of the *fanshen*

families. This deal between Jinfa and Crooked Mouth must have confused a lot of people. Seeing the wall being torn down, they must think that this get-rich competition means the landlords no longer stink and that exploitation is okay. We'll get rid of the bad air by having our security team reprimand Crooked Mouth. Everyone will see that bad people can't get their way. Besides, I also want to use this to test Jinfa once more."

"Good idea," Yongzhen said with delight. "You've just poked at Jinfa's sensitive spot. Now we are really giving him another knock, and he can't even get mad. There's nothing he can do." Yongzhen clapped his hand over his mouth and laughed, aware that his voice had grown progressively louder.

"Take him to the Tall Steps to write a report on himself. I'll go notify the rest of the security team."

"You should go home," Yongzhen pressed. "I can handle this by myself."

"There's no hurry."

"What do you mean no hurry? After being away for several months you came back and simply left your bedroll in the street. Erlin saw it and has been combing the village looking for you. If you don't go home and see your family, even I'll get pissed off. Leave this to me."

Daquan had to agree. He pointed to Crooked Mouth and whispered, "Everyone tearing down the wall saw him and we've paraded him through the streets. That's enough. Give him a scolding, make him write a report and then let him go. Don't drag it out any longer than necessary."

"I promise nothing will go wrong."

As Yongzhen and Crooked Mouth walked off, Daquan felt a sense of triumph. But he was still concerned. The situation in Greenfields was too complex for him to go home

and relax. He thought he had better look up Tiehan to find out in full what had been happening and plan the next step.

When Daquan arrived at the Zhu family's gate, Liping and Tiehan were sitting at opposite ends of a stone table in the courtyard with Liping facing the gate. Though Daquan could not see Tiehan's face he imagined it was as hard as rock from the tone of his voice. Tiehan was saying, "Are you aware that we were all criticized because of you? Since we couldn't put on the new skit, we didn't take part in the performances. Afterward Secretary Wang chewed me out royally. I was a little resentful at the time, but when I got back the village head discussed the matter with me and I began to understand. He said I hadn't realized how serious the problem with your thinking was. To be honest, it hadn't occurred to me that this little disagreement was connected to a major issue. I wonder who told Secretary Wang. He knew everything and was very angry. He criticized our village at a district meeting. He said this represented an unhealthy trend in our Party and Youth League. He wanted our local Party branch to seriously discuss the problem. If we couldn't deal with it through education, then we should use disciplinary measures. You'd better keep in mind that this directive came from above. It's no joke. I've discussed it with Chunhe. We're afraid you'll be as stubborn as ever and you'll snap back at everyone who criticizes you. What if you actually get punished? Then it will be too late. And this doesn't affect just you. It could discredit our whole Youth League branch. Why don't you just make a self-criticism tonight and get it over with? Are you listening to me?"

Liping, her face grim and her eyes downcast, sat mute, with her elbows on her knees and her chin resting on her hands.

Daquan's heart sank. What is happening, he wondered. Tiehan can be gruff and uncouth sometimes, but he is usually kindhearted. Why is he treating a comrade like this? Liping is sensible and proud. Why is she so down? "Hey, what are you people doing?" Daquan called out and walked in.

Tiehan's furrowed forehead relaxed. He jumped up and grabbed his friend's hand. "Thank heavens you're back. I was planning to go get you if you didn't come back by planting time."

Daquan looked at Liping and asked, "What were you discussing? It sounded so serious."

"It's difficult to explain in a few words," Tiehan said. "Sit down. Let's talk about other stuff first."

Daquan wanted to pursue the subject further but he was pushed onto a stool. Tiehan then squatted on the stone table and demanded, "Tell me, are you going away again?"

"Of course not."

"Good. You've put on some weight."

"That's because I've been in good spirits, and have eaten and slept well. But more importantly, I see our goal now."

"What goal?" Tiehan asked.

"Socialism."

"Oh, everyone knows that."

"Yeah, everyone knows, but no one is sure what socialism will look like. Now I've seen it with my own eyes. Workers today are going all out to build socialism. They are opening the road. We peasants can't just sit by and watch. We have to join in too."

"When do we begin?"

"Right away."

"And what else?"

"Isn't this task enough?"

"Oh, is that what it is?"

"Yes, the trip to Beijing has opened my eyes. All the confusion in my mind is gone. To put it simply, I got a new idea. We all knew that Party members, Youth League members and cadres shouldn't just think about bettering their own lot, that we have to serve the people. But that's not enough. We must inspire the peasants to see beyond their own families and their own fortunes."

"But can we expect all the peasants to be like us?"

"Yes, as long as we help them get a clear understanding. We should tell people that only by building a strong country can they improve their lives. When we say 'Serve the people', we mean we should lead them toward a promising future. Right?"

Liping lifted her head from her hands and her face brightened.

Tiehan queried, "How come everything is at loggerheads? While you were away, Secretary Wang gave another speech to Party members and talked to me privately about how it is wrong not to wholeheartedly promote the get-rich campaign. It shows a lack of revolutionary zeal. He said that only wild dreamers and lazy riff-raff want to plunge into socialism right away, that these ideas create confusion and represent an unhealthy trend of thought. He talked about how socialism lies in the future. Right now we must work to consolidate New Democracy. We shouldn't restrict usury, hiring labor and buying and selling land. I didn't think these things sounded quite right, but these people are leaders. Would they twist things around?"

"No matter what anybody says, I'm sure there is absolutely nothing wrong with a Communist actively promoting socialism. Don't feel inhibited."

"I'm all for building socialism. I'm just worried that I'll be violating directives from above."



"Well," Daquan said, "our leaders didn't tell us not to push for a worker-peasant alliance, not to aid Korea against American aggression and not to increase production for the good of the country, did they?"

"No."

"There you are." Daquan thought a moment, then said, "I reckon Secretary Wang's statements were either directed against bums like Tough Hide or answering enemy slanders that we will make everyone eat out of the same communal pot. We'll do things our way and see."

"Terrific!" Tiehan exclaimed.

Liping jumped up and yelled at Tiehan, "Still want to punish me? You have another thought coming. Punish yourself."

"After all this fuss," Daquan said, "I still don't know what happened."

Liping sneered, then spitefully pointed at Tiehan, "Ask him. I don't know what was going on either."

Tiehan was amused. "You might not have known what was going on, but you sure were a scared chicken."

Embarrassed, Liping unleashed her anger. She pounced behind Tiehan and drummed his back with her fists, cursing furiously.

Tiehan's mother entered the front gate, a basket in hand, and shouted, "Hey, you have to come all the way over to my house to bully my son, huh? Don't you know it's against the law to beat people in the new society?"

Liping gave Tiehan two final punches with all her wrath and replied, "What do you mean? All the while your son bullied me you were hiding away and couldn't have cared less. Now that it's his turn to get what he deserves you come running to his defence. The two of you are ganging up on me!"

Mother Zhu laughed. "The way I see it, my son didn't bully you and you'd better stop bullying him. He was used." "Oh, you're back," she said, noticing Daquan. "Just in time. I want to hear what you have to say about this. The village head ordered Tiehan to make up a play about getting rich. Liping said that it wouldn't do a bit of good for us poor peasants, so she refused to participate and quarreled with Tiehan. At first I didn't take it seriously. Those two grew up together, squabbling one day and making up the next. But then the problem got all the way up to the district office and Tiehan was instructed to criticize Liping at the Youth League meeting. How could they do such a thing? And as none of this was any of my business, I couldn't poke my nose into it. All I could do was stand back and worry."

Daquan was beginning to piece things together. "What did you think about these two assignments?" he asked Tiehan.

"Oh my," Tiehan sighed as he shook his head. "The village head's fast tongue sent me running all over the place and Liping's gang made such a hullabaloo. This whole mess turned my head into a bucket of paste."

"We can't afford to get so muddle-headed, our work is too complicated," Daquan remarked. "No matter what problem you run into from now on, as a Party member you have to use your discretion and sort out right from wrong."

Tiehan waved his large hand. "To hell with all these past problems. I'm going to make a fresh start today. Don't anyone ever bring them up again."

"That won't do," Daquan countered. "You need to look back to the mistakes you've made and figure out why others asked you to do certain things and why you went along. Then you can get to the bottom of things and learn a lesson."

That's the only way you can make a fresh start and stay on the right tract. Otherwise how can you avoid repeating the same mistakes? Do you see what I mean?"

"I think you are absolutely right," someone outside the front gate chimed in.

Everyone looked around and saw Wenqing. He walked toward them and said in a grave tone. "The village head came to me last night and asked me to prepare a speech criticizing Liping at the Youth League meeting. Since I was so unsure about many issues myself, I felt I couldn't do it. I also felt the criticism meeting was inappropriate. But still I tried to write something that wouldn't hurt Liping yet could pass as the assignment. What Daquan said to Jinfa at the work site and what he just said to you have made me realize that this was unprincipled. Tiehan, from now on the two of us should learn from Brother Daquan and Comrade Liping."

Liping quickly said, "Now Wenqing, don't make fun of me. I'm pretty confused myself. These events have been a very hard test for me."

"Don't bicker," Tiehan protested. "I am the one who has the most to learn."

"Now you are making sense," Mother Zhu said. "You put me through such agony when you rushed around like a chicken with its head cut off, wasting all that energy for nothing and even getting into trouble. You aren't going to hold that meeting to criticize Liping anymore, are you?"

"Of course not," Tiehan said. "To hell with it."

"Since it's already been called, we'd better hold it. We can change the agenda and ask Chunjiang and Liu Xiang to tell us what they learned in Beijing."

## Family Affair

The moon rose. The bucolic night was clear and serene. A zesty spring breeze carried the coolness from the river and the scent of mulch. Lithesome willow branches danced lustily in the wind as if pursuing the silver moonlight. The rhythmic crunching of animals chewing on fodder pervaded the peacefully sleeping streets.

Daquan, who had grown accustomed to the clatter of the trains and the dazzling city lights, felt a fresh sensation upon suddenly returning to this setting. He walked home from the meeting, his footsteps buoyant, his heart warmed by the enthusiasm of the young people. The Youth League meeting had been a great success. People remarked that they had not been to such a good meeting since land reform.

Daquan saw a light in his house. He carefully lifted the gate, preventing it from scraping the ground, and gently closed it behind him so as not to disturb Erlin, whose room was dark. As he approached his house, he saw a figure silhouetted against the bedroom window, and he quickened his pace. Inside the house Ruifen knocked something over that fell with a bang. Then the door curtain swished as she hurried from the bedroom to the living room and opened the front door. The moonlight streamed into the room like clear water and fell on her. With sleepy eyes she gazed lovingly at her long-missed husband. They stood looking at one another, neither knowing what to say first. After they greeted each other with a smile, Daquan walked into the house. The walls had been cleaned, the windowpane papers replaced,

bright red couplets hung on both sides of Chairman Mao's picture and a strip of patterned cloth skirted the square table. Daquan noticed some changes in every corner of the room. It was nice to be home.

Embarrassed by her husband's appreciative look, Ruifen said, "You must be hungry. I'll fix you some soup."

"I'm fine. I had dinner at Tiehan's. His mother even fried some eggs for me."

"I'll heat some water so you can wash your feet."

"That sounds good. I think I got some blisters from all the dust on the road."

But Ruifen did not move. After a moment's hesitation she finally blurted out, "I heard that you went straight to the village head and got into a big argument with him when you came back. Did you really do that?"

Daquan nodded.

Frowning, she asked, "Is that good?"

Daquan smiled. "That's hard to answer. It really depends on how you look at it. From a personal point of view, I'm merely wearing myself out and delaying my own work with nothing to gain but a few enemies. Obviously that's very bad. But in terms of the revolution and the people, it's important. Why? Because though Jinfa sees himself holding power for all of us, he doesn't work for poor people and he couldn't care less about the revolution and the country. He puts his personal interests above all else. First he defended Shaohuai and now he's linking up with Crooked Mouth. If he keeps on in this direction, what will Greenfields turn into? It is good for people to stop him and put him on the right track."

"I heard he's getting more atrocious every day. He's even learned how to be tricky. You'd better watch your step."

"I'm not afraid of his tricks. If I start worrying about all that, I might as well quit."

"I'm not trying to hold you back. I'm just afraid you can't beat him."

"I might not win if I take him on by myself. But I will get everyone to fight him. Are you afraid?"

The confidence in Daquan's face and the firmness in his voice dispelled Ruifen's fears. "There are lots of things I still don't understand. But I feel much surer of myself now that you are back. I'll do whatever you tell me." She paused, then said, "I'll get the water now."

Daquan leaned over and peered at his slumbering son. "It took me so long to get home today. Did he make a fuss?"

Ruifen came over and tucked in her child. She looked at Daquan and smiled. "He sure did. He even cried. He could hardly keep his eyes open tonight, but he still made Erlin take him over to the village office to look for you."

"Has Erlin gone to bed?"

"He waited around for you all evening, then went out a while ago. I don't know if he's back yet."

"I thought there wasn't anything else going on at the cultural center."

"He probably went out visiting."

"So late?"

Ruifen smiled mysteriously. "I'll tell you some good news after I boil the water."

Daquan sat on the stool and washed his feet while Ruifen cleaned up around the stove, closed the door and drew the curtains. Then she leaned against the *kang* and softly said, "You'll never guess. Other people had to tell me. Erlin found a girlfriend on his own."

"Really. Who told you?"

"First Wan Shuhua."

"How often has her news been reliable? She sees a leaf and she adds a stem. She'll make up a tall story on a whim."

"She wasn't wrong this time. A few days later both Liping and Chunhe told me there was quite a romance budding between the two of them."

"Who is she?"

"Her name is Qian Caifeng. She's a relative of Shaohuai's wife from Temple Village."

"Oh, her!"

"Do you know her?"

"Not really. I used to see her around a few years ago. At least she's a hardworking woman. But I thought she was already married."

"She just got divorced and is staying at Shaohuai's place."

"Did Shaohuai introduce them?"

"No, they met at the cultural center."

"So Erlin's been going to Shaohuai's place to visit her?"

"No, he hasn't. After the play folded, the two of them continued to meet at the cultural center in the evening and talk late into the night. When I was at the well washing clothes the other day, I took a close look at her. Erlin sure has a good eye. She is quite beautiful."

"Looks are not the only thing. More important is what she thinks. Did Erlin ever talk to you about this?"

"You know how shy he is. Would he talk to me? He's been waiting for you. Come to think of it, he is not so young anymore. We should help him make the arrangements."

Daquan sat soaking his feet. He had thought about Erlin's marriage and had even asked some friends to look out for a good family. But he had never expected that the issue would come up so abruptly. Half talking to himself

he remarked, "We need to think this one through very carefully. Of course the new marriage law decrees free choice in marriage, and our family should especially uphold it. But I'm always very suspicious of anything that involves Shaohuai. Maybe I'm too skeptical, but I think it's good to be cautious."

Seeing her husband's troubled face, Ruifen said, "Since you two are very close, I thought you'd be glad to hear about it as soon as possible. I didn't mean to add to your troubles the moment you got home."

"Don't feel bad. The earlier I know the better." Daquan comforted. "That way I have more time to think about how to handle it well."

Ruifen sighed. "Our parents aren't around and we're not that much older than him. It's hard to know how much we should interfere."

"Don't worry," Daquan said confidently. "Erlin's such a good person. And we're so close. He'll listen to us."

They talked a while longer and were just about to go to bed when they heard the courtyard gate open. "Erlin's back," Ruifen whispered.

Daquan put his jacket back on.

"Ruifen, is my brother home?" Erlin called from the courtyard.

Daquan answered, "Come on in."

Daquan immediately noticed the joy in his brother's face. Erlin also seemed more outgoing and more neatly dressed. A fountain pen pinned in his breast pocket was covered by a colorful crocheted jacket with two fluffy balls, one green and the other red, dangling from the top.

Erlin was more loquacious too. As soon as he came in, a stream of words flowed from his mouth. "Where did you go? Some folks said you went to look for Jinfa so I went

over there, but I couldn't find you. Then some people said you were dealing with Crooked Mouth, so I went to the village office but you weren't there either. You've been away for so many months. Everyone missed you. You should have at least come home and said hello before you plunged into village affairs." He pulled out half a pack of "Baby" cigarettes, a good brand with a tin-foil wrapper, and tossed it over to Daquan. "Where are the matches?" he asked Ruifen.

Watching Erlin's anomalous behavior with amazement Daquan gently pushed the pack aside and said, "No thanks, I'll roll my own."

"Take one. They were a gift. I didn't want to smoke them all by myself. I saved them for you." He pulled one out of the pack and shoved it into his brother's hand.

Daquan guessed where the cigarettes had come from. Though he was not too happy about it, he appreciated Erlin's thoughtfulness. So he accepted it and lit up. Daquan assumed from his brother's uneasy expression and his odd behavior that he was anxious to discuss this affair. "Ruifen said you found a girlfriend. Is that true?"

Erlin blushed.

"I'm all for it."

Erlin glanced at him.

"But I want to remind you about something."

Erlin puffed on his cigarette, listening intently.

"The Communist Party saved us from a life of misery and we should always follow the Party toward socialism. Do you understand?"

Erlin was puzzled by what seemed to him irrelevancies.

"We should measure every move we make by this yardstick. This applies to your marriage as well. What do you have in mind?"

Erlin looked down and bashfully said, "We just started to get to know one another."

"You don't have to mince your words with me. If you are really interested in her, it's good to discuss it."

Ruifen looked at Daquan and smiled to herself.

"I was afraid I might not be doing the right thing," Erlin said. "I wanted to wait until you came back so we could talk it over before I made my decision."

Daquan moved closer to his brother and counted on his fingers as he said, "I have three points. First, be very clear about whether Caifeng is the kind of person who will go with us toward our future goal. Secondly, be clear about whether Shaohuai has anything to do with this. Is he trying to get something out of us again? Finally, if there isn't any problem with the first two and Caifeng and you really like each other, then I will be all for it. And I'm sure Ruifen will too."

Erlin waited for a minute, then said with his head still down, "I have tried to get to know her. She is a hardworking honest woman. Her former husband cheated and maltreated her. She has suffered a lot. Shaohuai has nothing to do with this affair. I've never taken anything from him. As far as how we feel about each other, it seems that she is really fond of me, but she still hasn't made up her mind. And I'll listen to you. If you say yes, then I'll say yes, and if you say no, then I'll say no. What's the big hurry anyway?"

"This will affect your whole life," Ruifen said. "It's worth taking some time to decide. Tomorrow we'll ask someone to go to her village and check out her family. Then you should have a talk with her. Be very frank. If the two of you agree, then I would like to see you married as soon as possible. I'm looking forward to some good company and help around the house."

When the issue was first raised, all three were somewhat tense. This conversation, unexpectedly candid and pleasant, had drawn them closer together. Erlin walked back to his room, merrily humming a tune.

Ruifen got into bed and suddenly said, "All that time we were talking we forgot to have Erlin try on the sneakers you brought him from Beijing. He's never had such good shoes before."

Daquan lay down without responding.

Ruifen put out the light. "If the marriage happens, there won't be enough time to build a new house for Erlin. The three of us could move into his room and let them have our place."

Daquan did not answer.

Ruifen went on, "Caifeng can stay home and I'll go out in the fields with the two of you."

Still Daquan did not speak.

Ruifen assumed he was exhausted so she stopped talking. But Daquan was wrapped up in the events of the day. The situation made him realize the path ahead was replete with twists and turns, challenging not only his courage but also his resourcefulness. He moved closer to Ruifen and said, "I really don't think we should rush Erlin's marriage. We need to investigate and give it a little time to see how it works out. I'm afraid that Erlin will get tricked. He never suffered in Shaohuai's hands the way I did. When my mother first brought me to Greenfields as a kid, we lived with Shaohuai. Even though we are relatives, he worked me to the bone. Erlin doesn't know much about Shaohuai's character. I'm afraid that Shaohuai will use Erlin and Caifeng to tear down the wall between him and the *fanshen* peasants."

## Rage

Joyful laughter rippled through the streets of Greenfields and mingled with booming voices from loudspeakers and the clamor of gongs, symbols and *erbu*\* emanating from the cultural center. This tumult, which had been absent since the height of land reform, left no farmhouse untouched.

Shaohuai was livid with rage. He banged his windows shut. Stamping his feet he yelled, "Won't they ever stop that squawking? Can't even have a moment's peace. Disgusting!"

Purple Eggplant was baffled by her husband's change of mood. She trailed him around the house, babbling incessantly to draw out why his recent ecstasy had turned to rage. "Did you hear Daquan picked a fight with the village head before he even went home? What do you make of it?"

"Who knows?"

"He and that son of Zhou Zhong's yanked Crooked Mouth from his house and paraded him all the way down the street. They locked him in the village office and scolded him till he turned blue. It peeved the hell out of the village head, but he couldn't do a thing about it. What are they up to?"

Shaohuai wrinkled his brow. "Beats me."

Their conversation was interrupted by the unexpected arrival of Zeng, the Lihua Landing animal trader.

Trader Zeng flashed a smile and brought out a pack of cigarettes. "Old Shaohuai, I heard you were buying a cart. I have the perfect horse for you to pair up with your mule.

\* A two-stringed bowed musical instrument.

It's a beaut — young and strong. I'll let you have it for a good price. You can't beat it. Best buy in town."

Shaohuai grimaced and listlessly replied, "I'll have to wait awhile on this one."

"Shaohuai, I went all the way to Gubei Gap to pick out this horse for you. If you pass it up, you may not find one so easily the next time."

"I can't afford it right now."

"You needn't be so modest. You're doing great these days."

"I'm not being modest. It's true."

"Don't slam the door on this deal so quickly. Come take a look when you have a moment. I guarantee you won't be able to let the reins out of your hand once you've seen it."

"I'm not in the mood these days."

Trader Zeng assumed Shaohuai's intransigence indicated that his competitor from Heavenly Gate had snatched this lucrative deal away from him. After he casually chatted about daily trivialities and business in town, he unleashed a scathing character indictment of his rival. Zeng pontificated on Trader Li's avarice and lack of scruples, and then told a story about how Li had dolled up an old donkey and passed it off as a four year old to a peasant who was buying an animal for the first time. The peasant was so distraught when he discovered the fraud that he fell ill. Zeng next implicated his rival in illicit traffic: Li used matches, salt, and cloth to cheat nomads in Inner Mongolia out of expensive horses, and made a huge profit by selling them in the Heavenly Gate area without paying a cent of tax. His treachery had instilled such fear in people that no honest peasant dared be involved with him. His stories spent, Trader Zeng bid Shaohuai farewell and was off to another prospective customer.

After seeing his guest to the gate, Shaohuai decided to dig up some dirt for the pigsty. He was picking up the shovel when Caifeng walked out of the house with a basin of dirty clothes.

"My wife said you're leaving," Shaohuai stopped and said.

Caifeng smiled and answered, "I've been here for quite a while. I'd like to go home for a visit."

"Not planting time yet. Why are you in such a hurry? My wife would like you to help her finish some sewing."

"I have to plan the spring planting for my aunt in Temple Village." Caifeng blushed, her eyelids dropped, and she looked down at her toes. "Shaohuai, what should I do? You know. . . ."

Shaohuai felt ill at ease. "Nowadays there's freedom of choice in marriage. The decision is in your hands."

Caifeng glanced at him. "What decisions can I make? You started it all. You have to follow it through to the end."

Shaohuai lowered the shovel from his shoulder and leaned it against the ground. "Well, you know how I want to help you. I don't need to go into that. I first thought the Gaos were a perfect choice. No in-laws, many workers and few mouths to feed. They seemed quite promising. Then when Daquan led a bunch of people to work in Beijing, I figured he'd changed his ways like Jinfa and was going out to make money for fertilizer and a few implements. But damn it! He came back less willing than ever to do a good day's work. He ran around as if he had discovered a gold mine in Beijing. He riled up a bunch of people and all hell broke loose. God only knows what he's up to. I'm fed up to the teeth."

Shaohuai's discourse seemed almost incomprehensible to

Caifeng who had little interest in matters not directly pertaining to her. A month earlier when Shaohuai and Purple Eggplant were trying to persuade her to catch Erlin, she had been pessimistic, largely due to her resentment toward her former husband, which had broadened into an animosity toward all men. She had approached Erlin with a timid curiosity and was soon attracted by his strong build, sincerity, and fierce loyalty toward her. Erlin awakened her lust for life and for happiness, and bolstered her confidence. Caifeng became deeply involved in this relationship, but now that she needed Shaohuai to negotiate the marriage arrangement, he seemed strangely apathetic. Frustrated by his inexplicable uneasiness, she said, "All this is beyond me. Just say if you are going to do something for me or not."

Shaohuai paused and looked at her. "Erlin is an honest and decent guy. As long as he has not been contaminated by his brother, this marriage is still possible. Don't fret. We'll find out which way he's leaning, then decide."

Caifeng said bitterly, "A few months ago you and your wife sang a duet about what a great match this would be. I believed you. I put my pride in my pocket and ran after him like a shameless hussy. Now you are changing your tune and leaving me in the lurch. It's so embarrassing. All right, the hell with it. I'll drop him."

"Now don't be childish. Marriage is the biggest event in your life. We can't treat it lightly. Get a hold of yourself, and be patient. I hope that Erlin won't take the same road as his brother and that he'll put his heart into his family. That way the two of you won't have to worry where your next meal is coming from. And I'll be pleased to see you enjoy some respect in the village."

As Caifeng walked away, Purple Eggplant came out of the house and said, "I don't blame her for resenting you.

You have been acting a little strange lately. Everything was going fine and then you suddenly changed your mind. You better let me in on it so I'll do the right thing."

Shaohuai shook his head. "Let you in on what? Daquan's recent actions have really thrown me off balance."

"The way I see it, you've already tied them together. It's past the point of no return."

"I'm afraid that I'll lose the bait along with the fish."

Purple Eggplant finally understood her husband's change in attitude toward the marriage. "I don't see how it could turn out badly. The Gaos are poor. It's easy to make them feel grateful. Don't you see how hard it is for Daquan to arrange a wife for his brother? Why wouldn't he appreciate a wife delivered right to his doorstep? Besides, we could spend a little money on the wedding and keep seeing them afterward. You said blood is thicker than water. With all that effort, I'd be surprised if they didn't come to us."

Shaohuai shook his head. "You don't know Daquan the way I do. I watched him grow up. He is stubborn — as hard as iron. An old brick wall might patch up Crooked Mouth's relationship with Jinfa. But I'm afraid even a wall of gold won't bring Daquan over to our side."

Such resignation made Purple Eggplant begin to wonder about Shaohuai's 'new discovery.' "Didn't you say that the saying 'People die for money like birds die for food' is a divine rule?"

"The world has been that way for thousands of years. But somehow that's not what makes him tick. How strange!"

Shaohuai walked toward the gate in bad spirits and saw a head disappear behind the side wall. Once on the street he heard his neighbor's door screech open. Qin Fu appeared and greeted Shaohuai in a tense voice. "Are you going to the fields?"



"Yes."

"What news have you heard?"

"Nothing."

"Don't try and fool me. I can smell the difference in your courtyard."

"Well, isn't your nose sharp?"

"Wait a minute. I want to ask you something. The get-rich fad is dying, isn't it?"

"Looks like it's all pooped out."

"That's the least of my worries. I just hope that there aren't any more tricks waiting off stage."

"I don't think you have to worry about that."

"Wenqing rambled on all last night. I suddenly realized these people are not about to sit back and enjoy a peaceful life. They want to mess around with socialism right away. You're much sharper than I am. How come you didn't pick up on this?"

"Wenqing was just parroting Daquan."

Qin Fu's faith in Shaohuai was shrinking considerably. "Daquan is a Party member, and he came back from Beijing. His words should be reliable, shouldn't they?"

"How high can Daquan reach? In Beijing he was nothing but a sweating coolie; he didn't go to big meeting halls and sit in soft chairs. I think he's just raising a racket on his own whim. He doesn't have any support from above."

"Why is he doing this?"

"He's so poor, he's going crazy."

"Then why do you look so upset?"

"I'm not worried about changes. I'm fed up with these people."

"How come the village head isn't as spry as usual?"

"Him ... probably he over-exerted himself building his

new house — Even he puts all his heart into getting rich. Why are you so jumpy?"

22

## As Clear As Day

Tiehan, reinvigorated, once again whirlwinded through the streets. He was heading for Jinfa's house, hoping to persuade the village head to attend a Party meeting.

Tiehan attributed Jinfa's muddled actions to the same source as his own: they had not gone to Beijing and seen the recovery of national industry nor grasped the importance of aiding Korea against American aggression. In short, the village head could not see the connection between everyday life and state affairs. Tiehan believed that Jinfa, like himself, would immediately come around once he calmly listened to Daquan's reasoning in a Party meeting.

Jinfa's yard was cluttered with bricks, tiles, sawdust and wood chips, and smelled of clay and sap — the trappings of his unremitting efforts to rebuild his house.

Jinfa, his eyes bloodshot from lack of sleep, squatted in the one remaining shed and boiled water with a dour expression on his face while Tiehan zealously expounded on the new mobilization. Even though Jinfa had been secluded in his yard for the last few days, he was well aware of recent events. He was much clearer and much angrier than Shaohuai about Daquan's activities. A stream of alarmed visitors had come running over, anxious about the stability of the get-rich policy. Jinfa assumed his village head posture and authoritatively

reassured them. But he could not shake off his resentment or his feeling of emptiness. Even still, he did not harbor any bad feelings toward Tiehan, whom he viewed as somewhat mischievous but quite docile on important matters — all in all a fairly malleable person.

Before Tiehan had finished talking, Jinfa unleashed a tirade against Daquan. "A village needs one man to call the shots just like a family. Even if I were a stake in the ground, he shouldn't casually step over me now that the leaders have put me there. Am I the village head or is he?"

Originally Tiehan had not intended to say much. But now he felt compelled to openly counter the village head. Waving the newspaper in his hand, Tiehan replied, "Frankly what you said couldn't be further from the truth. Let's be honest. When Daquan came back, he went straight to you. How can you say he stepped over you?"

Jinfa waved his hand. "Better you didn't mention it. Just thinking about it really makes me mad. He did come to me, but for what? To blast me like a machine-gun."

"He suggested that the slogans be revised. That's hardly blasting you."

"Do you think just anyone can change these slogans because he feels like it? We both heard the speech at the district meeting. Are those slogans out of line with what we were told?"

"But what's wrong with the ones Daquan suggested?"

"That depends on how you see it. Is hawking socialism right now in keeping with the leadership's intentions?"

"Communists have to work for socialism. Anyone who is not for it might as well quit the Party."

"Of course Communists should work for socialism but timing is important. To push it right now is wrong. It's trying to scare people. If you keep it up, sooner or later

you will be criticized. You might even get suspended from the Party."

"Don't try to scare me. I'm not afraid."

Jinfa burst out laughing. "Oh you..."

Tiehan was puzzled by Jinfa's laugh. With a grim expression he said, "What's so funny? I'm really not afraid."

Jinfa cleared the smile from his face. "We got this obsession from Luo Xuguang during land reform. Luo talked to me for two whole nights about socialism and communism. After that I wasn't a bit interested in getting my own life together and was disgusted with anyone who had his mind set on doing better. You probably remember I used to threaten in meetings, 'Don't anyone try to get ahead. Anybody who aims higher than the rest is going to get nipped!' Ha, ha, ha..."

Tiehan impatiently waved his hand. "Don't confuse the point. That's not what we mean at all."

Jinfa cut in, "Let me finish. Later on someone reported me to Secretary Wang. He called me in for criticism. He told me that County Head Gu also knew about my mistakes — that I had better watch out or I might get in trouble. I answered the same way you just did. Said I wasn't afraid. But he didn't lose his patience. He explained that working for socialism was our long-term goal. Who knew which generation would see it. He said that his generation of Party members would work for New Democracy. And for the present that meant wholeheartedly striving to enrich one's own family and to recover and develop production. He said our country had inherited a wreck from the old society. It would take a long time to put everything in working order. And at the same time we would have to deal with the imperialists surrounding us. He asked me if the people could stay in power without overhauling this wreck. Without grain.

Without developing production. Could production be developed without giving peasants some benefits, without letting them freely compete to enrich their own families and without making them feel at ease? Oh my, it was as if I'd just awakened from a dream. Only then did I realize why the leadership was calling on peasants to get rich and why it was criticizing unhealthy trends of thought. Tiehan, think about this. Am I right?"

Tiehan looked at Jinfa's beaming face, shook his head and said, "Bring it up at the Party meeting."

Jinfa believed that he had softened Tiehan. He patted him on the shoulder and said amiably, "We are members of the Communist Party. We can't just do whatever we like. We must follow the leadership. Of course Daquan's intentions aren't bad. He's been misled by Luo Xuguang and refuses to listen to other people's advice. You may not know that Luo Xuguang disagreed with County Head Gu. Luo's point of view may not be correct. Why else was he transferred before land reform was over? Besides, Luo Xuguang might have even changed his own mind by now. Are you going to cling to a few words that he said then and risk getting into serious trouble? How crazy can you be?"

Tiehan was outraged by Jinfa's self-righteousness. He slapped his thigh and said, "I've had enough of your garbage. Don't try to shove it down my throat."

"What's the matter?" Jinfa said calmly. "I'm discussing important issues of the revolution. How can you call it garbage?"

"Would I have been so lost these last few months if it weren't for your garbage?" Tiehan's veins bulged in his neck as he yelled. "Would I have supported Wenqing's rotten skit? Would I have gotten criticized by Secretary Wang

and would I have called a stupid meeting to condemn Liping?"

"Tiehan, are you against the leadership's calling on peasants to get rich?"

As intended, this question jolted Tiehan. He fumbled for an answer.

"Come on, answer me. It's a question of your attitude toward the leadership. You have to take a stand."

Tiehan frankly admitted, "I have nothing to hide. I never thought about opposing this policy. It's just that it doesn't excite me."

Jinfa pounced on this inconsistency. "Let's get this clear. You are a Party member and a Party policy doesn't excite you. Is this acceptable or not?"

"I have my reasons. From what I can see only people like Shaohuai support it. The *fanshen* families are left out in the cold. Before we know it Shaohuai may be able to take advantage of us again. I don't think this policy, by itself, can lead us to socialism."

Jinfa smirked and said satirically, "What is socialism anyway, comrade? Do you understand it? Socialism means giving the peasants a better life. If I have to talk in these terms, I would say enriching individual families *is* socialism. It's connected with the future of socialism."

Tiehan waved his hand. "Hogwash! I'm not sure if enriching individual families is linked to socialism but I know it is not equal to socialism. Do you mean to say when Shaohuai gets rich, then we'll have socialism? You are all turned around. Don't think others are going to go along with you. You need to wake yourself up with a bucket of cold water. Getting back to the point, there is a Party meeting tonight. We'll discuss everything there. Did you get that? Right after dinner at the Tall Steps."

Jinfa, still squatting, looked up and said, "I'm quite busy right now. I can't afford the time for anymore of this empty talk. Let's set a later date."

Enraged, Tiehan became wreckless. "Of course there are concrete things. We will discuss the bricks you bought —"

Jinfa jumped up. "What is there to talk about? Let me ask you, does your instant socialism mean that Party members can't build houses, that they all should live out in the fields?"

"You bought bricks from the landlord. This needs to be discussed."

"Oh, good heavens," Jinfa scoffed. "Even this becomes a crime on your list! It doesn't matter who owned the bricks. The deal was fair and square. I paid for them. He didn't give them to me. Does everyone here have to wear a button stating their class status at the weekly market in Heavenly Gate? Which article in the law prohibits Party members from buying from the landlord? Tell Daquan to find it for me. If he succeeds, he can make all the fuss he wants in a Party meeting. I'll even bow my head and make a public self-criticism."

"That self-righteousness won't do you a bit of good," Tiehan yelled. "You'll have to come to this meeting whether you like it or not. Otherwise we'll re-elect the group leader."

Jinfa nearly blurted out *you don't have the right*, but said instead, "Even though we're both pretty angry, I don't hold a grudge against you. And I believe you don't have anything against me either. We've worked well together these last few years. I didn't mean to get so excited but I'm really afraid that you'll lose out. You —"

"It's not a question of gaining or losing out," Tiehan cut in as he rolled back his eyeballs. "I'm talking about the revolution, not a business deal."

"To use your words then," Jinfa said, "I'm afraid you've been fed a pile of garbage. Not by me, but by someone else. You have to be careful."

Tiehan sneered. "No need for your concern. I see things as clear as day now."

Tiehan left Jinfa's courtyard and trudged through the flooded reed swamp on his way to Daquan's place. A few ducks swam in the murky water which was seeping into the surrounding ditches. Mud oozed under his feet. Just as he parted some shrubbery to jump over a ditch, he heard voices. His eyes followed the sound and he descried Caifeng washing clothes on a rock and Erlin standing next to her with a shovel over his shoulder.

"Ever since your brother came back, you don't care about me as much." Caifeng said.

"Don't let your imagination run away with you. As long as you don't change, I'll never change."

"Then why won't you give me an answer? How long do you expect me to wait?"

"My brother is too busy these days. I hardly ever see him. We haven't had a chance to talk it over."

"How come your brother is so busy? Who is he working for anyway? If it's not for the Zhangs, it's for the Lis. Doesn't he ever work at home?"

"Well, who knows what he is thinking about?"

"Everyone calls him a fool behind his back. They say this is the ideal time for your family to get rich. I don't know what's stopping him. He's not interested in getting rich himself and even resents others for trying."

"No. He doesn't resent others. He just doesn't think enough about his own family. It gets to me sometimes too."

"I guess I just wasn't born under the right star. I was hoping that my luck would turn when I met you, that I

would enjoy a few happy days. The way things look now, even if we get married, there won't be much to enjoy."

"Don't worry. No matter what, I'm going to make you happy."

"That's easy to say."

"Wait and see."

Tiehan sensed a certain tension in their conversation. But before he seriously considered matters, he burst out, "Ha, ha. What kind of secret conference are you holding?" Then he jumped through the bushes and ran over to them. "Don't stop talking. I'll take part as an observer."

Caifeng blushed. She lowered her head and started scrubbing her clothes. Erlin, looking even more embarrassed, pretended to shovel dirt.

Tiehan clapped his hands and laughed. "Fine, fine. It's hard to discuss these matters with a third party around. Okay." Then he grabbed Erlin's arm and pulled him down a small path.

When they were some distance from Caifeng, Tiehan banged his fist on Erlin's chest and said, "I heard people say you had gotten a girl. I thought they were making fun of you. You rascal. Where did you learn this trick?"

Erlin returned Tiehan's punch with a kick. "What a worthless friend you turned out to be. Can't even count on your help at a critical moment."

"If I had known, I would have helped long ago. So when are you going to hold the wedding?"

"It's not all that simple."

"Can't be that complicated."

"She hasn't made up her mind yet."

"Just ask her — Do you want to marry me or not? Here I am. Nothing's hidden. Take it or leave it! Go ahead and tell her. If it's too hard, I'll do it for you."

Erlin grabbed Tiehan and smiled. "I considered talking to you about this when my brother was away. But then I thought better of it. Now I know I was right."

"If I'm no help myself, I can call on the cultural center or the militia any time. Just give me the word."

"None of that will help. I need to get a better sense of how she feels about me. But you could do one thing — keep this to yourself."

Tiehan gazed at Erlin for a moment, then nodded earnestly. "Fine, fine. I'll keep it to myself. You'd better go continue your offensive. If I can't help, I won't bother you either. But there's one condition. You'd better give me a full report tonight." Then he marched off laughing.

## 23

### The Busy Season Begins

Apricot and peach trees blossomed and before long willow fluff was floating everywhere. Wild grass shoots pierced the dark soil. Along the banks of the Bright Cloud River peasants eagerly threw themselves into spring planting, heartened by the arrival of government agricultural loans and relief grain.

The Party meeting never materialized. There was no further flare up between the three Party members although Tiehan could not refrain from a few gibes during the discussion to allocate the relief funds and grain.

Jinfa had more time for village affairs now that his new house was finished. He called a public meeting in three different neighborhoods to stress the policy and encourage

peasants to work hard to enrich themselves. He set his sights on the autumn harvest, for he figured that a number of families would be very well-off by then, thus providing him with some solid achievements to report. Needless to say he included himself among them, for this would be iron-clad proof that his position was right.

Daquan launched a massive political education campaign. At the same time he heeded Zhou Zhong's advice and concentrated on the important aspects of spring planting. The activists in the village went door to door making sure that each household had enough compost and urging them to get it to the fields quickly. Daquan instructed these activists to pay special attention to the *fanshen* families while he and Tiehan helped those who were facing severe difficulties arrange their work.

Enthusiasm ran high. People started to work before dawn — cleaning out pigsties, loosening compost heaps and transporting it to the fields.

Daquan sped along with two baskets of manure swinging like wings from his shoulder-pole. Sweat streamed from his forehead onto his thick black eyebrows, ran down his ruddy cheeks and splattered onto the ground. He was stripped down to his undershirt, revealing his powerful arms. He halted under a big willow tree and shouted, "Hey up there, why are you cutting those branches?"

Chunjiang stopped swinging his ax. "I'm growing vegetables in my yard," he answered. "I want to plant some branches for a hedge."

"Are you through spreading fertilizer on your fields?"

"Yes. Finished early this morning."

"When will you start plowing?"

"Not for a couple of days."

"Did you get a hold of some draft animals?"

"Old Su's going to let us use his ox in exchange for a few days' work. It's a convenient arrangement as we don't have a draft animal and he's short of manpower."

"Good, you'll be able to sow on time."

"Yeah, but my brother keeps griping that we're getting a raw deal. I told him to forget it, that we've got to get our seeds in. A little extra work for old Su afterward won't hurt us."

"I agree. Getting the seeds in is more important."

"How about you? Your small donkey can't pull a plow by itself."

"Grandma Xu from Lotus Pool Village has asked me to plow her fields in return for her ox. At first I told her it would be easier for us to team up with people in our own villages, but she says that she can't find anyone she likes."

"It's just as well. Greenfields never had many draft animals. With all this virgin land we're cultivating this spring there aren't enough animals to go around."

"You have a point."

"You'd better settle it with her right away. Don't spend so much time worrying about others that you neglect your own work."

"All right."

Erlin came up with another load of manure and the two brothers raced off to the fields.

The Gao stretch of land was fairly flat, sloping down into a ditch at the southern end. These fields had been allotted to them after Liberation: Land which they had yearned for without the least hope of possession. For two weeks after they received it, Erlin walked through the fields daily, feasting his eyes on the earth and eagerly anticipating the sowing and harvest. The future well-being of the family would spring from this precious plot.

The two brothers dumped their manure at the end of the field and walked back with empty baskets. The thawing soil was soft and moist.

"Back home in Shandong," Erlin said, "the land is hard as clay, but here it's so soft I feel like I am walking on a cotton quilt. Makes me want to roll on the ground!"

Daquan smiled at his brother's childlike joy. "Right. The good soil around the Bright Cloud River is famous and the stretch here is the best of all. This was the first plot I tilled when I became a hired hand for Crooked Mouth. And now, working on my own land for the first time, I'm starting on the same piece again."

Erlin stomped his feet on the ground several times as if reassuring himself that it was solid. "Sometimes I'm afraid this is only a dream. I never thought land would just come right into my hands. The two of us can cultivate it five or six times and get a bigger yield than we've pledged. We'll satisfy all the family's needs this year and have a surplus next year. In three to five years we'll have loads and loads of grain stashed away."

"In a few years we'll be able to supply more grain to the state, and that will support the workers to make more machines and weapons. We'll get tractors for plowing and trucks for transport. By then our village will be socialist. We peasants will be like factory workers. We'll be well organized, sowing together and harvesting together. Every family will enjoy a good life. Won't that be great!"

Erlin was preoccupied with different thoughts: In a few years he and Caifeng would have a couple of children. They might have earned enough for draft animals, a cart and a new house. They might even be more prosperous than Shao-huai. . . . As he followed his brother out of their fields he said, "I'd like to get settled right after the spring planting."

Daquan was thinking about the few families without draft animals who had not yet teamed up. It took him a moment to figure out what Erlin was talking about. "Are you sure about those things I asked you the other night?"

"Like I said, there's no problem."

"You both want to get married?"

"Yes."

"Don't we need some time to get ready? It might be better to wait until the harvest. Once we get our first crop, we'll be on firmer ground. Then we could also fix up the house."

"I'm afraid that something might go wrong if I wait."

"What's there to worry about if you both like each other?"

"I want to get married right after the spring planting and get it over with."

Zhou Liping and her sister-in-law came along carrying manure and greeted them as they passed.

Daquan thought: the Zhous can handle their plowing. They have enough manpower and plenty of relatives to team up with. Grandma Deng will be taken care of because her son's in the army. . . . As he reviewed the situation it struck him that Liu Xiang was in the worst trouble. He was the only able-bodied person in his family and he had no draft animals. He had tried to team up but most families had already promised their draft animals elsewhere.

Daquan and Erlin delivered two more loads of fertilizer to the fields. Daquan pondered Liu Xiang's problem the entire time. He went through all the families in the village who owned draft animals but could not think of anyone who might be able to help.

Swallows flew low, skimming the ground. The roseate evening clouds dimmed. The countryside seemed to contract as a light mist rose. Time to quit, the Gao brothers went

home. Xiao Long, who was waiting for them at the door, bounded over and carried a shoulder-pole into the house. Ruifen had already set the table. Now she brought out a large bowl of steaming porridge.

As Ruifen ladled out the porridge she said, "Qin Kai was just looking for you. He wants to go with you when you get the seeds."

Daquan hung up the towel he had used to wash his face and started out the door.

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

"Over to Qin Kai's. He might not have promised his ox to anyone yet. I want to get him and Liu Xiang together."

"Can't it wait until after supper?"

"The earlier the better. I want to get it over with."

These last words exasperated Erlin. When other people need draft animals, he thought, you put your heart into it. But when your own brother wants to get married, a once in a lifetime event, he cannot get your attention no matter what he does. What are you after? Some praise from the leaders?

Later that evening people arrived at the night school. Tables were lined up in the room and a paraffin lamp hanging overhead cast a gay leaping light on a circle of villagers smelling of sweat and earth who were pouring over a new handbook on world affairs.

Both Daquan and Liu Xiang were among the students. Daquan told Liu Xiang, "Qin Kai agreed to let you use his ox."

"I heard he's promised it to some relatives. Won't this upset their plans?" asked Liu Xiang dubiously.

"He said their village has plenty of draft animals. It

won't be hard for them to hook up with someone else. Don't worry about it. Hurry up and get ready to plow."

"My wife and I were starting to feel desperate. You've solved a big problem for us."

"The going rate is to exchange two man hours for each hour the animal works. Qin Kai's ox is pretty strong. If you can't make up the cost with your labor, your wife can help his family with some sewing. No matter what we shouldn't let him take a loss."

"Right." Liu Xiang nodded.

The class was dismissed early since it was the busy season. As soon as the golden moon rose in the east people cheerfully trooped out of the school. Liu Xiang, textbook in hand, had just walked down the steps when a little girl ran across the road.

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

"What are you doing here, Chunxi?"

"Mom's real sick."

In great dismay Liu Xiang hurried off with his daughter. His wife had been all right at dinner. What could have happened? She must be pretty sick or she would not have sent Chunxi to fetch him so late at night. . . . Anxiety preyed on his mind.

## 24

### Catastrophe

Just as Liu Xiang's planting troubles were no accident, his wife's illness was not incidental; she had been stricken by



a recurring condition. One cold winter day fifteen years ago the landlord had ordered Lanfang, eight months pregnant, to grind rice flour for New Year's cakes. She was not allowed to leave the millstone for two days and two nights; the draft animals were alternated but no one was sent to spell her. Fatigued and hungry, she felt like the northwest winter wind was slicing through her. Finally she was engulfed in darkness. The donkey, alarmed by the fainting woman, came to a standstill. Lanfang gave birth to her first son beside the landlord's millstone.

Lanfang did not dare call out for help lest the landlord should accuse her of wrecking the aura of good luck at New Year's. She lay there until nightfall before dragging herself home. When Liu Xiang came back from his job at a coalshop in Heavenly Gate at midnight, he found a frozen baby and a half-dead wife.

To save her, Liu Xiang plowed through a blizzard to borrow money from the landlord. Crooked Mouth exacted such exorbitant interest that Liu Xiang had to work a year to repay the loan. With the help of some friends, he managed to save his wife's life but she never fully recovered her health.

The strain preparing for spring planting retriggered her illness. She had said nothing for a few days, trying to overcome it, but her condition grew worse.

Now Lanfang shook her hand and weakly urged, "Don't worry. I'll be all right in a little while."

"Should I go for a doctor?"

"No, no. That costs money...."

"Don't worry about that. Your health is more important," Liu Xiang said, walking out to get the doctor.

After a day and a half, the patient's condition saw no improvement. Liu Xiang's spirits were extremely low.

The timing of his wife's illness distressed Liu Xiang more than anything else. Even a rather well-off family was hard pressed at this time of year to say nothing of a *fansben* family. Liu Xiang had to start from nothing to till his new land. He bought an old plow, some tools and some seed with the money he had earned in Beijing. He was the only able-bodied man in his family, yet with his wife ill, he not only had to spend money for medicine, but he also had to stay home to cook and watch his children. How could he find time to work in the fields?

As Liu Xiang sat beside his bed-ridden wife, he stared at the flickering lamp. Listening to the wind, his heart burned with agony and his body was as restless as the rustling branches. A host of memories crowded into his mind.

The Beijing experience had profoundly affected Liu Xiang. He came to understand Daquan more than anyone else and was the most sympathetic to Daquan in his dispute with Jinfa. He was determined to do everything within his power to support Daquan: to work hard on his new land, ensure a larger yield and be the first to turn in grain and cotton to the state. The two of them had discussed increasing fertilizer, selecting better seeds and plowing early. Now Liu Xiang was faced with a catastrophe before he had taken his first step. At this critical moment any further delay would make it impossible for him to catch up, spelling the doom of his grand plans.

His son had fallen asleep in his arms. His wife was resting quietly, her eyes closed. Liu Xiang laid the child on the *kang* and turned the lamp-wick up higher, then ran over to Daquan's place.

Even though it was fairly late, the Gao courtyard was alive with activity. From Erlin's room came the clatter of tools being repaired. Ruifen stood in the doorway running

seeds through a sieve and Daquan could be heard talking to a visitor in the main house.

Liu Xiang went in and found Daquan squatting on the *kang* husking corn as he chatted to Grandma Xu from Lotus Pool Village. Liu Xiang greeted her and asked how preparations for spring planting were going in her village.

"Pretty much the same as here. In all my sixty years I have never seen peasants so busy and happy. We want to raise a huge crop and get ourselves off the ground. What about you Liu Xiang? Got everything ready?"

Liu Xiang forced a smile but did not answer.

"Uncle Liu Xiang has had his share of problems, but he'll manage," Daquan supplied.

"That's right," Grandma Xu said. "A farmer's life is never easy. Even after land reform, it's hard to take the first step. Just look at me. I didn't have an inch of land to stand on in the past and I was always in trouble. Now I have my own land but I still have my troubles."

"The troubles today are different," Daquan said. "In the old days we could hardly survive. Nowadays we are trying to build a future."

Grandma Xu smiled at Liu Xiang and said, "Daquan has changed a lot since I last saw him six months ago. He's so sharp, has such big ideas, and talks so well. It's a treat to listen to him. I came over here worried sick but before I knew it, he had cheered me up."

"This new society brings out the best in people," Liu Xiang said. "Daquan is a Party member now. He's the backbone of our village."

Daquan immediately protested, "No, Uncle Liu Xiang, you've got it backward. It's the *fanshen* peasants who are the backbone. Without all of you, we Party members wouldn't dare think big, let alone plunge ahead." Then

he moved further in on the *kang* to make space for Liu Xiang.

Liu Xiang shook his head. "No, I can't sit down. I have to get back soon. I just wanted to tell you I can't go with you tomorrow to get the seeds. My wife's still sick. Well, that's all. I have to go."

Daquan leapt off the *kang* and ran out to the courtyard. "Wait a minute."

Liu Xiang stopped, touched by Daquan's concern.

With the light coming through the window Daquan studied Liu Xiang's face. "You don't look at all well."

"I've been up late these last few nights. ..."

"That can't be all of it. You look depressed. What's the matter? Are your problems too much for you?"

Liu Xiang shifted uneasily, not knowing how to answer without giving his friend more cause for concern.

"Are you short of cash? Do you need a hand? Tell me what's wrong and I'll try to help."

"It's nothing."

"Don't hide your problems. I'll get seed for you. And if you can't finish loosening your compost, we can all help. There's no need for you to look so down. We have to stand up to our difficulties. We can't let ourselves become a laughing stock for those who despise us."

"That's precisely what bothers me," Liu Xiang said. "I don't want my failure to become their joke. Don't worry, Daquan. Liu Xiang won't let the *fanshen* peasants down."

"I like your determination. But you better tell us your problems so that we can tackle them together. We are all one family. You shouldn't be polite with your own folk."

"You are already over-burdened with other people's problems. I don't want to bother you with mine."

"No, that's not right," Daquan adamantly stated. "What

kind of Communist am I if I'm bothered by other people's problems? If people won't let us help them, what is there left for Communists to do?"

Liu Xiang brightened up and said, "With a loyal friend like you I won't bend under any hardships. If I need help, I'll be sure to let you know."

"All right then. That's just what I want to hear."

Time and tide wait for no man. There were only a few days left for sowing. The fields and the village were bustling with activity from dawn to midnight. The calling of the cuckoos, the grinding of the millstones and the cracking of the carters' whips gnawed at Liu Xiang's heart.

Another five days had passed, yet his wife's condition had only worsened. He was late with his plowing and his family's store of grain was slowly being depleted to pay for medicine. He frantically paced around the courtyard, then called his daughter and held her hand. "Will you stay home from school today?" he whispered. "Work is piling up and your mother is sick. If you take care of her and your brothers, I can go loosen the compost and spread it on the fields."

Chunxi agreed. Liu Xiang patted his daughter on the head and started out with his pick. "Come get me if your mother wakes up."

It was very quiet in the streets. No children were about. Most adults were out sowing, their houses locked.

Liu Xiang chipped at the compost heap, untouched all winter. Since he did not own any pigs or draft animals, his pile consisted only of the dung he had picked up along the road and clay bricks from the shed he had torn down. The tamped earth was hard to break up but he worked quickly as he might be called home at any time. He swung

his pick so vehemently that his tattered jacket was soon soaked with sweat.

The sun was warm and the fragrance of apricot and peach blossoms permeated the gentle spring breeze. Chickens scurried around the streets and sparrows chirped atop the walls.

Liu Xiang had been confined to his house for the last ten days. Endless chores and gnawing anxiety had taken their toll; gaunt and exhausted, he felt as if he too were ill. Though he exerted all his strength, he was like a wounded soldier persevering at the battle front. The blows of his pick grew less powerful and an incessant buzzing rang in his ears. Suddenly he blacked out. As he toppled to the ground the pick dropped on his foot. When he came to, his left foot felt numb; then a piercing pain shot through it.

Liu Xiang was about to inspect his wound when he heard some footsteps. Glancing up, he saw Daquan coming toward him. Daquan looked like he had just left the fields; his white shirt was unbuttoned, his pant cuffs were rolled up and his ankles were spattered with mud. Daquan smiled at the pile of loose compost and asked, "Is your wife better?"

Liu Xiang shook his head. "Just the same."

"I thought she might be since you were out working. Here's some herbal medicine from Lotus Pool Village. Brew it and give it to her twice a day. I heard several women with the same trouble were cured after two doses. I don't know if the report is true, but it certainly seems worth a try."

"Anything is worth trying once," Liu Xiang agreed. "You never know what medicine will work." Gritting his teeth, he struggled to his feet and took the packet.

"We've just fertilized our fields. Now I'm going over to help Grandma Xu. I've teamed up with her, you know.

Get your manure ready while I'm away. When I come back the two of us will take it to your fields at night. Then as soon as Qin Kai can spare his ox, we'll have your fields plowed in a day or two. Just keep busy and don't worry. With all of us around, your land won't go to waste."

When Daquan left, Liu Xiang looked down and saw blood staining his sock. Pain ripped through him. He leaned against the wall to steady himself.

## 25

### Aid

Daquan worked with a vengeance at Lotus Pool Village but his mind was on Greenfields. How fast was the spring planting progressing? Would families short of hands be able to plant in time? Was Liu Xiang's wife better? It took five days for Daquan to plow and sow the fields of Grandma Xu and the family sharing her ox. He rose at two in the morning and drove the ox home, reaching Greenfields before daybreak.

Ruifen, who was cooking breakfast, came running out when she heard her husband tethering the ox to the big willow tree in the courtyard. "Did you get any sleep? How come you're back so early?"

"I can't let any time go by," he answered as he walked toward the house. "If we don't get those seeds into the ground soon, it will be too late. How's the spring planting in Greenfields?"

"It's going like lightning. But Tiehan and Zhou Zhong came over last night to talk with you about a few families who still haven't finished." Ruifen walked into the house behind Daquan and continued, "We didn't have enough compost, so after you left, Erlin and I tore down the chicken coop and dug up the soil under the stove. Erlin took it all to the fields. We're just waiting for you to start plowing."

Daquan squatted down to wash. "Is Liu Xiang's wife better?"

"Not really. And Liu Xiang hurt his foot. It swelled up like a pumpkin. He can't even get into his pants."

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

"He dropped a pick on his foot when he was loosening compost."

Daquan raced out of the house.

The compost heap outside Liu Xiang's gate had been scattered right and left by chickens and dogs. His thatched gate was falling apart and the yard was a dismal sight. No light shown through the window and no smoke rose from the chimney.

Not wanting to disturb their sleep, Daquan paced anxiously up and down by the gate. Poor Liu Xiang, he thought, what bad luck. Why him of all people? He was so eager to get going and then he hurt himself before he even started. He's the worrying sort, having endured such a hard life. This must have struck him like a bolt out of the blue.

"I'm hungry . . ." a child wailed from inside the courtyard.

Then Daquan heard Chunxi say, "Hush. We'll eat when dad gets back."

Daquan quietly pushed open the broken gate and tiptoed toward the house. The front door was ajar and Chunxi was sitting in the doorway, rocking her little brother in her arms.

Daquan walked over, bent down and softly asked, "Where's your dad?"

"He's out."

"His foot is all right now?"

"No, he went out with a staff."

"Where's your mother?"

"She's asleep."

"Haven't you cooked any breakfast?"

"We used all our grain to buy medicine."

The little boy whimpered and his sister patted him.

Daquan stood there at a loss, chilled to the bone. It was brighter now, the stars had disappeared and the cocks were beginning to crow. Feeling greatly distressed, Daquan left.

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

Erlin was attaching a plowshare to the wooden plow in their yard. He cheerfully called out, "If you hadn't come back, I would have gone to get you. You're just in the nick of time. It will only take us three days to plant. I was afraid with so little snow last winter that the soil would be too dry. So I dug up a patch. The under-soil is moist enough for the seeds to sprout. Have breakfast now and take a nap. Then come and spell me."

Daquan nodded as he hurried inside.

Ruifen was ladling porridge out of the pot. "Erlin thinks we should make full use of the ox while we have it. The two of you should take turns. He's going now without breakfast. I'll have some flat bread ready in a minute."

Daquan walked through the kitchen into the bedroom where Xiao Long was dressing. At the sight of his father, he scrambled up, holding his trousers, and hopped to the edge of the *kang*. "Why did you go out right after you

came home?" he cried. "Did you bring me those peanuts you promised from Grandma Xu?"

Daquan did not answer. Instead he lifted the lid of the flour-bin; it was empty. He groped in the millet-bin; there was not much millet left either. Then he saw a bag on a stool, and feeling it, found it was full of corn. He picked it up and slung it over his shoulder.

Erlin saw his brother rushing out of the house with a sack over his shoulder and asked, "What are you taking that for?"

Daquan stopped. "Liu Xiang has run out of food. His children are hungry. This will hold him over."

"Even if we were starving, we would never eat seeds, much less lend some to others," Erlin said in a panic.

Ruifen, standing in the doorway, quickly explained, "That's not a seed bag. I just got this corn out of the grain jug. I was going to grind it for lunch."

Erlin looked at Daquan and frowned. "How much is it?"

Daquan was baffled. "What?"

"We should weigh it," Erlin said. He grabbed the sack from Daquan and went inside.

Stunned, Daquan stood staring at Erlin's back.

Erlin came out and dropped the bag at his brother's feet. "Thirty eight and a half cattles. Thirty eight without the bag." He picked up the plow and led the ox and donkey out the gate.

"Why don't you eat while I take this over to them," Ruifen said. "I'll even go by the millstone and grind it first. Then Chunxi can start cooking it right away."

Daquan turned around. His face looked like a sheet of iron right out of the furnace, his eyes smoldering. Ruifen realized that the shock from the unexpected conflict with

Erlin was not going to pass easily. Suddenly she suggested, "Then let's go together. We'll take them a couple of cabbages too."

Daquan nodded and turned back to the house. But Xiao Long was quicker than his father. He was already staggering out with a huge cabbage in his arms. "I'm coming too! No, I want to carry it myself. I can do it."

Like sunshine piercing the clouds, a smile dawned on Daquan's grim face. Stroking his son under the chin, Daquan said, "That's a good boy."

As light streamed from the east, clouds tinged with red grew brilliant. Chirping birds hopped merrily on the boughs and alighted on the walls. Another busy day had begun. Old and young, bearing plows and driving draft animals, hurried into the fields.

Daquan carried the bag of grain and Ruifen walked along in silence. Only Xiao Long babbled as he latched onto his father's fingers and skipped along. At the crossroads, they saw Tiehan pushing a cart of fertilizer. "Daquan, Daquan," he ran up to them. "Well, the whole army's out today. Where are you marching off to?"

Xiao Long tipped his head to the side. "We're taking food to Grandpa Liu Xiang." Then he hid behind Daquan so that Tiehan could not tweak his nose.

At the mention of Liu Xiang's name, Tiehan's jovial mood vanished. "The worst problems seem to strike those already in trouble. At a time when every minute counts, one thing after another has to go wrong for his family!"

"There's no way to undo what's happened," Daquan said, trying to sound calm. "We just have to bare up and pull through."

"I wanted to go to Lotus Pool Village to tell you yesterday, but Liu Xiang begged me not to. Today I planned to talk

to some people about helping him but as soon as I came out to work, I saw Liu Xiang limping down the road."

"Where was he going?"

"He said he was on his way to his mother-in-law's in Temple Village to ask for help."

"I already arranged for him to team up with Qin Kai."

"Qin Kai did agree but then he couldn't wait. How could we ask him to? So he teamed up with one of his relatives in another village."

"But Liu Xiang's relatives in Temple Village just got land and a house too. They don't have any draft animals."

"He's not going for draft animals but grain. He said that once he had some grain, he could deal with his other problems. It looks like troubles are coming in all directions these days. They are practically crushing some of us *fanshen* peasants."

"No matter what, we won't be pushed under."

"We have to help Liu Xiang. If his land lies fallow, it will be a disgrace to all of us."

"Of course," Daquan nodded. "We have shared the bitter past and the fruits of land reform. We are joined together like bones and tendons. One person's problems is everybody's problem."

26

## "Make Him an Offer"

Amidst these fields humming with activity there was one quiet corner. Dubbed "the tip," it was the five mu of land owned by Qin Fu.

Wenqing was out there edging the field. He was swinging a hoe, worn down from years of use, no larger than a child's palm; it had never been replaced because Qin Fu was such a miser. Wenqing methodically loosened the hard soil, then broke-up the clods. Though not strenuous, he took his time, pausing frequently to look around at others. He spotted Shaohuai's new black mule pulling an iron plow driven by Shaohuai's nephew while Shaohuai himself walked behind sowing seeds and the child bride, hardly able to keep up, scattered compost from her basket. On the next field Jinfa was plowing his land with his big donkey and an unfamiliar white horse. Close by Zhou Zhong's family worked as a well-coordinated team.

Far away to the southwest, a new highway was under construction. Amidst the faint roar of distant motors men moved like ants. From the north by the old brick kiln, metallic clanging noises from workers fixing cables filled the air. Occasionally trucks rumbled past, blaring their horns.

Tiehan came along pushing a cart. Seeing a student style jacket hanging on a bough and a magazine weighted down with a clod of earth, he searched for Wenqing and bellowed, "Hey there! Don't overdo it. Come take a break."

Wenqing stopped and walked over to Tiehan. They sat down on a ridge overgrown with wild flowers.

"Trimming the edges, eh?" Tiehan asked.

"We're all finished with plowing, but my old man always has to find something else for us to do."

"Why are you working by yourself?"

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

"So you have something on your mind too."

"Why, you're not the only one who thinks."

"But you don't have trouble sleeping, do you?"

"Insomnia? You mean you're suffering from insomnia." Wenqing burst out laughing.

"What's so funny?"

"Everyone says you've changed. And it seems like they are right. You're always frowning or moody. You never race around and shout the way you used to. Even your loud voice has toned down. Tell me honestly, do you have someone?"

"What do you mean?"

"A girlfriend."

"Come off it. I don't have any time for such nonsense."

"Don't try to fool me. Everyone says you've been in a tizzy since Erlin and Caifeng got together —"

"Shut your big mouth or I'll beat you up!"

"You're a good actor. But what else could be keeping you awake at night?"

"I'm worried."

"What's there to worry about? You're not tied down with a lot of family chores. You're the freest man around and as far as the work in the village goes, the whole atmosphere has changed ever since Daquan came back. Everything's going so well now."

"Even so there are a few messes. Some land hasn't even been plowed yet. It's just waiting for weeds to grow."

"Whose land?"

"First I want to know, what's your father doing? He d'dn't go out with the ox, did he?"

"No, he's over there, edging the field."

They both turned and looked toward the southwest where they saw Qin Fu leaning on his pick near a solitary grave deep in conversation with Shaohuai.

Tiehan moved closer to his friend and earnestly said, "Wenqing I want to talk to you about a very important mat-

ter. We Youth League members have to work very hard for the revolution. We have to help people in trouble. We can't be like your father who only cares about his own petty interests. The situation is very urgent."

"Hey, comrade secretary, come to the point —" Wenqing cut in. He had smiled and nodded in agreement for a while, so as not to dampen his friend's enthusiasm. But when Tiehan droned on and on he had to stop it. "Whose land hasn't been plowed?"

"Haven't you heard?" Tiehan bellowed. "Liu Xiang's land."

Tiehan's account of Liu Xiang's troubles shocked Wenqing. "Yesterday on my way home with my dad, I met Liping. She said Liu Xiang was sick but I assumed he'd be all right in a few days. I never imagined that it was so serious that it had held up his planting."

"Everyone in the village knows. Do you have chicken feathers in your ears? I thought you were playing dumb."

"Hell!" countered Wenqing. "The last few days my father has been unbearable. He's been driving us day and night. We hardly have any time to wash our faces, to say nothing of going out for a visit. How could I have possibly heard the news? I'll go see Liu Xiang this noon."

"He doesn't need to hear how sorry you are," Tiehan bellowed. "He needs some help. Action speaks louder than words."

"Sure, we have to help him."

"All right then. Since you have done your plowing, offer him your ox. It will save his life."

"When can he start?"

"Right away. The sooner the better."

"Very well, I'll go home and ask. You'll have an answer by this evening."

Delighted, Tiehan then cautioned, "You have to think about your strategy. Don't just let off steam and play the fool like I used to do. Try to persuade that shortsighted father of yours. Encourage him to be patriotic and point out the bright future for socialism. Tell him we poor folk wouldn't have gotten this land if it weren't for land reform. This is our first spring planting. The *fanshen* peasants have no reserves and some have run into bad luck. It's up to us to help them. Tell him that if we let some land go to waste then we'll harvest less grain and cotton. The factory workers will —"

"There's no need for all that," Wenqing broke in. "He has too much on his mind to take any of it in. Just leave it to me. I promise to bring our ox to Liu Xiang's fields. How about that?"

Tiehan grinned. "To tell you the truth Wenqing, even though you're sympathetic and you've given your word, I don't altogether trust that penny-pinching father of yours."

"When did you turn into such a nag?" Wenqing jabbed. "Even though my old man is pretty selfish, he still is a human being. He won't stand back and watch someone drown."

Tiehan was impressed by Wenqing's sincerity. Satisfied, he stood up and said, "All right. It's settled. I'll wait for you at Zhou Zhong's house this evening." He hurried back to his cart and pushed it away.

Qin Fu's conversation with Shaohuai was also drawing to a close.

A smile gradually brightened up the grim face of Shaohuai. Even when he felt compelled to whisper, his head was cocked at such a derisive angle that Qin Fu, the shorter of the two, could not see the gleam in his eyes but only his flaring nostrils.

"Very well then," said Shaohuai. "From now on, don't



play for peanuts but for higher stakes. That's the only way to get ahead."

"Right you are," Qin Fu said nodding vigorously.

Shaohuai stepped closer and confided, "To be frank, I'm convinced that going it alone won't work. As the proverb says: A single tree doesn't make a forest. This is the time to get rich — if we stick together."

"I feel the same way." Qin Fu gave a knowing smile. "Times have changed. These days everything has to be done in the 'mass' way. We have to float with the tide. If others don't move, I won't budge either. I've made up my mind."

"Actually you are in a better position than I am. You are one of the masses that the Communists want to woo. People in my position should follow your steps. You've nothing to fear. You're not in the spotlight. No one hates you. No one is always trying to label you a rich peasant. Hell! If I were in your shoes, I'd do as I damn well pleased."

Although Qin Fu thought Shaohuai's point was well taken, he said, "You don't know the inside story. We're all in the same boat. Each family has its own problems." He had Wenqing, his unruly third son, in mind, but not wanting to wash his dirty linen in public he just swallowed his irritation and kept quiet.

"Since we see eye to eye, let's make our move right now. We'll never have a better opportunity."

"That's true," Qin Fu smiled. "Don't blame me for being cautious. Daquan and his crowd stirred up such a ruckus with their plays, broadcasts and house-to-house calls, I got all turned around. I thought we were done for."

Shaohuai threw back his head and laughed scornfully. "The moon may wane but only to wax again. I tell you, the world is made up of rich and poor. The day such differences disappear, the world will come to an end. This is the truth,

damn it, and nobody can change it. You can see it now for yourself. Liu Xiang's troubles are just a sign of what's to come. Just wait and see. Wait till the storm dies down and the tide runs out. A whole lot more will be stranded."

"Sure enough."

"There are some able men who are in the government now. They see much more clearly than we do. Daquan and Zhou Zhong led a mob to gang up on the village head and raised quite a storm. But Jinfa kept his head. He has an in with those able people above and is under their guidance. They know you can't get away from rich and poor. Jinfa doesn't have such crazy ideas as Daquan's gang, who dream about socialism and everybody getting rich together. What sort of world would that be? Just to take one example, they say that in the future we'll all move around in cars. But that would mean everyone would be sitting back and enjoying themselves. Who in the hell would drive the cars then? Ha, ha, ha. . ."

Having aired his true feelings, Shaohuai started back to work. After a few steps, however, he turned and called to Qin Fu who was standing there lost in his thoughts, "Mind you, don't forget what I've said. Hurry up and make Liu Xiang an offer."

"Sure thing."

27

## Watching a Man Go Under

Wenqing quit work early and went home, confident that he could convince his father whom he believed was not a

bad person. He knocked loudly on the habitually locked front gate and Yu'e, his twenty-four-year-old sister-in-law, came to open it.

Her oval face exuded a sense of serenity and sagacity. When she first came to live with the Qins, she had worn her hair in a bun. Recently she had come back from her mother's with a shoulder-length haircut, the ends still slightly curled from her former hairdo. Yu'e smiled and said, "Wenqing, my son tore up those notes you left on the table when I wasn't looking. I'm terribly sorry."

As Wenqing walked inside he said, "Then you'll have to replace them."

"I'd be glad to," Yu'e said. "I'll copy them over as soon as you teach me how to write."

"Who would want to teach a die-hard conservative like you?"

"Don't lump everyone in this family together."

"Can this vat of black dye produce a piece of white cloth?"

"What about yourself then?"

"I'm the end piece hanging out over the edge."

The only ones in the family who joked, these two were compatible and supportive of one another. As soon as they reached the inner gateway, their jesting automatically stopped. Yu'e rushed back to the stove and Wenqing turned toward the east window where Wenji squatted, searching through his junk heap for a piece of leather. He looked up and smiled at Wenqing. "You're back."

"Where's dad?"

"In the backyard."

These two brothers, who were always distantly polite to each other, never quarreled or joked, in much the same manner as Qin Fu and Qin Kai. In the old days incredibly acrimonious quarrels ensued when brothers divided up the family

property, for even a cracked vase from the deceased mother's dowry could provoke a knife-drawing altercation. Friends and neighbors would be called upon to act as arbitrators and repaid for their services with splendid meals, even if money had to be borrowed to do so. But Qin Fu and Qin Kai divided up their family property so quietly no one even noticed. The entire affair was conducted very cordially without tremendous splurges or intermediaries. Their only expense was a simple meal for the witness and for the scholar who was hired to write the contract. Qin Fu often commented, "It doesn't pay to fight within the family. No matter who wins, no one benefits. I refuse to go in for such stupidity." Yet this division of property had strained their relationship. To this day these brothers hardly spoke to one another.

Wenqing came to the vegetable garden in the back which was a model of neatness, every bed level and symmetrical as if stenciled. The back gate, now open, commanded a view of Liu Xiang's yard where a peach tree was blanketed with clouds of blossoms.

Qin Fu was squatting near the garden, hard at work repairing an old wooden plow. When he saw his son he said, "Come hold this for me. Look at it. Already broken after a few days' use."

Wenqing gripped the shaft.

Qin Fu, still hammering, asked, "Why are you back so early? Have you mashed all the clods? If some are left, the sprouts will suffer."

Wanting his pernickety father to be in a good mood when he made his request, Wenqing said, "I did such a good job you'd think the dirt had been sieved."

"Did you dig down to see if any of the seeds had sprouted yet?"

"I did," Wenqing lied. "Some are already sprouting. The

soil is nice and moist. We've planted in time." Then watching his father's expression he continued, "But Liu Xiang's fields haven't been planted yet. He hasn't even started plowing."

Qin Fu grunted.

"His wife's ill," Wenqing went on. "He's been calling doctors and brewing medicine for days. Then he hurt his foot and couldn't go out to work. Pretty soon it will be too late. If their crop doesn't get in, they won't have anything to live on."

"That's right. Land is a peasant's means of livelihood," Qin Fu answered casually, concentrating on his plow.

"A lot of people are concerned about him."

"Yes, it's better to have your neighbors do well than go under. Otherwise we'll have to worry about them swiping our beans and corn cobs when they get hungry."

"It's hard for most people to help Liu Xiang because they haven't even finished their own planting."

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

"But we're through. Why don't we give him a hand?"

Qin Fu stopped work and scrutinized his son. "Did Liu Xiang ask you for help?"

Encouraged that his father had not exploded, Wenqing answered, "No. Someone else asked on his behalf."

"I figured it was about time for Liu Xiang to call on us," Qin Fu smiled.

Wenqing was delighted by his father's reasonable response and quickly followed up, "When do you think we can get started? They're waiting for an answer."

"Well, it depends on how he's going to feed us and —"

"He used all his grain to pay for the doctor," cut in Wenqing. "We'd better not ask for meals, don't you think?"

"All right."

"Oh father, you're great. You have such a good heart."

"Never mind about a good heart. Work is work. I don't care who it's for. Easier to work for people in the same village than farther away. Less walking back and forth. Less tiresome."

"The earlier we start the better. How about tomorrow? I'll go and tell him now."

"Wait a minute. What are the terms?"

"The terms?"

Qin Fu stretched out his palm. "How much is he going to pay us?"

"How can he afford to pay?"

Qin Fu blinked. "He can pay us in grain after the harvest. I won't be sticky about the interest rate."

"We're helping him out, dad. We can't set terms."

Qin Fu rolled his eyeballs. "What! Work for nothing?"

"Later on, when his foot heals, he can do some work for us."

Qin Fu shook his head. "We have more than enough people to work our fields. We don't need him. If he won't pay, there's no more to be said."

Suddenly Qin Fu seemed to shrink in Wenqing's eyes. Hiding his indignation, Wenqing tried to win his father over by pointing out the need for compassion between people, but his father just kept shaking his head. Finally Wenqing's patience was exhausted. He blew up and threatened to take their ox and do Liu Xiang's plowing by himself if his father did not change his mind.

Wenji heard the quarrel and came over to cool them down. He soon ascertained what they were arguing about, but not wishing to offend either one, he pretended he did not understand, nor did he ask for details. He simply mumbled a few

soothing banalities while trying to drag his angry brother into the house.

Qin Fu knew he had an ally in Wenji and immediately counterattacked. Stretching his neck he bellowed, "What the hell is going on? Are you looking for a bargain in this nest? You might get your fingers bitten, you know. Didn't those *fanshen* peasants say they were against exploitation? How come they're not against it now? They want me and my animal to work for them free, without even a meal. What kind of policy is that? You little brat, you! With all that schooling, don't you know better than hollering at me about this! Let's go to the district office and find Secretary Wang. Let him judge who is right."

Wenqing did not know whether to laugh or cry. He felt that it was futile to reason with a blockhead who was blinded to everything but money, so he let his brother pull him into the house.

His mother turned pale at the violent disagreement between her husband and son. She pitied her son but she was terrified of her husband. Not wanting to offend the former and not daring to offend the latter, she squatted near the stove shivering, only moving back when she felt the scorching fire close to her feet.

Wenji said a few words aiming to placate both sides, then called out, "Lunch is ready. Let's eat. There is still lots to do this afternoon." He scrambled to set the table. "Where's the bread?" he asked his wife.

Yu'e said spitefully, "Your mother told me to just make porridge."

"We need something solid for lunch during the busy season," Wenji said. "How can we work this afternoon on porridge?"

His mother, who had just recovered from her fright,

glanced around to make sure her husband had not come in and whispered, "It's your father's order. He said we should make do with porridge today so that the three of you will eat more tomorrow when you go plow for others and get a free meal."

Nauseated, Wenqing scoffed.

28

## "This Is No Business of the Government's"

Daquan was spelled by Erlin after a morning's work in the fields and started home. Near the Tall Steps he bumped into Tiehan, pushing an empty cart back from the fields.

"Daquan, I have some great news for you."

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

"I've found a draft animal for Liu Xiang. Isn't that terrific?"

"Whose is it?"

"Qin Fu's. They've finished with their ox."

"Oh? Has he agreed?"

"Not yet. But Wenqing's all for it. He's given his word."

"If Qin Fu hasn't agreed, Wenqing's word isn't worth much."

"I think it's all right. How could Qin Fu be so heartless? Don't worry about it."

Tiehan happily trundled his cart away.

Daquan started to rehash all Liu Xiang's possibilities. Nothing seemed certain. Qin Fu was selfish to the core.

He would not part with a single blade of grass even to help his own brother and nowadays he was quite friendly with Shaohuai. The season would wait for no man. If Liu Xiang delayed much longer, the seeds might not sprout even if he got them in. Daquan finally decided if worst came to worst, Liu Xiang should ask the government for help. The last time the government issued loans and relief grain, Liu Xiang did not need any since he had earned some money in Beijing. But now that he was in such bad shape, the government would surely help him. Daquan decided to talk it over with the village head, the government representative at the local level.

The final touches had been put on Jinfa's new house. Grey brick from top to bottom with over-hanging eaves, bright rooms and big glass-plated windows, it stood like a camel among a flock of sheep, its dignity dwarfing Greenfield's old squat, tamped-earth huts.

Daquan smelled fried scallions as he neared the courtyard. From the gate he saw an oleander bush in white blossom by the window and steam swirling out of the open door. He walked into the courtyard calling, "Jinfa."

Xiuhua, her hands caked with dough, came out. "Well, what an unexpected pleasure," she said with a laugh. "To what do we owe the honor of your visit. It's been a long time since you've come around."

"I've been busy," Daquan smiled.

"And you aren't busy today? Come in and sit down."

"Is your husband home?"

"No, he's not. I want to talk to you about something."

"Where did he go? I have something important to talk to him about."

Xiuhua came closer and asked, "Why haven't you been

over to see us? When we put up the main beam, I sent my son to invite you for a drink. Why didn't you come?"

"I was working with Wenqing on a new show," Daquan hedged, not wanting to be dragged into a time-consuming conversation. "I couldn't get away. Besides, I don't drink."

"Don't try to fool me. Wan Shuhua told me you Party members had a spat. Is that true?"

Daquan did not know how to answer this blunt question.

"Every time I ask Jinfa about this," Xiuhua continued, "he just says there's nothing wrong. But that doesn't make sense. If there is nothing wrong, why don't I see you discussing things together like you used to? Other people are puzzled too. Can you honestly say you haven't quarreled?"

Daquan felt like he had to tell the truth but he did not want to go into details with her. He just nodded and said, "We disagree on some major issues."

"So it's true!" Xiuhua exclaimed as if shocked. "But why? We all live in the same village and you two are friends from way back. Now that we all have land and can count on a better life, why are you quarreling? Live and let live, that's my motto. What's the point of so many disagreements. Even if you don't see eye to eye, there should be some give-and-take. If each of you gives way a little, won't everything be all right?"

"I can't explain this in a few words," replied Daquan sincerely. "We're not bickering over petty differences that can be patched up with a little bit of broad-mindedness. But don't worry. Sooner or later we'll agree. We're not only old friends, but we're Party members. A Communist must abide by the truth. Whoever's wrong must follow whoever's right. That's what the masses expect, what the Party demands."

"That's the spirit!" exclaimed Xiuhua smiling. "Jinfa

has his hands full, dealing with higher-ups as well as the villagers. He's so overworked he gets short-tempered. If he flares up once in a while, don't take it personally."

Daquan found out that Jinfa had taken his donkey to plow Zhankui's land. He left rather pleased. Since Jinfa was helping Zhankui, he would probably be cooperative about Liu Xiang. Daquan decided to shelve his differences with the village head until after planting when they could raise them with the district leadership. Crossing the reed swamp, he saw Qin Kai breaking up clods in his fields. As he walked by, he called out, "Hard at work, eh?"

Qin Kai put down his pick and ran after him. "I've something to tell you."

"What is it?" Daquan asked, noticing his embarrassed expression.

Qin Kai heaved a sigh. "I feel like I let you down."

"Humm?"

"In the last few days he wasn't able to come out. The planting season was slipping by so fast I couldn't wait any longer," explained Qin Kai sheepishly. "My relatives asked me time and again to team up with them. I had to agree. It was really too bad."

Daquan realized that Qin Kai was referring to the ox he had promised Liu Xiang. "It's not your fault," he said reassuringly. "I know you wouldn't have changed your mind unless you had a good reason. If you hadn't made other plans, both of your fields would have gone unplowed. That would have been much worse."

Zhankui's fields were separated from Qin Kai's by a small stream that had dried up during the spring drought and was now overgrown with thistles and wild flowers. Half the land lay soft and spongy like raised dough, giving off a pleasant tang of damp earth and mulch. Just plowed, the furrows

lay as straight and even as if measured by a ruler. The plowman leisurely cracked his whip and strode forward with a contented air as if hardly exerting any strength.

Daquan stood on the ridge watching. He could see that the plowman was Jinfa, but he could not identify the man leading the team.

The usually cheerful Zhankui walked over with a big teapot, looking rather gloomy.

"Well plowed," remarked Daquan.

Zhankui forced a smile. "Not so bad."

"Jinfa's a first-rate farmer. He hasn't lost his touch."

"He's pretty good at getting ahead too," Zhankui sneered. "Even more than before."

Eager to apologize, Daquan let this remark slip. "Your place is so far north, I seldom see you. I'd plain forgotten to check on how you were doing."

"I understand. I know you've been tied down by Liu Xiang's problems."

"I'm glad that you've teamed up with the village head."

"No such luck," Zhankui said, shaking his head. "What would Jinfa get out of teaming up with me? I'm paying him through the nose."

"What? You're paying him?"

"Yes, right after he planted his land he wanted to hire out his donkey and that white horse he had borrowed in Heavenly Gate. My dad was against hiring animals, especially his, but Jinfa kept pressuring me. I couldn't very well refuse him and then look elsewhere. It seemed there was no getting around some big expenses so I agreed. I told him we didn't need any extra helpers, but he insisted on making Tough Hide part of the deal. Now Tough Hide is eating me out of house and home. Besides three square meals a

day, he keeps grumbling for more meat and booze. What luck!"

Daquan was outraged. His new found hope in Jinfa vanished.

Jinfa drove the plow toward them, his bronzed skin and easy gait exuding self-confidence. But at the sight of Daquan his face clouded over. He lowered his eyes to the plowshare and vigorously cracked his whip.

Tough Hide at the front of the team dragged his feet as if he had traveled hundreds of miles. Spotting the teapot in Zhankui's hand, he yelled, "Have mercy, Zhankui! Come take over. I'm dying of thirst, damn it. My chest is on fire and my throat's parched." He tossed the reins onto the horse's back and staggered over to grab the teapot.

Daquan accosted Jinfa. "I want a word with you, Village Head."

Jinfa's eyes stayed on the furrows. "I'm busy right now. Won't it keep till later?"

"No, it won't," Daquan said emphatically. "It's urgent."

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

"Yes."

Although exasperated, Jinfa could hardly make a scene. He put down the plow, pulled a towel from his belt and mopped his face as he waited for Daquan to speak.

Daquan stepped closer and curtly began, "Liu Xiang needs help. He hasn't started plowing yet and can't find anybody with draft animals to team up with. The people's government should do something for people who are in such desperate trouble. I've come to discuss how we can work it out —"

Jinfa picked up his whip and cut him off. "Is that all? All right. You've reported it and I've taken note of it." With a shout to the team, he continued on his way.

Daquan stopped him. "Just taking note of it isn't good enough. You must deal with the problem. I think our village government should shoulder the responsibility or ask the higher-ups for instructions. We must see that he gets his planting done in time."

Jinfa shook his head forcefully. Still driving the team he muttered, "What can we do? We've just issued loans and relief grain. He's not a dependent of a revolutionary martyr, a soldier in active service or a cadre working away from home. The government has no obligation to assign someone to plow his fields. If any peasant can ask the government to find him draft animals, what sort of government would that be. In my opinion this is no business of the government's."

With a sweep of his hand Daquan interrupted, "It is the government's business. This isn't an unreasonable request. True, he doesn't come under the usual categories for routine government aid, but he's a poor peasant on whom the Party depends. To serve the people, the government must first serve the former poor peasants and hired hands. Besides, if land is left unplowed, it's a loss for the country."

"Huh! Oh, so when land is left unplowed, it is a loss for the country. Well put! I remember when you came back from Beijing and immediately picked on me for those slogans. You wanted to cover all the walls with slogans about supporting the country and worker-peasant alliance. When I disagreed, you were furious. Since then your crowd has been running around making broadcasts and writing wall posters. You put on quite a show. Many people clapped and cheered for you, and cursed me behind my back. But I didn't take it to heart. If good came of your work, I was willing to admit my mistake and apologize. But now, after all your highfaluting talk, you're supporting the country like this! The Party

didn't ask for a single cent and presented us with good land. Yet when a peasant can't even put seeds in the ground, you self-righteously come to the government for help. Tell me, Comrade Daquan, are you supporting the country or hanging a millstone around its neck?"

Stung to the quick, Daquan glared with smouldering eyes at the village head's crafty face. Although they had had their share of disagreements, Daquan had never expected Jinfa to be so despicable. "You're right to say that we've been given land," Daquan retorted. "But we fought for that land. Much blood was spilt to win it. And you're right to say we can't sow our fields. But why? We aren't able to stand on our own two feet yet because we were exploited for generations. You scoff at us for talking about supporting the country when we are so poor. But we poor have to rely on our government. It's precisely because we are poor that we care for our country. We have to grow more grain and cotton to help industry, to make our country stronger and to make sure that the people stay in power. Otherwise we poor people 'won't be able to stop those fiends from using their draft animals to take away our land. This is the only way we can get rid of our poverty once and for all. Yes, it's true that we are still poor. I'm worried that Liu Xiang won't get his seeds in. But even more, I'm proud of him. He fought his poverty by going to poor relatives for help. I'm also proud of Zhankui for using his blood and sweat money to put in his crop. They're poor but they have backbones. They didn't stoop to secret dealings with the landlord or try to take advantage of their poor brothers."

Jinfa was livid. "What are you getting at?" he bellowed. "Say what you think. Don't pussyfoot around."

"I put all my cards on the table," Daquan answered. "You're the one who is underhanded. Last winter when I

warned you about pushing for the get-rich competition, you declared that you were not the village head for the *fanshen* families, but for all hundred families. I immediately pointed out how wrong you were. I thought those words had just popped out of your mouth. I never imagined you would act on them. You keep preaching that you represent the government. Just think. Would we have a new China if poor people hadn't picked up guns and fought? Would you own your twenty mu of good land, your big donkey and your brick house? You say that poor people's troubles are no business of the government's. I wonder whose government you represent. I warn you, Jinfa. You won't be allowed to go on like this. What are you after? To amuse yourself watching the poor flounder? It won't be that easy. If you don't straighten out your thinking, you'll fall flat on your face."

Unnerved by Daquan's outburst, Jinfa evaded Daquan's eyes, while desperately groping for a rebuttal. He forced a smile and said, "All right, all right. Empty talk won't get us anywhere. We'll wait till the harvest to see whether your bins are overflowing with grain and your pockets bulging with money."

"Good enough," Daquan said. "He who laughs last laughs best."

## Hand in Hand

Daquan plowed the rest of the day, all the while gritting his teeth to restrain his anger. Even though Erlin offered to



spell him several times, Daquan refused to relinquish the plow.

Daquan decided he would use his ox and donkey on Liu Xiang's land if Qin Fu did not agree. He figured that his small family could get by even if they only tilled part of their land. He could not bear to see Liu Xiang endure another anxious year. Nor could he bear to see others delight in Liu Xiang's misfortune. Daquan vowed to himself: Nothing will stop us. The first steps are never easy. But once we get through this difficult period, better days will come.

Erlin sat at the edge of the field smoking his pipe and watching his brother lap the field. Time and again he stared off in the direction of Temple Village. In the last three days since Caifeng had gone back to her aunt's, he had decided not to wait for his brother to arrange his marriage. Daquan had neither the time nor the interest; he was totally wrapped up in other people's affairs. Erlin would rely on himself. As soon as spring planting was over, he would go to Temple Village and talk with Caifeng. Then he would tidy up his place, buy some necessities and find a good day to hold the wedding.

The sun dropped through the blazing clouds on the western horizon. Swallows flew through the sky in pairs, swooping down close to the ground in prey of insects.

Erlin jumped up and again rushed over to Daquan. "Let me have a turn."

"I'll do two more rounds."

"How come you have so much energy today?"

"I'm under a lot of pressure. Listen to what happened." Daquan stopped and explained Liu Xiang's predicament and Jinfa's attitude. Then he asserted, "We're living in New China. We would rather die than be like Jinfa. I wish you would have this kind of conviction too."

Erlin glanced at his brother. "I agree. But there is another side. We should try very hard not to go down Liu Xiang's path. That's conviction too."

"Since Liu Xiang is already in a difficult spot, we have to help him get out of it. If poor people don't help each other, then our convictions won't mean a damned thing. It would be like forgetting our roots."

"Of course we will do what we can." Erlin grabbed the plow. "Go home and get some rest so you can work later."

Remembering his evening meeting, Daquan handed over the plow and whip. As Erlin drove off, he brushed his arm across his sweaty forehead and appreciated the tilled fields which glistened like the scales of a fish. As he broke a few clumps of dirt with his foot, he saw carts coming down West Bound Road. He figured Zhou Zhong must be back from his meeting in Heavenly Gate by now.

A group had already gathered at Zhou Zhong's house when Daquan arrived. They were listening to Grandma Deng recount the stories she had heard from the soldiers who had fought in Korea. Daquan, immediately drawn in, stood there spellbound. Suddenly someone called through the window, "Come out a minute, Tiehan."

Tiehan jumped to his feet and ran out. He eagerly asked, "How about it, Wenqing? Can we start plowing tomorrow?" Wenqing hung his head.

"Did it fall through?" Tiehan asked, his heart sinking.

Still no reply.

"Well? Did you fail?" Tiehan reached out impatiently to shake his friend, and felt some hot drops fall on his hand. "Why, you're crying!" he exclaimed.

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

Others came outside. Daquan realized at once what had

happened. "Never mind," he consoled Wenqing, patting him on the shoulder. "We know you did your best, but you don't have much say in your family. We never expected your dad would help Liu Xiang."

"Stop crying," Tiehan stamped his foot. "Be a man."

Liping said, "We've just been hearing about heroes in Korea and look what we've got, a whimp."

Daquan waved his hand to stop her. "You're wrong. We learn from our mistakes. A few hard knocks will make a hero."

"It's all my fault," Tiehan said. "My view of the problem was too simplistic."

After hearing the story, Grandma Deng told Wenqing, "I know what your dad's up to. He wants to make a buck off other people's troubles."

"That's right," declared Yongzhen indignantly. "This morning when I was working in the fields, Wenqing's old man came by with a big grin on his face. He told me to let him know if any family wanted to hire animals for planting. If they had no ready cash, they could pay him in grain after the autumn harvest — at three percent interest! He sure knows how to make an easy buck, doesn't he?"

"'Build up the family fortunes' — that line is right down his alley," chimed in Liping. "Others can starve to death for all he cares. He'll do anyone in so long as it helps him get rich."

Tiehan pounded the cabinet. "I've seen through this get-rich gimmick at last. With this line only skinflints like Qin Fu will get rich. What way out will we poor peasants have?"

"Well said," Daquan cried, holding Tiehan's shoulders. "If we only think of feathering our own nests, people can't possibly get rich together. As one family grows richer,

another is bound to grow poorer. This is nothing but a rat race. And nine times out of ten it'll be poor peasants like us who are ruined. No matter what, we can't take this path. We have to figure out a way to help everyone stand up together."

Tiehan said emotionally, "When the leadership started calling on each family to get rich, I didn't think anything was wrong. And I still didn't realize what was happening when Daquan and the village head clashed. I thought we're all farming folk who have been longing for our own land. Now that we've got it and everyone knows how to farm, why bother the government? Who needs us Party members to worry about them? I never dreamed that tilling our land would be trickier than struggling against the landlords during land reform."

Wenqing looked from Daquan to Tiehan, then said in a low voice, "It's all my fault. I bungled it. But something has got to be done. Suppose you two go talk it over with my father? You never know. . . ."

"No," Daquan said. "We don't expect help from people like him. My fields can wait. Tomorrow I'll work on Liu Xiang's land."

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

Grandma Deng shook her head at these two young men. "You mean well," she said, "but your fields are the fruits of land reform just like Liu Xiang's are. How can you get a crop without planting your fields?"

"Where there's a will there's a way. We won't let any land go to waste," piped up Yongzhen. "We can all lend Liu Xiang a hand. Even if we use nothing but picks, we'll see that his seeds get sown."

"Right," Chunjiang said. "We don't have anything else, but we have a lot of people."

"I'll go mobilize the militia," Tichan said.

"And we Youth League members can call on the young people for their support," said Chunhe.

"Count me in too," cried Wenqing, brightening up. "I don't mind going without sleep for a few nights. I may not have a say about our ox, but I can decide what to do with my own body."

Liping said, "And the women can... Oh Dad, you're back!"

Zhou Zhong came in with a big smile on his face. He had evidently been walking fast, for his brow was beaded with sweat and he was short of breath. He said excitedly, "Hey, I've learned something new today. When I was having lunch at my mother-in-law's, I heard the spring planting in East Willow Village was going very fast because they had some new methods. I hurried over there and found some people plowing with three small donkeys yoked to a plow. I couldn't believe it. When I asked if small donkeys could stand the strain, they said two couldn't but three together were as good as an ox. I took a look. The field was well plowed. And they were not moving slowly either. Then I asked how many families had teamed up together. They explained they had a new arrangement. Instead of two families swapping animal power for manpower on a daily basis, five families formed what they called a seasonal mutual-aid team. They have the problem we do — many *fanshen* families who are not strong enough to plant their land. Party Secretary Liang stayed there for a while living right in their homes. He held meetings and talked about the need for people to help each other. He pointed out that it's easy to break one strand, but if you put a bunch

of strands together you have a strong rope. He helped them form groups. Each had families with and without draft animals and families with and without manpower. This way none of the two hundred families in that village had to dish out money to plow their land. And not one family was overwhelmed with worries. They finished their planting today. They said every village in their district was trying out this new method."

Daquan listened with rapt attention. Then he clapped his hands and exclaimed, "This is a great idea. Comrade Luo Xuguang talked about this. Do you remember? He said that during the production campaign in the old liberated areas, they formed mutual-aid teams and the poor people worked together. But we were so busy dividing up the land at that time, his story went right by us. If we *fanshen* families work hand in hand now, we can cope with the planting and can even withstand unexpected disasters. Let's try it out."

"I knew you'd like it," said Zhou Zhong.

"If three little donkeys can pull a plow, we can make a team to plow Liu Xiang's land," put in Yongzhen.

"It's settled then," said Tichan. "Our donkey will be free the day after tomorrow. We'll form a mutual-aid team with Uncle Liu Xiang. In the next couple of days we'll mix his manure and spread it on his fields."

"I'm all for it," said Daquan.

"Count me in too," said Wenqing. "At least I can help mix and carry the manure."

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

"You didn't make this trip for nothing, Zhou Zhong," Grandma Deng remarked. "You've brought back the answer to our problem."

## Sharing the Same Bed Dreaming Different Dreams

The moon had not yet risen. The night was pitch dark, as if the whole village had been thrown into a huge vat of black dye.

Wenji lay snugly in bed listening intently. The door to the north room softly opened. Qin Fu's footsteps sounded across the courtyard and faded beyond the inner gate. A few minutes later they returned, interrupted by the squeaky closing of the gate and the clicking of the storage shed lock. The door to the north room creaked again. A moment later Qin Fu yawned. The hard-working man, succumbing to his exhaustion, reluctantly ceased work for the day and went off to bed.

Wenji got up and lifted up the paper curtain from the window. No light in any part of the house; his brother had not come home yet. He slipped back under the quilt and nudged his wife. "Are you asleep?"

Yu'e answered with a slight movement.

"I've got to go out for a few minutes," Wenji whispered in her ear. "If father wakes up and calls for me, just say I'm having stomach trouble and I'm in the outhouse. If Wenqing bolts the gate when he comes in, open it for me."

Yu'e did not reply.

Wenji gave her a shove. "Did you hear me?"

Yu'e turned over, waking the baby. She quickly put her nipple in the baby's mouth.

"Why are you being so difficult?" Wenji implored.

Yu'e, lightly patting the baby to sleep, mumbled, "I simply don't understand what you and your father are up to, running around from morning to night. What a way to live!"

"It's all for the good of the family!"

"Who knows what will happen to the family if you keep this up."

Wenji ignored her and put on his jacket. Just as he was about to get off the *kang*, the gate squeaked. Assuming Wenqing had come back, he lit his pipe to pass the time and puffed on it impatiently.

Wenji had married Yu'e three years ago. She had been picked out with painstaking care by Qin Fu. Sticking to the family practice, he had sought a wife for his son who was as obedient as his own. He further calculated that the prospective daughter-in-law should not come from a family better off than his, as her family would look down on them. She might well be unruly as a result and undermine his son's authority. But if the daughter-in-law's family was poorer than theirs, they might be descended upon by a pack of poor relatives who would appeal for money right and left and even filch their things. Such doings would be practically impossible to prevent, much less discuss. Qin Fu's deliberations were so time-consuming that Wenji was still wifeless when he turned twenty-three. For a family like the Qins, further procrastination would be courting danger and disgrace, for it would be increasingly difficult to find a family willing to have their daughter marry Wenji. Finally Qin Fu settled on Carpenter Zhao's daughter. Even though her family was considerably poorer than his, Qin Fu figured they would not impose on him since the father's trade brought in a steady income. And if Qin Fu ever started some construction, he could enlist their help at little cost. He had decided on the Zhao girl despite his wife's objections that Wenji would not

be well looked after when he called on them since the girl's mother had died, and that Yu'e had large ungainly feet, which had not been properly bound. Qin Fu had countered, "We are getting our son a wife, not sending him to live with the Zhaos. Who keeps running over to see their in-laws anyway? After a few years the two families will have practically nothing to do with each other aside from marriages and funerals. It doesn't matter whether Yu'e has a mother. And what's so bad about big feet? We want her for her work, not her looks." So the marriage was settled, and Qin Fu was delighted with the outcome: the bride worked diligently from the moment she arrived and was extremely obedient and polite to her in-laws. The young couple lived in harmony and a year later Qin Fu got a lovely grandson. Life seemed to be going so well that he felt his family would rise in no time if only he could find the right tact.

Wenji had always striven to emulate his father and until recently had shared his optimism. Now two things disturbed him. He was beginning to realize what a big gap existed between his father's grandiose ambitions and his lack of courage; further, Wenji was fed up with his father's petty-mindedness. But even more vexing to Wenji were the changes in his wife. Since Qin Fu worked her like a man, she often left the Qin courtyard to do chores, thus gaining an opportunity to see a wider world. She heard different ideas when she ground grain at the millstone or washed vegetables beside the well. During her recent visit home, her older brothers had filled her ears with talk of liberation and freedom. Though no chinks were apparent to Qin Fu, the changes in his wife were patently obvious to Wenji. He worried that, unchecked, she might turn out like Wenqing and become a second troublemaker in the family. He considered pushing her into line with a good thrashing, the same

way his father maintained absolute control over his mother. However, while Wenji was just as ruthless and calculating as his father, he was slightly more sensitive to the new trends. And while Yu'e was as honest and hard working as her mother-in-law, she had a stronger character and was more likely to speak out. The days of the Qing Dynasty were over; men no longer wore queues and ruled over women with an iron hand. The Woman's Association and the Youth League would surely clamp down on Wenji if he resorted to violence, and no one would come to his defence.

Sometimes Wenji felt so frustrated with his wife that he thought of her as a huge tiger sleeping beside him which might awaken at any moment and devour him. Wenji, however, refused to allow his vexations about his father or wife dishearten him. After all, he was Qin Fu's resourceful son. He had ways of getting around obstacles to gain greater fortunes. He had added some new twists to the tricks inherited from his father: he was more patient and he explored the various possibilities before acting. As a matter of course he never disclosed any of his maneuvers to his wife.

Suddenly the inner gate creaked. Wenji was immediately on the alert. Figuring that Wenqing was going out again, he threw down his pipe and ran out. He sped through the courtyard in pursuit of his brother as if he were tracking down a thief. Wenji was not acting irrationally; he was motivated by the traditional antagonism which existed between brothers who would someday divide the family property. On several occasions Wenqing had been known to pilfer the family's coffers: during land reform, when Song Laowu ran out of food, Wenqing emulated Daquan and gave him a pound of millet; on Army Day, when the village honored those families with members in the PLA, he had taken a bunch of fresh green beans to Grandma Deng. Now Wenji was worried

that his brother might be helping Liu Xiang. Since Qin Fu was not able to keep close tabs on Wenqing, Wenji took it upon himself to enforce the family rules.

Wenji overtook Wenqing, and was relieved to see he only had a wad of crumpled paper in his hand. He asked in a brotherly tone, "Where are you going at this time of night?"

"I have something to do," Wenqing said.

"Isn't the meeting over?"

"Not yet. I just came to get something."

"Why is the meeting dragging on so long?"

"Important business."

"Aren't you tired? Better get to bed."

"Why should I gripe about losing a little sleep when people like Daquan are so busy helping others they don't even take time out for meals."

"He's a Party member. You don't have to be like him."

"I should try to be like you, huh? If you ask me, you'd do well to get out of this house and look around at what's going on in the village. You'd learn something."

"Don't try to rope me into your gang. I'm not going in with them."

"Then do as you please and leave me alone."

Afraid his father might be roused and wreck his plans for the evening, Wenji did not pursue the argument. He stood there watching his brother's retreating figure, wishing Wenqing would become more involved with the government. Unlike Qin Fu, Wenji hoped his brother would become a county or district cadre and leave the village as he obviously was not interested in building up the family's fortunes. Since he would have a government salary forever, he would not be a nuisance to his family any more nor be around to divide the family property.

Wenji returned to his room and sat for a moment. When he was sure that his wife was sound asleep, he stood up on the *kang* and groped around the ceiling beam. Extracting a small package, he blew off the dust and stood in reverie for a few seconds, treasuring it, before opening the door.

Branch shadows stretched across his father's window. On the sill a cat was perched, licking its paws. Qin Fu's snoring sounded like a slow pumping bellows. Suddenly the old man cried out, "Hitch up the cart. Get the mule." The frightened cat leapt down and scampered away. Wenji retreated into his room and shut the door.

Stillness returned.

Wenji slipped out.

Yu'e had not fallen asleep yet. Initially she thought her husband might be going to the tavern. Though not much of a drinker, Wenji liked to hear the scuttlebutt from the old hands. But she was perturbed that he had hidden something on the beam. Could it be money? Was he secretly gambling at the tavern?

She got out of bed, pulled the quilt over her baby, and followed him as far as the inner gate. She saw Wenji fiddle with the latch on the front gate for a minute, then come back into the courtyard. He picked up a basket laying near the pigsty, carried it to the west wall, and climbed up on it.

Yu'e was nonplussed. Even though everyone in the family knew that Qin Fu's envy of Shaohuai often prompted him to peer over the wall, she could not imagine why her husband would be doing such a thing, especially at night. She considered calling to him, then suddenly she almost screamed out in spite of herself at the spectacle of Wenji scaling the wall. As she clapped her hand over her mouth, she felt her heart pounding; cold sweat beaded her forehead and dampened her palms. Why is he climbing over the wall in the dark? she

wondered. Is he going to rob them? That does not seem likely. He has never stolen in our three years of marriage. Wenji may be just as miserly as his father and he is certainly more daring, but I am sure he would never steal even if he were poor, let alone when he is quite prosperous. So what is he up to?

The image of a woman suddenly loomed up in the mind of Yu'e: a flashy red scarf, big angry eyes, thin eloquent lips. Caifeng is a recently divorced woman hunting for a man, Yu'e recalled, and she has not settled on anyone yet. . . . No wonder Wenji has been praising her lately. He even suggested that Wenqing marry her. The marriage might well have happened if his mother had not protested that Caifeng was too old and a divorcée. All right then! So you two have gotten together. If you are going to dump me, I certainly will not think twice about hurting you. I will tell the whole village, then take my baby and get out of this unbearable household. I am going to enjoy myself for a change.

From over the wall drifted the voices of Caifeng and Wenji.

"I thought I saw someone in the courtyard," Caifeng remarked.

"You haven't gone to bed yet?"

"Only your family goes to bed with the sun. What brings you over here away from your precious father?"

"I came to see you."

"The hell you did. Who needs you? You are too stingy for me."

"If you are so generous, give me some of your money."

"Even if I ran a charity, you wouldn't be on my list of handouts!"

"Hey, I thought you had gone home to Temple Village."

"I have two legs. Can't I come back?"

"Isn't it pretty late to be going out right now?"

"I'm going out to have a good time with my friends!"

"Say, is Shaohuai home?"

"Yes. And the wine's heated. They are waiting for you. Hey, you already locked the gate. You don't forget your family rules for a minute, do you?"

Yu'e's anger vanished, but she was still puzzled. As she regained her composure from the false alarm, she painfully thought: What a way to behave in the new society! A husband and wife do not even know what the other is doing.

Wenji immediately sensed a festive atmosphere in the Feng courtyard. Though only a wall separated the two households, they seemed like two different worlds.

All the rooms were lit. Shaohuai's laughter came from one; the voice of a boy memorizing his lessons from another. The kitchen fire blazed, silhouetting the child bride who squatted beside it. A whiff of fried scallions floated by Wenji. The black mule poked its head out of the shed and neighed at him. Purple Eggplant, a long pipe in her mouth, came out from the west wing holding a bunch of spaghetti. She giggled girlishly at Wenji and took the pipe out of her mouth. "Looking for Shaohuai? You came at a bad time. We have a guest."

"Can you ask him to step out for a moment?" Wenji asked.

"I'll try. Wait a minute."

Once Purple Eggplant had gone back inside, Wenji sneaked over to a window and peered in.

A lamp with a white shade hung above a red lacquer table. Shaohuai sat across from a portly man dressed in a brown unbuttoned cardigan. He was around fifty, bald, and had a chubby, square face with a wide forehead and no eyebrows.

Three folds bagged below both bulging eyes. He held a cigarette between his pudgy fingers.

Wenji realized after a bit that this familiar looking fellow was Shen Yiren, the owner of a fabric store in Heavenly Gate. Shen reputedly owned stocks in both Beijing and Shanghai, and traveled extensively. Frequenters of the periodic market in Heavenly Gate seldom saw him.

Purple Eggplant laid the food on the table while Shaohuai opened the cupboard and brought out a colorfully-labeled bottle of wine. After using his teeth to remove the cap, he poured the wine into small cups. "Our poor village can't match the town, to say nothing of the big cities. Please excuse our modest food and wine."

Shen Yiren's thick lips parted and he said, "Shaohuai, don't be so polite. You have to excuse me for barging in on you. But if I pull off this deal, you might have to throw me a banquet."

"Honestly," Shaohuai said, "I only have enough dough to piddle around with. Even if I were interested, I couldn't swing a big deal."

"You're right. You shouldn't be rash and get overextended. But I heard you have some grain stored away that you're afraid to use. What a shame! Right now with the spring shortage, it's the perfect time to make a move. The friend of mine who asked me to approach you used to be a poor scholar, but he has guts. He opened up a grain shop in Heavenly Gate. Now he's interested in doing something big with you. I think if you two get together, you'll both make a pretty profit. Why don't you go see him in Heavenly Gate tomorrow?"

"You have a lot of connections and know more than I do," Shaohuai remarked. "Do you really think this is the right time to try and make a killing?"

Shen nodded. "No doubt about it."

"Will this situation last?"

"Yes, it will," Shen assuredly answered. "I think people of our generation won't run into disasters anymore."

Greatly interested in their conversation, Purple Eggplant, who was standing by the table, chimed in. "The Communists in our village don't want this situation to last. They keep trying to bring on a disaster."

Shaohuai glared at her from the corner of his eye for speaking up, then turned to his guest. "One Party member here shoveled dirt in Beijing for a while. When he came back he started to make trouble for another more reasonable Party member. He insisted that New Democracy had run its course, and we should step right into that communism we've heard so much about, where everyone eats out of one big pot. But things didn't work out too well for his crowd. Before they took one step, they fell flat on their faces. They couldn't even plant their own fields, to say nothing of bringing about this or that 'ism.' They're in a real bind now. Hah, hah."

Flashing a smile, Shen waved his hand. "Humm! This communism bunk is the poor devil's chant. It won't work, not in a million years. The district leaders held a special meeting for some of us in business and encouraged us to expand our businesses and to increase our investments. Just think. China has the most people and is the poorest and the most backward country in the world. Now that the Communists have taken over this mess, they have five hundred million mouths to feed. They also have to straighten out the beat-up factories and the wrecked railroads, not to mention sending volunteers to fight in Korea. Who are they going to depend on to produce cotton and grain? On those who can't even plow their land? No way. They will have to depend on you. The strive-to-get-rich campaign is giving you the



freedom to move. I think the Communists will only open the door wider and wider. Just wait and see. Our golden age is coming. Shaohuai, don't pass up this chance."

Shaohuai felt like he was awakening from a dream. "Ah, I see."

Purple Eggplant also grinned. Suddenly she turned and went out. Wenji assumed she had remembered him, so he quickly backed away from the window. He stopped by the trough, put in some hay and pretended to be watching the mule.

Purple Eggplant stood at the door and beckoned to Wenji. "They just started to drink. You'll have to wait awhile in the west room."

Wenji hesitantly followed her in to what used to be a storage room. Now it was shared by Caifeng and Purple Eggplant's young son, who had fallen asleep over his book.

Purple Eggplant put a pillow under her son's head and spread a padded coat over him. She went out and returned shortly with a cigarette which she handed to Wenji. Perching herself on the edge of the *kang*, she shouted to the child bride, "Go fill the pot and heat some water so Shaohuai can wash his feet. If you run out of things to do, line the pigsty with some more dirt while the moonlight is good. Oh, this grown girl can't do a thing without me having to tell her."

Wenji, trying to make conversation, asked, "When does Xisheng finish his apprenticeship?"

"Who knows?" Purple Eggplant answered disinterestedly.

"Xisheng is a year older than Wenqing, isn't he?"

"Perhaps."

"A stepson really isn't the same as your own kid. You can't even remember how old he is."

"If he were my own son, he wouldn't run off for three years and never even come back to see me."

"But he sent word that he wanted to come back and you

wouldn't let him."

"I don't want a loafer around. I'm not running a charity."

"Xisheng used to be a good kid. It's your fault that he turned out so bad."

"Nonsense. He was bad from the start."

"What do you mean nonsense? In the beginning you tried to win him to you. You threw a lot of money his way and spoiled him. Then after you had your own son, you cut him off. It was only natural that he'd start stealing from you. If it weren't for the government taking care of him, he would have been ruined for good."

Cut to the quick, Purple Eggplant did not have a ready response so she barked, "You have a lot of nerve, insulting me in my own house. I've worked hard on Shaohuai for you. At first he couldn't be bothered with your request. Then yesterday, Liu Xiang's troubles put him in a good mood and he agreed."

Wenji was very pleased. "He agreed? Has he found a borrower?"

Purple Eggplant frowned. "Would I let him go ahead without finding the right person? I'll never let you lose a penny. More and more people will need to borrow from now on. We have to be particular about who we lend to."

"It wasn't easy for me to trick these few dollars out of my dad. You must find a reliable borrower for me."

"Don't worry," said Purple Eggplant. "Would I let you down? Don't be petty like your father. The new government guarantees freedom of financing. Anyone who borrows has to return it. You're sure to get it back."

"I don't have much."

"The loan will earn interest for you. Little by little you'll build up a fortune. People run out of things to eat during the planting season. This is the best time to circulate our money and compound our interest."

Wenji took out a paper bag from his pocket and counted the money. "Looks like Shaohuai will be tied up with his guest for quite a while. I'll just give you my money."

"I'll tell him to do it as soon as possible." Then she leaned closer to Wenji and said, "I'll keep this secret from your father on one condition — you have to do me a favor."

Wenji drew back and demanded, "What?"

"I have some money. I'll put it in with yours and make it a round figure. If Shaohuai asks, just tell him it's all yours."

Wenji was surprised. "You rule the roost around here. Why do you need to hide money away?"

Purple Eggplant patted her sleeping son and said, "You're doing it. What's so strange about me doing it too? Unless he happens to die, my lousy stepson will come back from the city sooner or later. I'm not going to wait on him hand and foot after he's finished enjoying himself in the city."

Wenji smiled sympathetically at Purple Eggplant and nodded. The business which had preoccupied him the whole day was concluded. As he walked through Shaohuai's courtyard, he glanced once again at the well-lit room and started to revel in the significance of the conversation he had just overheard. . . . He hoped that this good news would convince his father to think big. The time had come. They should not let this good opportunity slip by.

### 31

## Poor but Proud

Lihua Landing was a major crossing point on the Bright Cloud River. At the river's edge there was merely a small

tea house as the village was set back from the bank. Activity here ebbed and flowed according to the ferry crossings.

Liu Xiang limped up to the landing, leaning on a willow staff. His face was pale, his back more bent than before. Each step up the sandy slope demanded much effort. He was on his way back from his wife's brother's home where he had hoped to enlist some help. He had discovered that their son's wedding just before New Year had practically put them in debt. So Liu Xiang had not mentioned his difficulties or asked for a loan. He spent a sleepless night there considering his alternatives. Finally he thought of Blacksmith Dong, his sister's husband, who lived in Heavenly Gate. Last winter Dong had reopened his shop, which had been bankrupted ten years earlier, with a government loan. His superb skill, passed down to him through three generations, was well-known in the area and many old peasants still clung to the worn tools he had made many years before. The reopening of Dong's blacksmith shop had caused quite a stir in the villages around Heavenly Gate. His business was prospering now. Hopefully Blacksmith Dong would be able to help.

As Liu Xiang paused for breath at the top of the dyke, he saw Shaohuai riding toward him on his big mule. Shaohuai alighted and warmly greeted him. "I went to your place twice last night, but you weren't home," he said.

"I've been out visiting."

"You should be careful of your health. Wouldn't it be better if you stayed home and rested your foot? Don't overdo it."

"Walking around relaxes me."

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

"I've stopped smoking since my accident. Go ahead."

Shaohuai lit a cigarette and took a few puffs. "I heard you

had some trouble, but I was so busy with planting I couldn't come see you. How are things going now? If you need any help, just let me know."

"I don't need a thing."

"Don't be so polite," urged Shaohuai earnestly. "What are neighbors for anyway? We drink from the same well and grind flour at the same millstone. We should help one another. Farmers are bound to run short sometimes. My life's a bit easier than yours, but I've been poor myself and know what it's like to run into difficulties. In our new society poor peasants, hired hands and middle peasants are one family. You've all treated me well. How can I stand by while poor friends are in trouble?"

Liu Xiang looked incredulously at Shaohuai.

"Honestly, I want nothing more than to be on good terms with everyone. Why shouldn't we all live peacefully together in the same village? You're an honest and intelligent man. You must know what I mean. Empty words are useless. You can tell from my actions." He took out a wad of crisp new banknotes and flaunted it before Liu Xiang. "Take what you need. If it's not enough, I'll try to raise more."

Liu Xiang glanced contemptuously at Shaohuai and kept both his hands on his staff. With a vigorous shake of his head he answered, "Put your money away. I don't need it."

"Have you got money?" asked Shaohuai in genuine surprise.

"No."

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

Once again Liu Xiang shook his head. "No."

Shaohuai grinned. "Then why not take it?"

Drawing himself up, Liu Xiang answered bluntly, "My

friends — the *fanshen* peasants — won't let me fall into debt. And our new government won't let me go under either."

"I don't want any interest. Just pay back what you borrow."

"No interest?" Liu Xiang smiled scornfully. "I am afraid you're after something much more precious than money."

"Do you think I'm trying to trap you? Frankly I am not the least bit tempted by your meager possessions. If it weren't for helping a friend, why should I bother running after you like this?"

Liu Xiang faintly smiled. "I may not have any valuable property, but I have a priceless backbone. Shaohuai, whether you like it or not, we're living in a new society. I'd starve to death sooner than sell my *fanshen* peasant backbone."

Suppressing his rage, Shaohuai assumed a look of righteous indignation mingled with sadness. "Well, well. I didn't know you had such a low opinion of me. Some people have smeared me, making me out to be a monster. Scared lots of people. So I don't blame you. All right. Wait and see how high this Monkey King\* of Greenfields can jump and whether he can really fetch us a holy canon from paradise to solve everybody's problems." He carefully pocketed his banknotes and remounted his mule. "Don't close the door too tight. If you need help, just let me know. I'll certainly give you a hand." Flicking his reins across the mule's rump, he cantered down the dyke.

The rippling surface of the stream scintillated like shattered glass under the sun. A small boat sailed smoothly over the water, with one man holding the rudder at the stern and

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\* Monkey King is the chief character in the 16th century novel, *Journey to the West*. He possesses secret powers which he uses when he accompanied the monk Xuan Zang on a perilous journey in search of Buddhist canons.

another standing at the bow catching fish. The fisherman was wearing a straw hat and had a strip of oil cloth around his middle. Poised with the fishing net in his hand, he waited until the boat approached an eddy, then deftly cast the fine net which spread out like a dark cloud in the air before falling into the water. He slowly hauled the net aboard and shook it. Countless small fish thrashed about, caught in the meshes.

The Dong blacksmith shop was situated on the outskirts of Heavenly Gate amongst a row of squat huts. Beside the beam-smoked doorway hung a plaque denoting the smithery which was handsomely polished, though it had not been repainted after Liberation like the ones outside the larger shops.

Liu Xiang limped into the workshop which also served as a kitchen for this two-room house. It was pitch dark; no fire in the furnace, no drone of the bellows. Instead there was a desolate coldness. A pile of ashes lay by the furnace.

Dong Lan, the thirteen-year-old daughter, came back from the market with noodles. When she saw her uncle standing inside the door of the workshop in a daze, she called out, "Go on inside. Mom's in the other room."

Liu Xiang's sister came out holding a needle and greeted, "You have time to come into town during the planting season?"

Both mother and daughter were easily identified with a blacksmith's shop. Dong Lan's jacket and pants were permanently stained by coal dust and honeycombed from sparks. This dark complexioned girl had braids thicker than a sickle handle. She was as strong as a boy, and she frequently worked in the shop with her father and brother, either pumping the bellows or swinging the hammer. Her tall and slender mother was also strong from years of working in the shop. Though she had not had to work as hard since its reopening because

her children were now old enough to help, her clothes, too, were marked by smoke and sparks, unavoidable from having to frequently pass by the furnace in such cramped quarters.

Dong Lan noticed Liu Xiang's injury and cried out, "What's happened to your foot?" She quickly handed the noodles to her mother and tried to help Liu Xiang into the next room.

Liu Xiang's sister followed them saying, "Things really look bad for you. Zhankui told us your wife was sick when he came to have his pick fixed. And now you've hurt your foot."

Liu Xiang sat on the edge of the *kang*, which was black like everything else in the house, and briefly recounted his misfortune. His sister sighed. "All the other *fanshen* families have a lucky star shining over them. But all you seem to have is trouble."

Dong Lan said, "Uncle, don't worry. Dad will help you. I'll get him."

Liu Xiang wanted to feel out the situation from his sister before deciding whether or not to ask for help from Blacksmith Dong. He and his sister had relied heavily on each other while they grew up since they had been orphaned in their early childhood. When famine struck the south shore of the Thistle Canal, they fled to this area together. Liu Xiang helped her find a husband and she helped him find a wife. They were always very frank with each other. Now when Liu Xiang mentioned borrowing money, she shook her head. "You're really out of luck this time. Business is terrible. Our furnace hasn't been running for several days."

"How come business is so bad now? Don't people need tools?"

"More and more people have needed tools since land reform, but most of them are *fanshen* peasants who just got

their land. They haven't been able to pay. So we gave them credit until the harvest. Normally this wouldn't be a problem but since we just reopened, our cash flow isn't very good. So we got in a bind too. We worked hard for months but didn't take in much. We even had to spend half the start-up money the government loaned —"

"You should explain to people," Liu Xiang interrupted. "It would make a big difference to you if everyone could come up with a few dimes. You can't stay above water if you're trying to hold up everyone else."

"That's right. But my husband is softhearted just like you and he's too embarrassed to say anything. I figured that if we went on like this, the shop might close again so I told the customers. They were very understanding. They are all poor and know what it is like. Some paid right away, others gave what they could. But since most families didn't have any cash, they stopped coming altogether even though they need tools badly. This, of course, hurt business even more."

Liu Xiang said, "You might have to cut back and just do enough work to stay afloat. Maybe you will recover in a year or so."

"That's what we were thinking. But one problem seems to lead to another. First there was a shortage of iron. Then when some came, the Du Family Iron Works hogged most of it. Very little was left for small shops like ours. The Shunxing Coal Distributor also made things hard for us by raising their prices and not giving us any credit. Even when we paid hard cash, we didn't get decent coal, just a lot of rocks. These two companies sandwiched us in so tight we could hardly breathe. We had to stop the furnace while my husband went looking for iron and my son for coal. What a life."

His sister's story added to Liu Xiang's agony. He realized that poor people in town were just as vulnerable as the *fanshen*

peasants. Everywhere they turned they seemed to be up against difficulties. Why was it? he wondered. Liu Xiang regretted having come to Heavenly Gate. He did not mind going home empty-handed, but he worried about the strain his request put on the already troubled Dong family.

Blacksmith Dong, a strong man of fifty, came in with his daughter. After one look at his wife and brother-in-law, he guessed what they had been talking about. "You told him everything, didn't you?" he asked his wife.

"Of course. He's my brother."

The blacksmith wrinkled his brow and said, "Why? Are you trying to help him or add to his worries?"

Liu Xiang's sister smiled in embarrassment.

"I'm not blind," Liu Xiang said. "I don't need her to tell me your furnace isn't blazing."

"These hard times will pass," the blacksmith said. "We'll start up our furnace in no time. I have experience with our new government. It helped me reopen my shop and it will surely help me grow. Those large iron and coal dealers won't find it so easy to push me under the way they did in the old society."

"The government is on our side," Liu Xiang said, "and it has done a great deal for us. But I feel we're letting it down. I used to think that once we had land, everything would go smoothly. I never expected the road would be so rugged. Many people are worrying that *fanshen* will turn out to be nothing but an empty dream."

"You are still the same," Blacksmith Dong laughed. "You worry too much. If the Communist Party could beat the Japanese and Chiang Kai-shek, it will surely be able to hold power and guarantee us poor people a good life."

Liu Xiang said, "I'm not worried about the future. Right now is the problem. Some people are out to take advantage

of the *fanshen* peasants because we are still so shaky. This is dangerous. Once we get our first harvest in, we'll be on firmer ground. Then we'll be able to sell grain to the state and help build our country. That's why I came here for help."

"Good," said Blacksmith Dong. "We see eye to eye. You shouldn't worry about the present either. There is no river that can't be crossed." He turned to his daughter. "Make lunch for your uncle. I'll go get some liquor." He picked up an empty wine bottle and walked out.

After lunch Blacksmith Dong took some money from his pocket and said, "There is not much here. Take it and see a doctor about your foot."

Liu Xiang pushed Dong's hand away. "No, no. You are in a tight spot yourself. It doesn't help me if you break your back."

"Take it," insisted Dong. "After all, we are healthy and have enough to eat. I also borrowed fifty kilos of corn."

Liu Xiang shuddered at the word "borrow." He quickly said, "From where? I won't take it. If I were willing to borrow, I wouldn't need to step foot outside of Greenfields. Feng Shaohuai tailed after me trying to lend me money. I'm afraid of it. I came here just to get around that."

Blacksmith Dong argued, "Everyone runs short of money once in a while. If you borrow a little now, you can get through the next few months. Both you and your wife are in poor health and you don't have any food left. How else are you going to swing it? I went to a grain shop that recently opened. I've known the guy who runs it for a long time. He used to be a poor scholar. He agreed immediately to lend me grain. I knew you were afraid of going into debt so I borrowed it in my name. As soon as my customers pay,

I'll wipe out the debt. It's safe. There's nothing to worry about."

Liu Xiang shook his head. "I'll take your money but not the grain."

"You must take the grain," his sister said. "The wheat harvest is two or three months away. Your family has to have something to live on until then. Don't box yourself into a corner trying to avoid something there is no getting around. You're just making things difficult for yourself."

Liu Xiang softened. Debt is debt, he reflected. It makes little difference whether you borrow from friends or strangers. But I would rather borrow from a poor scholar than get mixed up with the rich. And it is less noticeable than borrowing in Greenfields. Besides, Dong will pay it back soon.

Liu Xiang dragged himself back to Lihua Landing. A wind started to blow from the south rippling the water which glistened like silver under the midday sun. The ferry docked and passengers started up the dyke.

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

He turned and saw it was Shaohuai again on his mule. Liu Xiang halted and greeted him casually. "Going home?"

Shaohuai came up leading his big black mule, the symbol of his prestige. His face was flushed as if he had been drinking, and his eyes were glistening. "Come on, let's go together," he cried. "You ride my mule. I'll walk."

"You go ahead. I'm waiting for my nephew," Liu Xiang lied, unwilling to accept any favor from Shaohuai.

"Is he bringing your grain right away?" asked Shaohuai.

"What grain?" Liu Xiang was taken aback.

With a knowing smile Shaohuai picked up his reins. "Think over my offer carefully, Brother Liu," he replied. "Don't get me wrong. Even a rabbit won't nibble the grass

by its hole. However greedy you might think I am, I'd never try to take advantage of you. So let me know if you need help."

"Don't worry about me," answered Liu Xiang perfunctorily. "You have enough on your own hands."

With a parting smile, Shaohuai led his mule up the dyke.

Liu Xiang walked to the water front. A fishing boat was rocking in the waves; the finely-meshed net billowed out through the air like a dark cloud, then fell into the water with a splash....

## 32

### Birth

It was late when the meeting to set up the mutual-aid team ended. Daquan and Tiehan left Zhou Zhong's warm house, one carrying a pencil and a notebook, the other a lantern. The spring breeze cooled their flushed faces and ruffled their jackets as they walked along, chatting. They stopped before the home of a family with only a few able-bodied workers to see if their manure pile had been carted to the fields. Then they stopped near the house of a family which had arranged to borrow an ox from a relative to see if they could hear an animal chewing its cud.

The moon came out and cast checkered shadows over the lanes and clay walls as it climbed from the lowest boughs to the tree tops.

Finally Daquan and Tiehan came to Liu Xiang's sorghum-stalk gate. They flashed the lantern around and each rolled a cigarette and lit up.

"This compost won't be enough," Daquan said.

"Not much we can do now. They will have to make do for this year."

"No. We're a mutual-aid team," Daquan pointed out. "Everyone's waiting to see how we do. We should set a good example."

"You're right. Suppose we each go through our sheds and pigsties for more manure for them."

"I'll tell you what. Tomorrow we'll tear down that *kang* in Liu Xiang's west room and use it for fertilizer."

"That's a good idea. Baked clay makes first-rate fertilizer. But tomorrow might not be so good. We'll be busy plowing all day and won't have time. Besides, hard clay has to be finely crushed. That takes quite a while. I'm afraid it won't be ready before we'll have to plant. Let's do it right now — the two of us."

"No, you've been sick. You mustn't overdo it."

"I'm fine. Weren't you the one who said we've got to go all out for the revolution?"

"Well... all right. I'll go get a couple of picks."

The next day dawned clear and bright. Cocks crowed heartily as men fetched water from the well and women went for firewood. Smoke wreathed up from kitchen chimneys. The villagers emerged from their brick houses and adobe huts, driving livestock or carrying farm implements. The lanes bustled with activity.

"This pile wasn't here last night," someone noted in surprise when passing Liu Xiang's house. "Where did it come from?"

"Maybe Liu Xiang's relative have come to help."

"Not likely. Liu Xiang himself isn't even back yet."

Zhou Zhong strolled up, a spade and pick over his shoulder,

and solved the riddle. "This is the work of our mutual-aid team," he announced.

"Mutual-aid team? What's that?"

"Several families join together to till the land. If anyone's in difficulty, all the rest pitch in so that person doesn't go under."

Zhou Zhong was bombarded with questions about this novel idea. After a while everyone went to their fields, still discussing mutual aid. Zhou Zhong started to crush the baked clay. Since land reform, he had been cutting down on heavy work. He had toiled hard all his life. Now that he did not have to worry about food and clothing he wanted to sit back and enjoy his old age. After all, he was over sixty. But this new task spurred him to action. He worked with a will. Before long the clumps of baked earth were mashed into a fine dust.

Chunhe approached with two buckets of water. His carrying-pole bounced as he ran, and water spilt out in two long tracks on the path behind him. Putting down his load he emptied the buckets over the pile. Then wiping his sweaty face he said, "Is this enough water?"

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

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

"Liu Xiang's fields are dry, and we're starting late. The damper the manure the better the seeds will sprout."

As Chunhe went off for more water, Qin Fu appeared at the crossroads. He had eaten sparingly yesterday and cut back on fodder for his ox in anticipation of Liu Xiang hiring his team. While readying his plow and yoke, he had calculated the amount he stood to make on the deal: During the four or five days it would take him and his two sons to sow the fields, they would be fed by Liu Xiang and would earn two

hundred catties of corn. If Liu Xiang were unable to settle now, he would have to pay fifty extra catties in interest after the autumn harvest. Qin Fu was delighted by his plans, they even seeped into his dreams. The night before he had been awakened several times by his two sons going in and out, and each time he thought it was someone coming to negotiate the deal. He had waited till sunrise but there was no sign of Liu Xiang. Now he was somewhat on edge. He did not mind waiting another day except his stomach would not cooperate and his ox was mooing from hunger. He needed to ascertain whether Liu Xiang was going to hire his team so he could plan his meals and his animal feed accordingly.

As he started down the road, Qin Kai passed him pushing a cartload of dirt. Suddenly he noticed the rope on the cart: Why, it was the hemp rope he and his brother had made years ago. Qin Kai's wife had claimed she lost this superbly soft and resilient rope on her way to her mother's well before the family property was divided. Ha, ha! So it had been stashed away at the mother's house all along, only to be brought out after twenty years. How shrewd! How shameless! He hurried to catch up with Qin Kai. Scrutinizing the rope, he discovered it had strands of cotton in it; definitely not the one he had in mind. Feeling foolish, he stared at his brother's receding back.

Then Qin Fu's attention was caught by people carrying water and mixing a big pile of fertilizer in front of Liu Xiang's place. Shocked, he hurried over. "Are you doing Liu Xiang's work, Brother Zhou?" he asked, unable to conceal his anxiety.

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

"You've even taken over the job of mixing his manure?"  
"Yes, everything."



"You've bagged the whole deal, haven't you? Not a single scrap left."

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

"You're doing very well for yourselves."

"And we'll do even better in the future." Zhou Zhong burst out laughing.

Meanwhile the women in the mutual-aid team also were springing into action. Mother Zhu and Liping went to see Lanfang. Softly opening the door they tiptoed up to the *kang*.

Mother Zhu was pained to see how frail the patient looked. She sat on the edge of the *kang* and felt Lanfang's hand. "Are you feeling any better?"

Lanfang moved her pillow to give Mother Zhu more room. "That medicine Daquan brought me helped a lot. But I still have dizzy spells."

"That's because you're weak. Don't worry, just lie back and rest."

While Mother Zhu chatted with Lanfang, Liping looked around the room. It was in great disarray: thick dust on the chest, ragged bedding, a dirty floor. Three children were huddled together on the *kang*. Liping dressed them and braided Chunxi's hair. Then she dusted the chest, swept the floor and straightened the bedding.

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

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

"This is my work."

"Chunxi can cook. Let her do it."

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

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

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

"Liping, what can I say to thank you?" Lanfang smiled.

It had been a long time since Lanfang had smiled. Her heart felt much lighter. With effort, she sat up.

"Good," Mother Zhu said. "You should lift your spirits a little. You know the old saying, 'rest is a better cure than medicine.' If you can't relax, the best medicine in the world won't do you any good."

"You have cheered me up," said Lanfang. "You've taken a great load off my mind. Done me more good than any medicine."

"Just take it easy and you'll soon be well," replied Mother Zhu. "Look at these sweet kids. Once you bring them up, they're going to be a great help. Just think of the happy days ahead. Everything's going to be better from now on. We've formed a mutual-aid team."

"Mutual-aid team?"

"Yes. The Gaos, the Zhous, our family and yours plus a few individuals are going to work together. We'll take on everyone's problems as a group."

"No matter how you look at it, we're a big burden on people."

"That's no way to talk. We all have to take our luck as it comes. You never know when someone's crops are going to be wiped out by a storm or some pests. But as long as we help each other, no one will go under. I saw this as soon as Grandma Deng started telling me the advantages of a mutual-aid team. I'm all for it."

"We can never thank you enough for your kindness."

"Forget it. Do the same for me when I'm in a pinch. That's better than any thanks. After all that's what mutual-aid means — to help each other."

## We Have to Stand Together

The Gao family had supper in shifts that evening. Xiao Long could not wait for his father and uncle. He ate early and curled up to sleep on the *kang*. Erlin returned after dusk, tired and hungry, silently ate a few bowls of millet, then retired to his room. By the time Daquan arrived home the lamp was lit.

When Ruifen saw her husband put down his chopsticks after just one bowl of porridge and get up to leave, she protested, "Don't work tonight."

"Why not?"

"You need to rest. I'll go help Liu Xiang."

"I wouldn't know what to do if Xiao Long woke up and called for you."

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

"Do you think I can sleep at a time like this? We've just started the mutual-aid team. How can a Party member relax at home when others are hard at work?"

Ruifen looked at her husband's haggard face. His eyes were sunken, his cheeks hollow, his chin covered with stubble. Every movement, each word showed clear signs of exhaustion. She thought: He has already missed one night of sleep. Even a man of iron would collapse under this grueling schedule. But when he starts talking about being a Party member, there is no convincing him. He won't budge.

"If you must go, you should eat well," she urged. "I'll make something right now."

"I'm not hungry. Don't worry," Daquan said with a

smile. "You can cook me a big meal when we've finished plowing."

"I'm not trying to stop you. I'm just afraid you will wreck your health."

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

He ladled some water from the jug and gulped it down. Then after wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he walked out.

Ruifen watched until Daquan had vanished into the night before clearing the table and cooping up the hens. It was a still, dark night. She lay down by her son but she could not sleep; her thoughts strayed to the past. The face of Mother Gao at their first meeting in Wen River Village came to mind. Ruifen was only nine then and had recently lost her own mother. Mother Gao hugged her and said, "I take care of you now, dear. You can call me mother. And this is your brother Erlin."

Mother Gao had just begged her way back from Greenfields where she had known Ruifen's father, a field laborer who had left his home in search of work. Mother Gao struggled to bring Erlin and her up. Then, worn down by poverty and grief, she died.

Ruifen was twenty-two years old when Daquan returned to his native village. His mother had left him with her father in Greenfields thirteen years earlier. Daquan had been raised by her father; she, by his mother. They decided to get married because that was the wish of their parents. A wedding should be a happy occasion, but that night Ruifen cried. Daquan held her hand and tried to comfort her. "Don't be afraid, I won't bully you," he said. "We're from the same stock, both poor."

Ruifen could not lie still any longer. She got up and de-

cided to help the men in the mutual-aid team. She picked up the slumbering Xiao Long and carried him across the courtyard to Erlin's room.

A light was still burning, casting the shadows of two people against the window. Ruifen heard troubled voices.

"Stay a few more days. We plant again tomorrow. After that I'll have more time. Then we can set the wedding date."

"No. I only came here tonight to tell you to forget the whole thing. It won't work."

"What are you talking about? No one can keep us apart as long as we care about each other."

"I'm not sure I want to go through with it. You don't seem to really care about me."

"Honestly, I haven't had any time in the last few days."

The two shadows drew together; Caifeng started to sniffle.

What strange lovers, Ruifen surmised. One day they are hot, the next day cold. Ruifen decided this was not an appropriate moment to walk in.

Ruifen left Xiao Long on her *kang* next to the wall, boxed in with pillows. She picked up a shovel, blew out the lamp and walked out into the night.

The village was quiet. Most peasants were fast asleep after a day of hard work. As Ruifen neared Liu Xiang's house she heard voices.

"Daquan, it's after midnight. Go home and get some sleep," Liu Xiang urged.

"Just two or three cartloads left. We'll finish in no time."

"I feel bad that you're killing yourselves for us?"

"Don't say that. We're only doing what we ought to do."

"Daquan..."

"Go in and rest. When you're better, we can work together."

Ruifen heard footsteps followed by the sound of a door being closed and latched. She found her way to the empty cart outside Liu Xiang's gate.

"Who's there?" Daquan demanded.

"It's me," Ruifen replied.

With no further ado they loaded the manure. The sound of rhythmic shoveling broke the stillness of the night.

After filling the cart, Daquan stuck his shovel into the pile of manure, wiped his brow and stamped the dirt off his shoes. Then he slipped the harness for the cart over his shoulders and took firm hold of the shafts.

As the cart trundled along the road, Daquan and Ruifen's bobbing shadow, revealed by the rising moon, glanced across the grass. The two passed by a pond where young reeds pierced the surface. The clear water glistened as tiny air bubbles from slumbering fish filtered upward. The cries of wild geese rose from a distant thicket that was just assuming its spring green.

Silently they trooped on. All of a sudden Daquan stopped short. Calling out, "Tiehan," he freed himself from the harness, released the shafts and dashed ahead.

When Ruifen caught up, she saw Tiehan lying by the roadside, an empty cart nearby; her heart began to pound.

Daquan held Tiehan in his arms and felt his head. He had a slight fever. One hand held a pack of matches, the other still clutched a match. Tiehan's short pipe lay on the ground beside him.

Distraught, Ruifen asked, "What happened?"

"I think he's all right," Daquan said, trying to sound calm.

"He just got over-tired. He was so hyped up these last few days he couldn't sleep. He was working too hard.

Looks like he sat down for a smoke and collapsed before he lit his pipe."

"We'd better get him home to bed."

Daquan took off his jacket and laid it inside the cart which Ruifen had pushed over. Then they lifted Tiehan in and pushed the cart back toward the village.

Yongzhen and Wenqing came walking down the road toward them. "Sorry we're late. I just thought I would rest for a bit before taking my turn but I fell asleep," Yongzhen said.

"I woke up in time," Wenqing explained, "but my father had locked the gate. I argued with him for a long time and had to threaten to break the lock before my brother took the keys from him and let me out."

Suddenly they noticed Tiehan in the cart. Daquan reassured, "I don't think there is anything wrong with him that a good night's sleep won't cure."

Yongzhen took the cart from Daquan and said, "Go home and sleep. Wenqing and I will take care of the last few loads."

"We can't take Tiehan home," Daquan pointed out.

"His mother would have a real fright if she saw him like this," Yongzhen agreed.

"We shouldn't tell Liu Xiang either," Daquan recommended.

"Right," said Yongzhen. "That would make him feel even worse."

"Let's take him to my house and let him sleep in Erlin's room," Daquan suggested.

When they reached Daquan's place, Yongzhen knocked loudly on the window and woke Erlin, who was annoyed until he saw the unconscious Tiehan. Daquan and Yongzhen lifted Tiehan onto the *kang*. Ruifen took off his shoes as

Erlin put a pillow under his head and covered him with a quilt.

"What happened?" Erlin demanded while holding a basin of water for Wenqing who was washing the grime and sweat off Tiehan's face. "Should we get a doctor?"

Wenqing, still pallid, wrung out the towel and said, "He passed out while hauling fertilizer to the fields."

"He got over-tired," Daquan said. "He'll be fine after a good night's sleep."

"He already finished planting his land. Why was he hauling fertilizer?" Erlin queried.

"The mutual-aid team has been working at night to help Liu Xiang," Wenqing supplied.

Erlin sighed. He squatted on the *kang* and studied Tiehan's slumbering face as he slowly puffed on his pipe. He felt tremendously perturbed: Daquan and Ruifen run around in a frenzy working for others from morning to night, he reflected, but cannot spare a minute to give my marriage some attention. Now they have even dragged in Tiehan, working him so hard that he collapsed. Where will it all end?

Everyone stayed around watching the soundly sleeping Tiehan. They began to feel more at ease as he did not evince any unusual symptoms.

After a while, Daquan said to Ruifen, "You stay home. If anything goes wrong with him, come get us. Yongzhen, Wenqing and I will finish up the last bit of work."

Erlin could not contain himself any longer. He knocked his pipe on the window sill and said, "Are you trying to kill yourself?"

"A few more trips will take care of it," Daquan said.

"Even one more is too much," Erlin said with disgust.

"Tomorrow we are going to get some animals to plow for

him," Daquan explained.

"Plow for him! I simply don't understand what you get out of it?"

Daquan stared at his brother's face in amazement. Controlling his anger, he slowly said after a moment, "What do we get out of it? It's very simple. We do it because we are all poor and we have to stand together."

Yongzhen was equally repelled by Erlin's attitude, but concerned that they would quarrel, he interjected, "Erlin has a point. He's worried that you might collapse too. You have been overdoing it these last few days. Why don't you stay home and Wenqing and I will take care of it."

"We can do it in no time. You should rest," Wenqing said.

"I won't rest until it's all done," Daquan resolutely stated.

After the three left, Ruifen mildly rebuked, "If you are really concerned about him, why don't you come straight out with it? Why make such off-colored remarks? He never thinks about what he'll get out of it. He's trying to put an end to the troubles of all our poor brothers so everyone can enjoy a good life. Oh Erlin, can't you express your concerns in a better way?"

Erlin turned his head away, his eyes fixed on the quivering lamp. He painfully thought: What is there for me here?

## 34

### Who Deserves the Credit?

The crack of a whip finally awakened Liu Xiang's land, the fruit of struggle with the landlords. Many people watched in amazement as the plow turned up fresh soil.

Yongzhen, plow in one hand and whip in the other, traversed the field with a team of three small donkeys while Daquan ran around to the front of the plow to judge the strength of the experimental team, then dropped back and bent down to check the depth of the furrow. He was ecstatic to see the millet stubble and the newly blooming weeds turned under the dark moist soil. Rubbing the dirt off his hands, he told Yongzhen to take a break after the next round so the animals would not be overworked. Then he walked back to the village to see Tiehan.

As he walked up the road into the morning sun, small birds blithely flew about. A rich scent rose from the freshly plowed earth.

Liu Xiang, staff and water jar in hand, stopped at the edge of a field and called out, "Daquan, come have a drink."

Daquan took the bowl, leaned back, and poured down the water. Wiping the corners of his mouth he said, "Go look. Our donkey team is doing fine. No slower than an ox."

Liu Xiang with obvious contentment said, "At last my land is being plowed. Now I can look forward to a harvest. You didn't go through a lot of trouble for nothing."

"Throw your worries aside and work hard. I dare say if we stick together, we'll not only have oxen and horses before long, we'll even have machines!"

A bicycle bell rang behind them. They stepped to the side of the road and Li Peilin, the assistant district agricultural director, screeched to a stop. Jumping off the bike, he smiled at Daquan. "You must have really worn yourself out this planting season."

"That's true," Daquan replied with a smile. "Not just from work but from a lot of worry and anger."

"You must be Liu Xiang. I heard how you'd injured

your foot and couldn't manage your planting. Daquan, why didn't you come to me for help?"

"I did consider it for a while. But then I started to feel bad about asking for help from the government when we hadn't made any contribution to the country. So all of us got together and solved the problem."

"You did a good job on your spring planting, maybe the best in the whole district."

"Don't poke fun at us."

"I'm not kidding. I've covered half the district gathering statistics on the planting. Greenfields is the best."

"Like all good bureaucrats you must have done a superficial job."

"Hardly. I went straight to the small group leaders in every village and figured out on a family to family basis how much land had been planted. Greenfields is by far the best. You've already planted 99 percent of your land."

"Well, if you're just going by the figures, we've actually planted 100 percent."

"No, 99 percent."

"This piece of land will be finished tomorrow."

"This is Liu Xiang's land? I've already counted it. But according to the group leaders, there is still one family which hasn't plowed its land."

"Really?"

"Don't worry, my friend. Most villages didn't even reach 70 percent. Your 99 percent is remarkable. When we evaluate the district three days from now, Greenfields will be among the best without a doubt. I think your trip to Beijing made the difference. Our district is behind Yanshan District. Secretary Liang and County Head Gu will soon call a county meeting to summarize the planting work. I bet our district will get criticized. Then you'll see some

changes. The leadership is sure to adopt some new policies. We'll talk more about this later. Right now I have to get the figures from other villages." He mounted his bicycle and swiftly disappeared behind the bushes.

"Actually spring planting here has been handled well," Liu Xiang said. "I passed by some villages a few days ago. Less than half the land was planted. I don't think that comrade was speaking off the top of his head."

"Whose land, do you think, is still unplowed?"

"I haven't been out and around lately so I really don't know. Could it be Zhankui's? He doesn't have any draft animals."

"He already hired a team."

"What about Tough Hide? No, that's not too likely. The village head wouldn't let Tough Hide's land go to waste, would he?"

Daquan handed the bowl back to Liu Xiang and walked toward the village. His eyes swept the fields in search of the unplowed plot and finally rested on the village. It was enshrouded with a new green that blended into the verdant fields. Gazing at the clustered walled houses visible through the trees, Daquan anxiously wondered: Which family can it be?

Right at that moment Tiehan was sitting on his *kang*, bitterly quarreling with the village head. A quilt wrapped around his legs, he was glaring at Jinfa with smoldering eyes and leaning forward with clenched fists, as if ready to jump off the *kang* and punch someone. Jinfa was leaning back against a cabinet, his jubilant spirits undaunted by Tiehan's unprecedented hostility toward him. His legs were crossed and one elbow was resting on the cabinet as he looked condescendingly at Tiehan.

"Why did you give such a report to the leadership?" Tiehan roared.

Jinfa gently replied, "You were sick and I couldn't find Daquan. Comrade Li was in a hurry to get the figures so I just went to the group leaders and collected all the facts. What's wrong with that?"

"I want to know why you lied to the leadership."

"Lied? Who lied?"

"Your report was false."

"How strange. Do you mean to say we did not plow all that land?"

"We did."

"Or did we not plant all that land?"

"Yes, we did."

"So there you are. I went with the group leaders door to door collecting the figures. Comrade Li took notes right on the spot. How can you say that I gave a false report? Greenfields is number one in the district. Who can deny it?"

"That makes you feel quite proud, doesn't it?"

"Of course. We didn't let others get ahead of us and we didn't let the leadership down."

"But just tell me, how did all of this come about?"

"Oh, come on. You'd better calm down and get some rest."

Seeing that Jinfa was moving toward the door, Tiehan tossed off his quilt and shimmied over to the edge of the *kang*. Stretching out his hands to stop Jinfa, he said, "Don't go. I want you to tell me, was this great success caused by your trumpeting the get-rich competition?"

Jinfa leaned against the doorway and stared at Tiehan in amazement while groping for a viable strategy. "That's not

hard to answer, but first let me ask: Who told you to come after me like this?"

Tiehan proudly responded, "No one. I've been wanting to get to the bottom of this for a long time. What's your answer?"

Jinfa raised his voice too. "I've been expecting this. Once there are some fruits to be shared, the credit-hoggers and knipickers all come flocking around. Why do this? No one worked for themselves. The credit belongs to everybody."

"Get to the point," Tiehan interrupted. "Was this success achieved through your get-rich competition or not?"

"Yes, it was," Jinfa self-righteously replied. "I faithfully carried out the Party policy. I didn't get any help, just plenty of stabs in the back. I had to take all that grief and fight all by myself. And now what? You are fighting over the spoils. The Communist Party pulled me out of hell. I have no second thoughts about the Party. If you hadn't brought this up, I would have let it go. There's no need for me to pour out my sorrows or boast about my contributions. You are not an outsider. You know how things work. Why don't you say something fair instead of spitting out all this nonsense?"

Jinfa's attitude caused Tiehan to change his tact. He intentionally assumed a milder tone, "OK, OK. Have it your way. Let's say you're right."

"It's not a matter of saying so; I am right. Tiehan, you really have been turned upside down. But sooner or later you'll find out —"

"You claim that all the good work was done by you. All right then. One percent of the land in our village still needs to be plowed. Let's see you use your get-rich line to take care of it."

"What?"

"Keep up your good work! Go find some animals and help that family out."

"There are no soldiers or martyrs in that family. They're not entitled to government help. If they're too cheap to hire animals, what can I do? It's none of my business."

Tiehan leaned back and roared with laughter. "Ha, ha, ha! Now the truth comes out!"

Jinfa's face waxened. Anxious to leave, he pushed past Tiehan as he said, "Come on. You have a fever. Lie down and rest." He bolted toward the door and stumbled over a carrying-pole leaning against a water jug.

Chunhe, who had been listening at the window, darted out the gate at the crash. He ran into Daquan on the street. "Tiehan's quarreling with the village head," he said. Chunhe then told Daquan what had happened.

Daquan smiled. "This is meaningless. We can hardly get everything done. Who has the time to fight over the credit? I need to find out whose land hasn't been plowed yet. Do you know?"

"You'd never guess. It's Jiukuan's."

"Impossible. I asked him twice, first at the beginning of spring planting and then when we set up the mutual-aid team. Both times he said he had teamed up with Liu Wan."

"Originally they worked out an agreement," Chunhe said angrily. "They were getting along fine until suddenly Liu Wan dropped him. Either someone egged Liu Wan on, or he saw other families raking in the dough and feasting by hiring out their animals."

After a momentary silence, Daquan said, "We weren't thorough enough. But there's still time to work something out."

"I don't know if it's possible. Zhou Zhong discussed the

problem with Grandma Deng and Tiehan as soon as he heard about it. He even went around to see if any animals were available. But from among the people that we can ask for favors, only Song Laowu can spare his donkey tomorrow. Everyone else will be using their animals for the next few days. After that it will be too late, won't it?"

"We've already forged the river. How can we let a stream stop us? We have to find some way to get his land tilled in the next three days. We can't allow the one percent to be a *fanshen* family."

## 35

### I Won't Be That One Percent

Heiniu ran into the courtyard and shook his father's shoulder. "Dad, Daquan is here. Tell him what's wrong."

Daquan stood before Jiukuan. He knew Jiukuan's temperament well and could see at once that this stubborn fellow was furious. He stooped down and said, "Don't worry, Jiukuan, there is no river that can't be crossed. I'm going to talk it over with Zhou Zhong. We'll figure out a way to get your fields planted."

Jiukuan suddenly looked up. "There's not much that can be done. If we don't sow right now, it'll be too late. I just don't have any choice but to pay for a team. But my wife won't hear of it."

The door to an inside room flew open and Suzhi came out. Though several months had elapsed since she had given birth, she still looked exhausted. Her cheek bones protrud-



ed from her ashen face. Her large eyes were red from crying. Now as she rushed out it was not anger but a sense of supplication that she conveyed. Standing in the doorway behind her husband she said, "I'm glad you've come, Daquan. Though folks often say no outsider can settle a fight between a husband and wife, you do know us well and you can help. We have never quarreled before. But I just can't stand getting into such a bind. Jiukuan has been grumbling about hiring animals ever since Liu Wan dropped us. I know it's hard to find another way out, but I just don't see how we can afford it. To plow one mu would cost us more than thirteen cattles of corn. When you throw in the animal feed and the meals for the driver, it comes to two hundred cattles. The alkaline soil around here is poor to start with, and we have floods nine years out of ten in this marsh land. Besides, you never know when there'll be a dry spell or a hailstorm. Even if we put the seeds in, there's no telling what we'll get in the fall. The best we can hope for is forty or fifty cattles per mu. Should we hand out at least half our yield before we get started? And that's not even counting the cost of seed, fertilizer and labor — why, we would work hard for a whole year and end up with nothing."

Daquan's heart sank. Only then did he realize what it meant for a family to hire animals, and how much fat those people selling their animal power were squeezing out of the poor. Zhankui's remarks in the field the other day weighed more heavily on his mind; Jinfa's figure holding the plow behind his animals seemed more loathsome than ever. Daquan thought: Suzhi is right. This trap is worse than paying rent in the old days.

Jiukuan was anxious to win Daquan's support so he could convince his wife and sow the fields right away. As soon as his wife finished he jumped in, "That one-track mind of

hers can't figure nothing from a different angle. If we can just put in the seeds, we'll work our butts off to make them grow. With luck we might be able to bring in seventy or eighty cattles per mu. Then we'd at least have something left after all our expenses."

"Don't get carried away!" Suzhi said. "You don't really believe we can get seventy or eighty cattles per mu, do you? What a pipe dream!"

"All right, all right," Jiukuan said. "I can never win an argument with you. Let's hear what Daquan thinks. I'll do what he says."

Daquan felt hard put for an answer. The best way, he thought, is to set up another mutual-aid team and pool the draft animals, but it is a bit late. The more well-to-do families would not be interested in helping others while those willing to join do not have the animals to spare. After a moment of reflection he said, "You get ready for plowing, while I go talk to some people. We won't let you hire animals. We'll get your land plowed one way or another."

After Daquan left, Suzhi said with a sigh, "I wonder how he found out. He has enough problems as it is. Bad news really seems to sprout wings and fly."

"How could we hide it from him?" Jiukuan said. "You can't stuff that unplowed land in a closet!"

Suzhi thought for a moment and said, "I think he's in a fix. If there were any hope, he wouldn't have frowned so. We should try to figure out a way ourselves."

"What the hell can I do?"

"I heard Heiniu say that the village head got a horse from somewhere. Doesn't he also have a donkey? He must have finished planting by now. Why not ask him for help?"

"He knows my partner just up and dumped me. If he were willing to help, he would have come long ago."

"He's a busy man," Suzhi reasoned. "He can't think of everything. Why not give it a try? Who knows, it might just work."

Jiukuan thought his wife made sense. He had known Jinfa for many years. Though they had never been intimate, they were not on bad terms either. Since Jinfa was now the village head, he was in charge of everybody. He might be willing to help. Jiukuan stood up and said, "It's worth a try. I just hope he doesn't give me the cold shoulder."

Suzhi was pleased to see her obstinate husband willing to give her idea a try. "I'm sure it will work," she encouraged. "He is a Party member just like Daquan. He won't let you down."

The words *Party member* raised Jiukuan's hopes. He was a shy, mulish man who had always found it extremely hard to ask for a favor. But he knew the integrity symbolized by that title and felt that he could ask a Party member for help without being ashamed.

The confident Jiukuan walked down the street, unheedingly walking past quite a few people on the way. Everyone knew Jiukuan never wasted a word on anybody, and respecting his idiosyncrasy, they passed him with the same aloofness. But today Zhankui pulled him to the side of the road. He waited until a group of people went by, then asked, "Jiukuan, I heard you are the one percent. Is that right?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You haven't started planting yet, have you?"

"Liu Wan dumped me."

"That was Little Abacus and Shaohuai's dirty work. They want to box you into a corner and then catch the easy prey."

"I know. Last night I went to see Liu Wan. That bastard Little Abacus was there talking with him. Dammit! I don't need his help!"

"You've found another way?"

"I'm going to see a Party member."

"Which one?"

"The village head."

"What? You're looking for him? Are you going to hire his rig? That's like throwing yourself in the clink."

"He's a Party member. Why should he take advantage of me?"

"So you want to ask him to do you a favor?"

"That's right. Aren't Party members supposed to help people?"

"Yes, but he's different. Better forget it. Don't even bother asking."

"Why?"

"It makes me mad just thinking about it."

They squatted by the wall as Zhankui recounted how he had gone to Jinfa for help and how Jinfa had pushed him into hiring his rig and insisted on bringing along the gluttonous Tough Hide. Zhankui also described Jinfa's callous retort to Daquan that Liu Xiang's plight was none of the government's business and that poor people were a burden on the state.

Jiukuan stood up and left.

As Zhankui watched him go back home, he felt good that he had spared his friend the humiliation he had experienced himself.

This was Daquan's fifth night without sleep. The first four were spent in meetings and helping Liu Xiang prepare his fields. But this night as he lay in bed, his frustration staved off sleep. Jinfa's grating words again rang in his ears. He angrily resolved: No matter what it takes, I'm going to help Jiukuan plant his fields. Then 100 percent of the *fanshen*

peasants will have planted in time. We have to prove ourselves.

Daquan rose at the crack of dawn and rushed over to Lotus Pool Village. He had decided to borrow Grandma Xu and her neighbor's ox and hitch it up with Song Laowu's old donkey. He and Jiukuan could work off the debt later. In Lotus Pool Village he talked to a number of families and made lots of promises before he finalized the deal. It was almost noon when he hurried back to Greenfields. As he reached the outskirts of the village, he desecrated in the midst of the tilled fields a patch of unplowed land where blades of grass pierced the hard alkaline crust and stood like daggers among rows of moldy corn stubble.

Walking along the edge of the unplowed plot, Daquan noticed a few shallow furrows. Corn seeds, half exposed, were sprinkled amidst clods of unbroken earth. His heart sank — how can any crops grow like this? He glanced up and saw Jiukuan struggling to scratch the chalky, weedy surface with an old harrow drawn by Song Laowu's donkey. Heiniu led the donkey by the halter and his mother walked behind, scattering seeds from a basket.

Daquan's pent-up rage suddenly exploded. He abandoned his ox and dashed over to Jiukuan, yelling at the top of his lungs, "Stop, stop!"

Jiukuan, slightly deaf and yelling at the donkey, did not hear Daquan shouting into the wind and continued to push the harrow strenuously across the field.

Daquan came up behind him, yanked the whip from his hand and threw it to the ground. Then he knocked over the harrow, throwing the unaware Jiukuan off balance.

"What kind of farmer are you?" Daquan roared. "How can you get a crop this way?"

The startled donkey, stiffening its ears and tucking its tail

between its legs, would have bolted if Heiniu had not clung tightly to its halter.

Jiukuan was stunned. He had never, in their long friendship, seen Daquan lose his self-control before.

"Haven't you noticed everyone trying their damn best to do well?" Daquan continued to shout. "What's wrong with you, planting in the stubble? How can you treat the fruits of land reform this way? What a disgrace to the *fanshen* peasants!"

Jiukuan hastened to explain himself. His face and neck were flushed and his thick lips quivered as he managed to say, "I'm doing this just 'cause I don't want to disgrace the *fanshen* peasants."

Daquan stamped his feet and said, "So you even feel proud doing such a job?"

"Why not? Should I feel proud to be told off by that bastard Jinfa instead? No way! I'd rather harvest less and tighten my belt than ask him for a thing."

Jiukuan's unprecedented declaration of conviction struck Daquan speechless.

"This was my idea," Suzhi came up and said. "Please don't blame him. Yesterday after you left, I thought we should figure out a way ourselves and not bother you. I told him to go see the village head. I didn't know Jinfa had become such a cutthroat. Then Zhankui told my husband all that crap Jinfa flung at you. That's too much! He's treating us like scum. Jiukuan and I talked it over last night and decided that we'd rather starve to death than bow down to him."

"Jinfa said we poor people can't even put seeds in the ground," Jiukuan added. "I'm going to show him that we damn well can."

"I know the crops won't grow well this way," Suzhi said, "but we don't have any choice."

"Even if the crops won't grow well," Jiukuan said, "I'm going to plant this way. At least Jinfa won't be able to say I couldn't sow my fields."

Suzhi turned to Daquan. "I was afraid you would worry so I didn't tell you."

"But you don't need to worry," Jiukuan declared. "I won't be that one percent."

Daquan was overwhelmed by this staunch pledge. He had always liked Jiukuan, but now, for the first time, he felt tremendous admiration for him. He regretted having lost his temper. Daquan looked at Jiukuan, Suzhi and their son Heiniu. He picked up the whip and the harrow and said, "We must dig out the roots of our poverty. Otherwise we will keep on being caught in the same problems we've had all spring."

## 36

### Settle Accounts After the Harvest

The county seat was a charming town nestled into the foothills of the Yanshan Mountains. Its natural splendor was embellished by a film of clouds hovering over the pine trees and gigantic boulders. An old Liao Dynasty Buddhist temple majestically standing near the west gate attested to the town's antiquity.

A two-day meeting to summarize the spring planting and

deal with the current food shortages in the southern part of the county had just adjourned at the offices of the county government and Party committee, which were located in the northeast quadrant of the town amongst a complex of buildings with temple-like overhanging eaves. Now, aside from a few cadre who had been asked to stay behind and talk to the provincial newspaper reporters, the delegates were packing up, eager to return to their districts. They were eager to relate the resolutions of the conference to their subordinates and figure out ways to catch up with the advanced districts which had been so highly praised in the meeting.

A gust of dry wind blew open a door in the north row of houses and rustled papers on the desk. They swirled to the ceiling and floated down all over the room. Wang Youqing, with a cigarette in one hand and a pen in the other, hastily pounced on the papers. "Dammit," he muttered. "Why do you have to make so much trouble for me when I'm working my head off." He raked together all the papers, weighting them down with a plate, closed the door and resumed his preparations for an interview with a reporter from the regional propaganda department. The reporter had requested to talk about the spring planting with the Party secretaries of two districts that had distinctively different characteristics.

This was Wang's first chance to meet a reporter, and the name of his county might appear in a newspaper for the first time as a result of his presentation. County Head Gu had underscored the importance of this interview and demanded that Wang's report be well thought-out and substantiated by vivid examples. Gu also divulged that the reporter was only going to write up the best district, Yanshan or Heavenly Gate, and that he would use his clout to influence the choice toward Heavenly Gate. Wang Youqing knew that this situation de-

manded more than his customary routine of flipping through a notebook and talking extemporaneously according to his estimation of the leaders' expectations. He would have to work very hard this time.

He skipped lunch and his afternoon nap and started to write an outline enthusiastically. Initially he had hoped to give an overall account of the situation in Heavenly Gate District and show how the call to get rich had been instrumental in making spring planting a success. But he soon found that he lacked the necessary facts and figures and several calls to the district office failed to obtain them. Even though he had been very diligent at the onset of the get-rich movement, he was now out of touch with local conditions because he had gone home at the beginning of spring planting to deal with some knotty family problems. So despite an elaborate beginning, the substance of his report was pathetically skimpy. Reluctant to present half-baked material to the reporter, he decided to change his approach and only use a few strong examples to illustrate his point. Though a number of villages had been equally active in promoting the get-rich call, no other place matched Greenfields in its spring planting results. In fact quite a few villages had planted large areas without tilling and left land fallow. Greenfields would surely attract the interest of the reporter. Once Wang Youqing made this decision, his pencil swished along the paper and before long he finished an outline. After one reading he inserted several examples and some comments from peasants, and underlined possible points to elaborate on should the reporter seem interested. The report drafted, he lit a cigarette, leaned back in his chair and let out a long sigh.

The spring breeze again rattled the wooden door. Youqing picked up a chair and was about to prop it against the door when it opened a crack and a fair face appeared. A woman

cadre in her twenties was holding the doornob. "So you are hiding in here, Secretary Wang," she said.

Wang quickly put down the chair and greeted, "Comrade Xu Meng, come in and sit down. Didn't you go to the other summary conference in the northern part of the county?"

"I just came back to bring a letter to County Head Gu and pick up some documents." She saw papers on his desk and smiled. "One can really become a lot like the person he works closely with, can't he? You're turning into a writer just like County Head Gu."

"Don't make fun of me. What can I write? I was forced to do this for an interview. I've really been in a bind this afternoon. If you had come two hours earlier, you would have saved me from all this agony."

"Oh, so you're going to talk to the reporter. Too bad I didn't get here in time to catch your excellent report at the conference. Now I can't listen in on your talk to the reporter either since I have to mimeograph a document for Secretary Liang. He's waiting for it."

"There's nothing in my report worth listening to. It will only give you intellectuals a few more things to laugh about us county bumpkins."

"You are too modest," Xu Meng said. "Many comrades in the county government were talking very enthusiastically about your report. They all said that Heavenly Gate made a lot of headway this spring. Land reform was carried out steadily in your district and now it is again number one in the spring planting."

"That's because of County Head Gu's personal attention."

"Oh, that reminds me. County Head Gu wants you to go to his house."

"What for?"

"He didn't say but it seems important. He wants you to go right away."

As Wang Youqing packed up, he tried to imagine why the county head wanted him so urgently: to check his outline for the interview or to discuss some problems with his attitude, perhaps both. County Head Gu was deeply concerned about both Heavenly Gate District, which he had chosen as his model, and Wang Youqing, whom he had personally trained and promoted.

Wang Youqing walked through a moon gate leading to an inner courtyard in the county government and Party committee office complex. Fragrant lilac bushes were in bloom. A path of multi-colored pebbles led through the trees to a house with latticed windows.

Wang Youqing stood near the lilac bushes and called out, "County Head Gu."

A baby-faced guard with rosy cheeks ran out of the kitchen. "Comrade Wang, I was just about to get you. Go in and sit down."

County Head Gu's voice called from an adjacent room, "Is Youqing here? I'll be right with you. Comrade Liu, give him some cigarettes and candy."

Wang Youqing hung up his pistol holster and hat on the coat rack. He ate a piece of candy, sipped tea and appreciated the simple but elegant furniture in County Head Gu's combination study-meeting room: a desk, a long table, a few wicker chairs, and two old-fashioned bookcases. On the wall hung a scroll with scraggly calligraphy which was incomprehensible to him. Every surface of the room, except for the chairs, was covered with books, even the window sills.

Gu Xinmin was well-educated and derived great pleasure from writing. Sometimes, when he was in the right mood, he would recount his life story for his comrades. In primary

school, he had become infatuated with the notion of becoming a novelist after he won first prize in an essay contest.

During mathematics or physics lectures he would read novels hidden in his lap. He read through all the classical literature: the ancient essays of the Wei and Jin dynasties, short stories of the Tang and the Song, the thick tomes of the Ming and Qing. Then he ventured into 18th and 19th century European literature and became well-versed in the humanitarian writings of the foreign literati. The cannon blast at the Marco Polo Bridge in 1937 shattered his dreams.\* Leaving his books, he joined the millions of students in the streets protesting the Japanese occupation of North China and later picked up the gun in armed resistance. Now he had laid down the gun, but he had no leisure time to trifle with literature. He felt the contribution he could make running a county was much more concrete and practical than writing novels and was much more closely connected with the fate of the peasants whom he loved and with whom he felt tremendous empathy. He had once used this example to enlighten Wang Youqing, who had an over-riding sense of family obligation. He said, "Giving up my own aspirations is dictated by the times. I view it as a sacrifice, but it's one that I face with both courage and joy. The happiness of the great masses of people is my reward. Only by paying such a price have we earned the people's trust and respect, and assumed the position we are in now." At that time Wang Youqing could not understand the full import of these words, but he was deeply affected. They sparked his present determination to build his district into a happy paradise. Wang Youqing respected and

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\* Japan used a minor incident which occurred at the Marco Polo Bridge to the south of Beijing in July 1937 to invade China without declaring war.

admired his superior, doting on every word he uttered and emulating every action.

Wang Youqing took the outline from his briefcase and put it in his pocket. He sat back down on the wicker chair and touched the ink stone on the table, then picked up a red book inscribed in gold characters. Flipping through the pages, he was attracted by notations along the margins in beautiful calligraphy. He was about to read them when Gu Xinmin walked in.

This county head exuded the air of a sophisticated veteran cadre. He wore a tan cardigan, black pants, and cloth shoes. Though he had just turned forty, he was graying near the temples. His slightly plump face was florid and his eyes thin and long, their gaze always accompanied by a thoughtful and humble smile. He lightly rubbed the dust off his fingers and said, "I've been turning the place upside down looking for a notebook from land reform." He lit a cigarette, pulled a chair over to Wang Youqing and sat down. "It contains my notes from a discussion with Comrade Luo Xuguang before he left. Also a letter he wrote me."

Wang Youqing knew that Gu Xinmin and Luo Xuguang disagreed and were not on the best of terms, so he asked, "Why are you looking for them now?"

Gu Xinmin tapping his cigarette, slowly replied, "I vaguely remember jotting down the names of a few people Luo Xuguang had talked about. They were also mentioned in that letter."

"What kind of people?"

"One of the names sounded something like Gao Daquan. It stuck in my mind because it was so unusual."

"Daquan is from Greenfields. He's an ordinary Party member. Do you want to know about him?"

"Yes."

"I haven't had much contact with him, but I know a few things. He's quite hard-working and enjoys some prestige among the villagers, but he is very stubborn and easily gets carried away by his personal feelings. He doesn't pay enough attention to policy."

"This is a serious weakness for a Communist Party member."

"Recently he went to Beijing. When he came back, he clashed with the village head who is also in the Party."

"Why?"

"I heard it was over power."

Suddenly Gu Xinmin laughed. He pressed his cigarette into the ash tray, stood up, and walked behind the desk. Then he looked at Wang Youqing, who had stopped short in bewilderment. "Youqing, this 'I heard' is not acceptable. If Daquan's fighting over power is based on nothing more than this 'I heard,' then I could logically deduce that all your information about him is based on mere hearsay. Can we use hearsay to judge a Party member under us? Absolutely not! A person in a leadership position should avoid such ambiguities." The county head stopped. He cared for his cadre, and he knew Wang Youqing had a strong sense of self-respect. Gu believed that, in certain people, position and self-respect were proportional. If he criticized such comrades excessively and hurt their feelings, it would weaken their faith in him. The strain on their relationship would eventually hinder Gu's own work.

Gu pulled a folder from his drawer and took out a letter. "I want to discuss something with you. First read this over and think about it. I'll go help Xiao Liu with lunch."

Wang Youqing, his face flushed, took the letter. Although

his eyes were fixed on the envelope, the inscription did not register until Gu Xinmin left the room. Addressed to the county Party committee in care of Heavenly Gate District Party Committee, it was from Greenfields:

We are Party members. We want to report a serious criticism and raise an important request to the leadership.

The village head, Comrade Zhang Jinfa, made a report to the leadership which was not in accordance with the facts. The first spring plowing after land reform did not go as well as he said. Actually, it went rather bad. We barely got everything planted. And that is no guarantee that we can get a harvest.

To be honest, we did not benefit from the policy of enriching individual families. Some people are all for it. For instance, well-to-do middle peasants like Feng Shao-huai and Village Head Zhang. One is against patriotic thinking all together, and the other will not educate the people about it. They are so busy getting ahead that they could not care less how other people are faring. We've actually suffered as a result of their actions.

If this policy continues, it will only make a handful of families happy and the majority of the families worry. The *fanshen* families are threatened. We really worry that they can't hold onto the land they got during land reform. We worry that the peasants won't be able to support industry and the Volunteer Army. If things go on like this, when will socialism ever come?

Neither of us has been to school. We have a lot to say but we don't know how to put it down on paper. What we wrote here is jumbled. It doesn't express our concerns very well. We urgently request that the leaders send people here to investigate and help us think of ways

to solve our problems and lead us to dig out the roots of our poverty!

Extremely urgent. We are awaiting your reply.

Sincerely,

Gao Daquan

Zhu Tiehan

(a big red finger print)

Wang Youqing stood up in outrage. He rushed to the door and heard the clatter of utensils and Gu Xinmin and Xiao Liu chattering in the kitchen. He pulled back, unconsciously feeling his pocket for the outline, and nervously paced around the room before sitting down again. As he re-read the letter, an inexpressible exasperation welled up in him. Greenfields cannot be in such a mess, he thought. Jinfa would not have given a false report. If he had, his report would have been contradicted by Agricultural Assistant Li who went there, because Li would not have gone along with a fraud. Even if Li had reasons to cover for Jinfa, there is also the cook, Fan Keming, who praised the spring planting in Greenfields to the skies. He has no stake in this matter. Why should he lie? This is ridiculous! Wang Youqing felt the letter was incoherent, full of nonsense. He decided it was deliberately written to make trouble. He scoffed.

Gu Xinmin came in with a plate of cold cuts. He looked closely at Wang Youqing as he put down the plate and took a seat. Lighting a cigarette, he asked, "You've read the letter? Let's talk about it."

Since Wang Youqing had already found sufficient reasons to refute the letter, he was calm and composed. He confidently began, "I'll give you my opinion. Correct me if I'm wrong."



Gu Xinmin had been waiting with great interest for his subordinate's response. He had asked Wang Youqing to read the letter and give his opinions to test his analytical abilities. He originally had assumed that Wang Youqing would be ruffled and anxious to clear himself, groping for reasons to invalidate the letter. He discovered that he was wrong, however. Wang's poise alone was sufficient to impress his superior.

Wang Youqing held up the letter and pointed at it. "I think the letter itself is full of contradictions."

Gu Xinmin eagerly encouraged, "Go on. What are they?"

Wang Youqing carefully stated, "Look at this. They start out by saying that Zhang Jinfa's report was false and that Greenfields' spring planting did not go so well. But in the very next sentence they say they finished all the planting. Since Zhang Jinfa's report was on the progress of the planting — and they admit that it was all done — there's no question of falsehood here. As far as what they say about 'barely planted,' this only proves that they ran into a lot of difficulties. But what else could you expect for the first spring planting after land reform? It can't be as easy as what we saw in the movies, with tractors plowing the fields. Zhang Jinfa carried out the directives from the leadership in earnest, overcame all sorts of difficulties and fulfilled the task of spring planting. There is only reason to praise him, certainly no grounds to reproach him. As for whether the harvest can be guaranteed, that work lies ahead of us. Zhang Jinfa did not sign any contract guaranteeing how much would be produced. So how can they settle accounts with him ahead of time. Isn't this a mass of contradictions?"

Gu Xinmin smiled. Patting Wang Youqing on the shoulder, he said, "Very good, Youqing. You have really raised your political level." He stood up and leaned against

the table, then continued, "I agree with your analysis. You have hit the nail right on the head. The letter negates itself, so we need not waste any more time over the validity of the report on Greenfields' achievements. We should now study the letter further. We have to go beyond the words and get at its essence."

Wang Youqing was a little embarrassed at this unexpected encouragement. But he also felt much more self-assured, even a bit complacent.

Gu Xinmin went on, "I have come to basically the same conclusions. That's why I wanted to find out more about Gao Daquan. It is also why I objected to your information based on hearsay. We are leaders. It is important that we make swift and accurate assessments of all situations. If we are ever slightly negligent, we will violate the principle of seeking truth from facts and end up going in the wrong direction. This can bring insurmountable losses to the Party and the people."

Wang Youqing finally understood why Gu had handled the problem the way he did. He nodded and smiled as he thought: I really can learn a lot working under such a leader.

Gu Xinmin continued, "I want to discuss this problem with you further. In my opinion your hearsay should be discounted. Gao Daquan's action is not caused by a lack of integrity, that is, the desire to undermine Zhang Jinfa. Beware, I am confining myself to this particular action. I have not investigated Gao Daquan in other respects so I have no right to draw any general conclusions. I believe that if he wanted to undermine Zhang Jinfa he would not be so blatantly self-contradictory. Also he wouldn't be so anxious for the leadership to investigate. What if an investigator went there and found that all the land had been planted? Wouldn't his whole argument collapse?"

Wang Youqing chimed in, "You are absolutely right. I totally agree."

Gu Xinmin took the letter from Wang Youqing's hand and said, "Once we've ruled out that possibility, then we can grasp the essence. In my opinion, this letter expresses the true feelings of the writers. This is the way they view reality and the way they reason. Their problem is one of ideology, of understanding."

Wang was not sure what Gu meant.

The county head put his hands behind his back and, looking out of the window, elaborated. "Do you remember what I said to you last winter when we began implementing the policy of 'enriching individual families through hard work'? Our goal is to build a strong and prosperous new China. But it won't be smooth sailing. Our work will be hindered by many wrong trends of thought which all stem from one theoretical premise: the denial that we are now in a period of consolidating New Democracy. The people holding this view do not realize that socialism shouldn't be called for until we build the material base for it — that is, until we've greatly developed the forces of production. We need to enrich the peasants so that they can buy machines, but the state can only supply the peasantry with machines after the country is industrialized. Therefore collectivization is out of the question until we have mechanization. But some people can't be bothered with this. To be more specific, before spring planting, they entertained notions like the poorer, the more respectable. Their widespread influence made some peasants afraid of getting rich, afraid of showing their wealth. After we called on individual families to enrich themselves through work, the 'poor-is-respectable' idea no longer had a market. Then these same people switched and spread ideas about opposing exploitation and stepping into socialism immediately. They

are advocating extreme egalitarianism — a characteristic of agrarian socialism. It is just another version of 'everyone eating out of one big pot.' These shifting wrong trends have strongly influenced our low level cadres. The two Party members who wrote this letter are typical examples. I have a basis for saying this; I can see a trace of Comrade Luo Xuguang in them."

Wang Youqing understood now. "That's right! That's right! I heard that Luo Xuguang filled a whole notebook with these ideas for Gao Daquan before he left."

Gu Xinmin continued, "This presents us leaders with a very serious task: How to educate the Party members and the masses of people to overcome the influence of these wrong trends. Is it hard? Indeed it is. But looking at this task from a more positive perspective, it is not that hard. The victory in spring planting proved the correctness of our policy and educated many people. We should not become conceited and relax our efforts but should work harder for a good harvest. When the majority of peasants have enriched themselves, we will again be proved right. Then those people will have nothing to say."

Wang Youqing said, "That was exactly what I was thinking when I finished the outline for my interview."

"This is the correct approach. We don't need to argue, and we don't need to try and pressure others into agreeing with us. Some comrades may hold different opinions, but they share common interests and a common goal with us. Our differences are only over how to reach that goal. All right. Let's settle accounts after the harvest. The results will decide who is the winner and who is the loser."

Wang Youqing nodded. "That's the best way."

"So you agree with me completely. Now I want to show you something else." Gu Xinmin pulled out a note from the

same folder and handed it to Wang Youqing. It read:

Comrade Gu,

I'm asking Comrade Xu to bring you a letter written by two Party members. I feel that they have voiced the fears and aspirations of the broad revolutionary masses. The problems they've reported should be seriously considered by the Party committee when it lays down guidelines for our work in the county.

I do not know the particular situation of this village, and as we are now in the middle of a conference I cannot come back and discuss it with you. Please bring this letter to the attention of Wang Youqing. After the conference I would like to discuss it with him.

Sincerely,

Liang Haishan

Wang Youqing was silent for a moment, then asked, "Does Secretary Liang also disagree with you?"

"Without differences there would be no unity. This is the dialectical law governing all development. This is the truth," Gu Xinmin replied.

"If Secretary Liang comes to speak to me, I won't argue either. I'll also ask him to wait until the harvest to make his judgement."

### 37

## Chance Meeting at Juncture Flats

The first chirps of the hedge sparrows accompanied Daquan's departure from Greenfields.

The stars faded as Daquan crossed the shimmering Bright Cloud River at Lihua Landing.

The pale blue eastern horizon turned pink, then golden yellow and the sun ascended above the poplar trees before Daquan reached a village called Juncture Flats.

A tea shed by the roadside selling cigarettes, wine and inexpensive pickled vegetables had lured many tired and hungry wayfarers. While enjoying their food, they kept an eye on the scores of children hanging around their luggage and carts, and chatted with great avidity.

Daquan sat under an old locust tree across the street from the tea shed. Clusters of white locust blossoms hung like clusters of carved jade amidst the verdant leaves. Birds hopped from branch to branch; humming bees swirled around the fragrant flowers. Holding a large bowl of hot water in one hand and a corn flapjack in the other, Daquan quietly ate. He was oblivious to the bustling scene around him; his mind was back in Greenfields. Yesterday after anxiously waiting seven days for a reply to his letter, he went to the district office to inquire. When he found out that Secretary Wang was attending a conference in the county seat, he decided to go there and talk directly to the district and county leaders.

Last night excited friends had crowded into his house to bid him farewell. Their indignation, their apprehension about duplicating Liu Xiang's calamity and their fervent expectations weighed heavily on Daquan. He lay in bed pensively staring at the gray windowpane paper. His usually unflagging confidence had given way to pangs of doubt and anxiety: Could he find a solution for the *fanshen* peasants by merely running to the county seat? What if County Head Gu and District Party Secretary Wang instructed him to adhere to the old get-rich line? That would be difficult to cope with. What would he do then?

Daquan did not want to tarry in Juncture Flats any longer. He quickly finished up his meal and returned the bowl to the tea shed. As he was picking up his belongings, he noticed a PLA soldier staring at him. The soldier walked over, still looking at him intently, then smiled and asked, "Is your name Gao by any chance?"

Daquan was startled. He closely examined the man before him: He looked in his mid-thirties, was of medium height, and was wearing a faded army uniform and carrying an army pack. His round face, dark eyebrows and large eyes looked familiar but Daquan could not place him.

Ecstatic to hear Daquan's affirmative reply, the soldier asked, "Are you from Greenfields?"

Daquan's face brightened. He thought he recognized the man, but he could not believe his eyes.

Before he could answer, the soldier grabbed his shoulders and shook him as he said with breathless excitement. "Daquan, how are you? We haven't seen each other for nearly nine years. Doesn't time fly? The last I saw of you was in 1942. You drove a cart into Heavenly Gate and you panicked when the Japanese soldiers started ransacking the town and arresting people. I pulled you into a courtyard. We squatted under a pomegranate tree for a long time and talked about the guerrillas. Remember?"

The bygone days flashed through Daquan's mind.

Once the landlord Crooked Mouth had woken Daquan at midnight and ordered him to hitch up the mule cart and take him to the Heavenly Gate market to hire some seasonal laborers. When they reached the "manpower market" at Heavenly Gate, Crooked Mouth stood on an earthen platform with arms akimbo, and bellowed, "I need people to pull wheat for me. I pay in cash. If you work for me, you'll get four and half dollars a day, three square meals of noodles, rice, big pan-

cakes, beancurd and roast meat. You can eat all you want and at the final feast two ounces of liquor for each will be thrown in."

Before he finished, a whole crowd surrounded him. Only a swarming mass of straw hats could be discerned in the dim starlit dawn.

Noticing the eagerness of the crowd, Crooked Mouth shouted, "This will be done according to the old rule. No food or drink until the headman leads you all in a stint of work. Those who keep up with him can eat their fill and continue to work. Whoever lags behind will be dismissed without pay." As he said this, he picked out twenty-five men from the crowd.

When they arrived at Crooked Mouth's wheat fields, Daquan discovered that Zhang Jinfa was to lead the wheat pulling this year.

Jinfa silently started to work. With every two or three pulls, he tied up a big bundle of wheat. Behind him was the second-in-command who was in turn followed by all the hired hands.

Daquan ran back home to tell Uncle Le to haul lunch to the field in the mule cart.

He sat in the cart and excitedly told Uncle Le what he had seen at the "manpower market." When they reached the wheat field, Daquan was astounded. Two hired hands soaked with sweat lay prostrate on the ground faintly moaning, one of them vomiting a greenish slime. Five or six other workers, realizing they would never make it, gave up to avoid working a whole day for nothing. They were sitting listlessly on an earthen bank. In the wheat field another seven or eight already had fallen way behind Jinfa, but perhaps still harboring a thread of hope, they struggled to keep going. Still another seven or eight followed closely behind Jinfa and the

second-in-command. They were led by a man wearing a white undershirt and red belt.

Daquan was strongly attracted to the young man in the white undershirt whom Uncle Le said was Tian Yu. Leaping off the cart, he ran into the wheat field and stared at this young man, his hand unconsciously forming a clenched fist. He was vicariously urging this young man to work faster.

Jinfa was calm and self-confident. When he stood up to wipe off his sweat, he looked around at Crooked Mouth, who was watching the race under a tree, then resumed his work with a wicked strength, plucking the wheat nonstop.

As the sun climbed higher, the heat became increasingly insufferable. Daquan burned with anger when he saw a few more workers fall behind until only the young man in the white undershirt persisted. The rule stipulated that the laborers could eat after they had worked up and down the field once. The young man was already halfway back. If he could only keep up, he would make it over the hurdle. But Jinfa worked furiously, stepping up his pace. When he reached the edge of the field, the young man lagged way behind.

From under the tree Crooked Mouth waved his bony arms and shouted, "Lunch time, lunch time."

This served as a command. It signified that time was up. No one had qualified. The twenty-five men had toiled the entire morning in vain.

Many of the seasonal hands surrounded Crooked Mouth and asked him to let them finish a day's work. Crooked Mouth, concealing his satisfaction, said with a treacherous smile, "I'm eager to hire some people. But I want men who can work, not those who only eat my food and take my money! If you people want to finish off the day, that's fine. But you'll be given the everyday grub and paid at half rate. Tomorrow you can try again on the southern spread. If you

pass, I'll give you a bona fide meal and wage. Take it or leave it — it's up to you."

The weary and famished workers looked at one another. They could only swallow their tears.

Daquan felt uneasy the entire day, his legs weak and his food tasteless. Crooked Mouth's bonus for the permanent workers at wheat harvest amounted to whole wheat steamed buns and stewed spinach with a few bean noodles. But the bun just sat like a lump in Daquan's mouth; he could not swallow it.

Uncle Le was mending his shoes that evening and noticed Daquan's downcast expression. "No need to rack your brains over this. Can't you see through it? It's really very simple. Go to Crooked Mouth's compound right now. Just look behind the screen hanging over the door and you'll know."

Daquan hurried to Crooked Mouth's quarters. When he arrived at the north room and opened the screen a crack, he was infuriated.

There were three men in the room eating — Crooked Mouth, Jinfa and the second-in-command. The table was packed with meat, fish and steamed buns. Crooked Mouth was pouring wine for a watery-eyed Jinfa whose face was drained of color from too much alcohol. Daquan turned around and walked down the Tall Steps, his head heavy, and returned to his room. At last he understood! No wonder those two stopped eating with other workers at the onset of the wheat harvest: They were getting feasts. No wonder Jinfa was so strong: With a stomach full of fish and meat, of course he could surpass all those hired hands living on wild vegetables.

The next morning, Crooked Mouth, Jinfa and the second-in-command came out to the fields. Crooked Mouth confidently shouted, "So everyone's turned out again. Well, let's

try it all over again today. We'll follow the standard rules. Start working."

Jinfa smugly rolled up his sleeves, bent down and began to pull.

Crooked Mouth's eyes widened with annoyance when he caught sight of Daquan. "Hey there kid, how come you're out here at this hour?"

Daquan looked at him. "I've come to pull wheat." As he said this, he took his place right beside the two headmen.

Crooked Mouth was delighted. "Oh, little brat. You're getting the idea of doing some hard work, huh?"

Daquan, marshaling all his skill and strength, silently followed the two men in the lead.

He pulled and pulled. Before long he surpassed the two headmen. Then he put his scheme into operation. Usually people first pull enough wheat to make a bundle, and then shake off the dirt from its roots, tie it together and put it aside. But Daquan knocked off dirt from every handful he pulled, flinging the dirt straight back, every speck of it flying into the faces of the two headmen.

Jinfa, unable to stomach losing to a kid, exerted himself. But he lost time dodging the dirt and wiping his eyes. Soon he grew nervous; his rhythm was broken and his vitality, sapped.

Daquan was pleased to see his trick succeed. Now he calmly set his own pace without allowing the two to surpass him. Tian Yu immediately caught on to Daquan's intentions. He signaled his companions with his eyes and, encouraged, they all stepped up their pace, catching up fast.

When lunch time came, Crooked Mouth was dumbfounded. Not one of the seasonal hands was outdistanced.

Daquan was an adult the next time he saw Tian Yu. It was 1942. The Japanese had occupied Heavenly Gate. One

day Daquan drove a cart into the market town to deliver some gifts for the landlord Crooked Mouth.

A tense atmosphere pervaded the desolate streets that day. People walked quickly while continually looking over their shoulders. Most stores had closed. Those still in business only opened their doors halfway or simply carried on their transactions through a small window. The most rowdy place in town was the little wine shop where wild laughter and shouts from Japanese soldiers frequently broke the deadly silence.

Daquan hurriedly drove the cart to an abandoned distillery and unloaded it.

As he started back in the empty cart, suddenly shots sounded and motor cycles roared. People in the street were scurrying in all directions. Families closed their doors and windows.

Daquan tightly held onto his jittery horse and looked around, not knowing what had happened. Someone rushed over, threw aside the reins in his hands and pulled him into a nearby courtyard. Only after he came to a standstill did he recognize that it was Tian Yu. He was about to greet him when an eerie sound of clunking boots approached the gate.

Tian Yu pulled him into a grove of pomegranate trees and said in an undertone, "Squat down! If they don't come in, we'll stay here. Otherwise, we'll climb over the back wall. Look, there's another street behind it. We can still get away."

After the clunking footsteps faded away, Tian Yu said, "How could you be so dumb as to stand in the street like that? Why bother with the horse cart? It was much too risky."

Daquan, smiling from embarrassment, asked, "What's going on here?"

Tian Yu held up his hand, his thumb and forefinger spread apart to form the Chinese ideograph *eight* signifying the Eighth Route Army.\* "There was a ruckus in the market. They're arresting people."

Daquan's eyes sparkled. "The Eighth Route's in *our* area?"

"Their bases are south of the Thistle Canal and at the foot of the northern hills. Whenever there's a chance, they strike here. Even though this is the enemy's nest, it's quite vulnerable. It's truly unbelievable! Round noontime a few days ago Qi Zhixiong, the guerrilla leader, charged into the fortress with some of his men and captured a machine-gun. Another time the guerrilla leader happened to pass by a well near the railway station where two Japanese soldiers were taking a bath. With no effort at all, he chucked those bastards right into the well."

Daquan was completely absorbed by Tian Yu's stories about this guerrilla leader whom he had known as a child.

Tian Yu stood up. "It's safe now. Let's go."

"Are you still working here?" Daquan asked.

Tian Yu brushed pomegranate petals off his clothes. "I'm here today but who can tell about tomorrow."

"Are you looking for temporary jobs?"

Tian Yu shook his head. "No, I'm looking for a different way to live."

A short time later the puppet county government posted a wanted notice on Crooked Mouth's wall, demanding the apprehension of a guerrilla leader. Whoever turned him over to the military police would be rewarded ten thousand dollars. The man was described as over thirty, tall, with a

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\* Predecessor of the Chinese People's Liberation Army.

square face, dark eyebrows, and a crescent scar on his left cheek.

In August, the Japanese marshaled their troops near the marshland and on both sides of the Thistle Canal. They were determined to hold on to the railway in the southwest and the highway to the north. A frenzied "mopping-up" campaign was unleashed. Then one muggy evening Uncle Le came back from collecting weeds and whispered to Daquan, "I saw that Qi Zhixiong you've been talking about every day."

Daquan grabbed Uncle Le's hand. "You actually saw him?"

"That's right. I was cutting weeds in the marshland and I heard a noise in front of me. When I looked up — oh my goodness, there were two soldiers with guns at the edge of the woods. I realized the woods were full of people, all carrying rifles. I picked up my sickle and ran. But I didn't know someone was watching me from behind. I nearly bumped into him. I couldn't escape so I obediently followed him into the woods. What do you think about this lucky break? I stumbled into someone I knew. It was Tian Yu, the one who was hired for the wheat harvest a few years ago."

"Tian Yu has joined the guerrillas too?"

"He said he had only been there three days. He helped me out. Pulled me over in front of someone and said he was their leader. I looked up and there on the grass sat a huge man in peasant clothes with a gray cap, a leather belt and puttees. Before talking to me, he smiled and passed over a cigarette. I didn't dare accept but then again it was hard not to accept. Right at that moment I noticed a crescent scar on his left cheek."

"That's him, that's Qi Zhixiong."

Three days later, Daquan left Greenfields and tramped through fields and swamps with a sickle in hand. He roamed about until nightfall, only returning home after dark. The next day he started out again, walking until the sun dropped westward. He had almost reached the bank of the Thistle Canal when he met an old cowherd.

The old man looked around, then said in a hushed voice, "Don't go any further in that direction, young man. The Japanese are setting up an electric barbed wire fence over there. Two days ago the guerrillas staged an ambush. They killed off a whole truck-load of enemy soldiers before retreating beyond the Japanese encirclement. What a shame two of them had to stay behind as rear guards. They fought to the very end. When a crowd of Japanese wanted to capture them alive, those heroes smashed their guns, jumped into the midst of the enemy and exploded a hand-grenade. I heard that one of them was the guerrilla leader."

Daquan anxiously asked, "Was his name Qi?"

The old man replied, "I don't know the details. I was only told this by an old woman who came from Wild Goose Village to visit the cemetery. Look over there. That's where the heroes..."

Now Daquan's eyes misted as he nodded. "Tian Yu, I never thought I'd meet you here. You have a sharp eye."

"If I had bumped into you anywhere else, I never would have recognized you," Tian Yu declared. "It's been nine years. Nine years of upheaval; nine years of great change. We've moved from one world into another. It's remarkable."

Daquan grabbed Tian Yu by the hand and, shaking it, said, "Some people said you left with the main forces and

were killed in battle. Others said you went to Korea and were killed there."

Tian Yu smiled. "I've been through a lot of battles but seem to have come through them all intact. The old society owes us so much, I can't die before I see it all paid up."

"Where are you going now?"

"I'm moving from one battlefield to another. I was transferred to a civilian post. I've been working with Secretary Liang at his model village to learn the skills of civilian work. I'll be assigned to Heavenly Gate District in a few weeks." Tian Yu smiled and pulled Daquan by the arm. "Let's go get something to eat at the tea shed."

"I've already eaten. Besides, it's not so convenient to talk there with all those people around. Let's go sit on the slope."

As Daquan pulled him in that direction, Tian Yu remarked, "You don't look so strong, but you still have your wicked champion wheat-puller strength."

Daquan was again reminded of a question which had perpetually preyed on his mind. "I heard that soon after we parted you joined the guerrillas. Uncle Le saw you once when he was cutting hay in the marsh. Right?"

"That's right. I remember it."

"So you really were with Qi Zhixiong?"

"Yes. We lived together and fought together for three months. It was he who taught me how to write. I'll never forget those days."

"And then you parted?"

"Yes. He and another comrade guarded our retreat after a fierce battle with the Japanese. We heard he was killed. But then before I came back from Korea, I heard he was still alive and fighting there."



"I ask about him whenever I can. Everyone says he must have died."

Tian Yu gazed at the vast fields and the far away hills. Then he plucked up his spirits and, putting his hand on Daquan's knee, said, "We all hope that he is still alive and building socialism with us. If he did die, it was a worthy death. Now the poor people own the country. How are we going to raise the banner of the martyrs and in what direction should we march? Those are the questions that everyone has to answer with their actions."

Daquan shook his head in embarrassment. "To tell you the truth, I cannot answer it. I'm at a loss for a road."

"There are plenty of roads," Tian Yu said. "But mainly two, both right in front of us. For instance, buying houses, buying land, and hiring people to enrich individual families is on the same road as setting up a factory. Some people are racing down that road full steam right now."

"That's the road for the few," Daquan said anxiously. "Most people are against it. They know it will lead them into quicksand. They will sink deeper and deeper, all the way up to their necks. We cannot go that way. If we do, our martyrs' blood will have been spilt in vain."

Tian Yu energetically slapped Daquan's knee and said, "See, you have an answer right there."

"But what road *should* we take?" Daquan continued. "We've suffered through the old days together. Now that we've seen the light of day after land reform, we should lead the peasants forward. But just take a look in the villages. The poor have already used up their land reform grain allotments. Families short of hands can hardly get their land planted. Their poverty is deeprooted. It holds them down wherever they turn. The way I see it, if we don't think of a way to dig up the roots of our poverty we will lose

the fruits of land reform. The majority will become landless, and their families torn apart. They will have to work for others and be exploited. Tian Yu, we are Party members. How can we stand by and watch this happen?"

Looking at Daquan's troubled face, Tian Yu held his shoulders and firmly said, "Don't worry. The old days won't come back."

Daquan shook his head. "I'm not sure. It's not all that safe."

Tian Yu stood up and took Daquan by the hand. "I want to take you to Red Date Village. Secretary Liang is holding a meeting there. He is working to build a new road that will prevent the old society from coming back. It's the road that will lead us to socialism."

## 38

### Strike While the Iron Is Hot

At noon Daquan and Tian Yu reached Red Date Village which lay in the foothills of Precipice Mountain, overlooking the plain. They saw a man of rugged build come down the road toting a carrying-pole with two buckets.

Tian Yu introduced Daquan to Yang Guangsen, the village Party secretary and head of the mutual-aid team, then asked, "How come you're carrying water to the fields at lunch time?"

"It's a long story," Yang Guangsen replied. "Secretary Liang pulled a fast one on me. Got me all turned around. Last night he told me the district leaders attending the con-

ference wanted to see our sorghum. Of course I said yes, and I offered to take them there. Boy, was I surprised when I went to their quarters early this morning and couldn't find a soul. I hurried to the fields and there was Secretary Liang and all the district leaders hoeing with our mutual-aid team. I tried everything to stop them but they wouldn't quit. What could I do?"

Tian Yu laughed. "Leaders should participate in field work. Why stop them?"

"It's all right for you to work with us because you've been here a while," Yang Guangsen said. "Have I ever stopped you from doing anything that we were doing? But they're different. It's not everyday that these leading comrades come to such an out-of-the-way village. They are our guests. We can't let them work."

"Don't worry about it," Tian Yu said. "Secretary Liang must have something in mind."

"It doesn't matter whether I worry or not, it's already too late. They've hoed every inch of that field this morning. Now they're going to have lunch right there, then end their conference. I've made some bean soup for them."

"We'll go join them. Let me carry that for you." Tian Yu tried to wrest the carrying-pole from Yang Guangsen but failed.

On their way to the fields, Yang Guangsen asked, "Tian Yu, is it true that Secretary Liang was once a miner?"

"Yes. He was born in a village near the Kailuan Mines in Tangshan and went to work there before he was any taller than a pick. He stayed a miner until he joined the revolution."

"Then why is he so good with a hoe? He looks like a natural. I worked for ten hard years as a hired hand, but I could hardly keep up with him."

"After he joined the revolutionary forces he worked for years in the countryside."

As Daquan listened to their conversation, he became intrigued by Secretary Liang.

Small paths wound through this rolling countryside which eventually merged with the mountain range. Date and persimmon trees claimed the hillsides, and farmland stretched through the valleys. This terrain lacked both the vastness of the marshland and its monochromatic monotony. Here the contouring land and the variegated foliage provided a tantalizing diversity. Sometimes dense woods screened out the sunlight, sometimes the sun glare was blinding. The spectacular array of flowers and birds, rocks and pebbles added to the novelty of the place. To Daquan, who had grown up on the plains of the Bright Cloud River, this scenery alone was exhilarating enough to warrant his long journey.

They crossed a bone-dry sandy riverbed and climbed another slope. A plateau came into view where a group of men were sitting under a persimmon tree with impressive umbrage. Then they heard a vibrant baritone voice, "Comrades, our conference has ended, I would say, triumphantly. This marks the beginning of a new battle."

A wave of applause resounded.

Daquan followed Tian Yu and Yang Guangsen toward the group, intently listening to the man at the center. Beside each person lay a straw hat and a hoe. Everyone's back and shoulders were soaked with sweat. Daquan sat down stiffly on the grass with Tian Yu and scrutinized the speaker.

He was a huge man in his early forties. His hair was not parted at the side as had become fashionable among cadres, but was shaved like a peasant. His gray jacket was unbuttoned and his blue pants rolled up to his knees. He rested

one hand on his wide leather belt and in the other hand held a cloth-bound notebook, which he vigorously waved as he talked. His dark eyebrows, his ruddy complexion and his mouth, which was surrounded by stubbles, conveyed a sense of kindness and will power as well as unfathomable depth.

Tian Yu whispered, "That's Comrade Liang Haishan."

Liang Haishan was saying, "I bet you all expect me to conclude this session with a concrete, well-organized, spectacular report running down the points 1-2-3-4-5-6-7, so that you can take notes and read them verbatim to your subordinates and use them as a manual for your work. Is that right? I'm not being too subjective, am I? See, you've all taken out your notebooks and unscrewed the tops of your pens, just waiting to write it all down." Liang Haishan waved his hand and continued, "Put them away. It's not worth the effort. You'll do fine just listening. We've been meeting for three and a half days. The first day we exchanged information on the work we've done and discussed future plans. The last two days I took you around to see six villages to look at other people's work, and this morning we hoed this field. Take the summary we did of our work and compare it to what's been going on in these villages. In my opinion, those of you who pushed on and helped the peasants organize after land reform, as was done in these six villages, are on the right track. Any achievements in this socialist direction, however small, are commendable. You should boldly carry on. But some people thought the revolution was over after land reform. They either left the peasants to their own devices, or gave in to their old thinking, leading the way for a surge in private production. These comrades are way off course. Well, I won't criticize them because the blame lies with the county Party committee. It did not fully grasp

the principles laid down at the Second Plenary Session of the Seventh Party Congress. Consequently it did not effectively implement them at the grass roots. We plan to make a full examination of past practices and change thoroughly. But I want to make it perfectly clear that after this conference if some comrades are still confused and still drag their feet, they will be criticized. I am sure this will happen to some of you. Because there is now a current against socialist revolution which has deeply influenced some comrades, they are blinded to the potential in the peasantry for socialism. Their eyes are fixed on the well-to-do middle peasants, and they cater to their tastes. What's worse, they act like gamblers hoping that the odds are with them as they test their will against the rest of the Party. They are waiting to see who will win out in the end. If we allow these comrades to have a free hand, China will go astray. The political power won by the people will be lost. We will be committing a serious error. This is an issue of critical importance. Comrades, you must be on the alert."

Liang Haishan paused to look at his audience then said, "I asked everyone to hoe this field as a conclusion to the conference. I want to emphasize the important reason for doing so. Many of our comrades were peasants who have picked up a briefcase and a gun. Comrades coming from other backgrounds have also done at least some work in the fields. But note this difference: In the past our sweat dropped on the soil of private farming, but this morning our sweat dropped on the soil of the mutual-aid team. Of course the mutual-aid teams are not full-fledged socialism but only the sprouts of socialism. However, once you have the sprouts you can expect them to grow. The sprouts of today will be a lush field of tomorrow. I hope our comrades have a better understanding and are clearer on our goal. When you return

to your districts after the conference, throw all your enthusiasm into developing this kind of soil and cultivating this kind of sprout."

The audience seemed stirred.

Liang Haishan waited for a moment and said with excitement, "Finally let me read you a passage which Chairman Mao wrote in 1943. It's from a speech called 'Get Organized': 'Among the peasant masses a system of individual economy has prevailed for thousands of years, with each family or household forming a productive unit. This scattered, individual form of production is the economic foundation of feudal rule and keeps the peasants in perpetual poverty. The only way to change it is gradual collectivization, and the only way to bring about collectivization, according to Lenin, is through cooperatives.'"

"Did you hear that?" Tian Yu whispered as he nudged the infatuated Daquan. "That's what I meant when I told you Chairman Mao has already pointed out the golden road for the peasants. Your mutual-aid team is the first step on this road."

"Now I understand," Daquan said. "If we want to build socialism in the countryside, we have to organize families and fight together against natural disasters and raise production. Together we can dig out the roots of our poverty. So mutual-aid teams are not simply for getting the fields planted or dealing with an immediate crisis; they are the way forward. As we attract more and more people to work together, we'll grow stronger, we'll eventually reach socialism."

Liang Haishan had already closed his notebook. He concluded, "In his speech Chairman Mao pointed out the way to solve the fundamental problems plaguing the peasantry and the road leading to socialism in the countryside. Go review the principles laid down at the Second Plenary Ses-

sion of the Seventh Party Congress. Think about why we can't stop at land reform but have to push the revolution ahead. Some people are shouting, 'Mix the plaster while the water lasts.' They mean to build on the gains of land reform and maintain private farming and enrich individual families. But we Communists should emphatically call out — 'Strike while the iron is hot!'"

There was a round of applause.

Over lunch lively discussions sparked up among the district cadres. Tian Yu led Daquan over to meet Liang Haishan. Daquan's hand was enfolded in the powerful grip of this former miner and soldier as Liang Haishan said with a smile, "Oh, it's you! I know you."

Daquan's face turned as red as sorghum in July. He excitedly asked, "Have you ever been to Greenfields?"

Liang Haishan tilted his head and looked at Daquan. "We've never met but we've had a heart-to-heart talk."

Daquan did not know what Liang Haishan meant.

"Does that surprise you?" Liang Haishan asked. "Ha, ha. Well, I read your letter to the county Party committee. When a Communist writes a letter to the Party, every word should come from his heart. That's exactly what you did in your letter. You spoke very movingly on behalf of the revolutionary peasants. You're quite something. You have a strong proletarian character."

The guard of the county Party secretary brought over three bowls of bean soup. Liang Haishan took a bowl and asked them to sit down.

Tian Yu said, "Secretary Liang, Daquan would like to talk with you about the situation in Greenfields. I would also like to hear about it."

"I fully support Daquan's letter," Liang Haishan said.

"But I have to go back to the county seat for a few days. Next time we meet, we'll discuss what's been happening in Greenfields. In the meantime take him to visit some of our model villages. First go to East Willow Village and look at the temporary mutual-aid team. Then come back here and see the permanent mutual-aid team. And finally go to Rooster Village to see the newly formed cooperative. Look over the whole process from the lower stage to the higher but focus on the permanent mutual-aid team here in Red Date Village. I'll meet you in a few days at Rooster Village."

### 39

## Fanning the Flames

People flocked into Heavenly Gate on the first market day after spring planting to shop and browse around. The street was jammed even before the vendors of pigs and fresh vegetables, usually the first to arrive, had set up their stalls. Local produce, handicrafts, manufactured goods and animals were displayed in booths along both sides of the street. The deafening medley of peddlers hawking their goods, laughter, chatter, and whinnying frightened the birds from their habitual perches on rooftops and nearby boughs.

Fan Keming waded through the crowd, looking tense. As a rule he would haggle to the last penny, but today he briskly bought some vegetables and pork and hurried to the retired cook's house. "Brother Zhang, would you fill in again for me today?"

"I thought you weren't going to take time off this week."

"Secretary Wang went home after the conference to get his summer clothes. I want to take care of a few errands while he's gone."

"Come in and have some water. How come you look so frazzled today?"

Fan was indeed acting a little strange. He had been uneasy since his talk last night with Agricultural Assistant Li, who had just returned from the county seat. He had learned that Daquan had reported Jinfa to the county leadership and had been praised by the county Party secretary. Daquan is going to be more uppity and diligent than ever, Fan thought. If we let him do as he pleases, he will build up the mutual-aid team, get a bumper harvest, and then chalk up a big reputation in the county. Daquan's success will be Jinfa's doom. The village head may lose his influence in Greenfields once and for all.

Fan resolved to help Jinfa. He felt he had to do something to counter Daquan's influence among the peasants. Meeting various acquaintances on his way back to Greenfields, Fan feigned a casual mien and amiably greeted all of them. He carefully tailored his remarks according to the individual in order to achieve his desired effect. At Lihua Landing he bumped into Shaohuai riding his black mule along the dike. A slight smirk lighted Fan's face as he watched this kulak on the make.

Shaohuai pulled the reins and greeted, "Old Fan, are you taking today off?"

"I'm coming back to tell all of you the good news."

"Good news?"

"The get-rich movement was a great success in our district. We were praised by the county head himself. The provincial newspapers will carry stories about our experience. We will be known throughout the country."

"We're becoming a showcase."

"You bet. Whoever gets rich will get the glory. The same holds true for the other districts too. This is the policy."

"Deeds sure do speak louder than words. I am becoming more confident about the Party's policies every day now. The new society is the best thing that ever happened to us."

"Weren't you going to buy a cart?"

"I'm looking for a good one. Fan, do you know if the leadership allows people to hire cart drivers?"

"Of course. Don't you know freedom of hiring is guaranteed? If the government didn't allow that, their policy of improving the people's livelihood wouldn't mean a thing."

"Have you heard of any hirings in other villages?"

"The get-rich movement has just begun. I bet quite a few people will start hiring before long."

"Fan, we really see eye to eye. Those poor fellows in Greenfields nearly killed themselves just trying to put seeds in the ground. If no one hires them, how are they going to make a living? Ha, ha."

They chatted jovially for quite a while.

After crossing Bright Cloud River, Fan saw Little Abacus Qin Fu slowly ambling down the road, a saddle bag over his shoulder, with his head drooping and his hands clasped behind his back. "Going home?" Qin Fu greeted.

"Yes," Fan said. "I heard you decided to build a house. I came back to find out when you're going to start, so I can help out and then rejoice at your party."

"I don't even know if it's going to happen yet."

"Why? Can't you get the materials?"

"That's not the only thing. Some people say that it's better to buy a draft animal than to build a house."

"Well, you can do both."

"But wouldn't that be too. . . ."

"Too what? Too showy? Too flashy? Brother Qin Fu, are you going to make me criticize you again? The get-rich policy is as solid as a rock. If the leaders keep shifting around, who will believe in them? Besides, you ought to have a little guts. Look at Shaohuai. Though his family is small, he's already done much more than you. He's not afraid of standing out. So what are you worrying about? For a large family like yours, having a mule and a cart and building a new house is nothing. And if by any chance there were a change in policy, you could just divide the pie four ways between you and your three sons. You'd still all fit into the poor peasant category."

"That's true."

"I wouldn't be so frank with you if I didn't think you were a good guy."

"Say, do you know who takes care of disputes in the district office? I'd like to find out about them."

"Why do you want to know about such useless junk?"

"Well, if there were a divorce or something. . . ."

"You want a cheap wife for your son?"

"No. But when women get divorced, they have to leave the household and find another husband. Doesn't everyone own a share in the family property nowadays? If some divorced woman wants to sell her part of the house and the price is right, I'd like to know. I'm interested in buying some used bricks and wood."

"Ha, ha! So that's what you're after. Good enough. Have you heard that Shaohuai is going to buy a cart? He is zipping right along with the wind. If you keep wavering like this, you'll miss your big chance. Once everybody else is rich, there won't be any land left for you to buy. Animal and cart prices will go way up. You can't hoard your

money until you die! If nothing else, you would be letting down your sons and grandsons. When the time comes, how could you explain it to them, my good old friend?"

"Oh, my. You make so much sense. Just what I need to hear. Brother Fan, let's have a smoke together. I want to hear more of your ideas."

When Fan reached Greenfields around noon, he rushed over to Jinfa's house. Jinfa's wife, Xiuhua, was sitting outside stitching a shoe sole. She graciously invited him in as if the God of Fortune himself had come to her door.

Fan entered the house and saw lunch covered with plates. "Isn't Jinfa at home?" he asked.

Xiuhua poured him tea and replied, "He went to Lotus Pool Village early this morning. He should be back soon."

"What for? Village business?"

"He didn't say. You might as well finish your tea, cool off a bit and stay for lunch. The food is all on the table anyway."

"No, thank you. I don't want to trouble you."

"You hardly ever eat with us. Isn't our food good enough for you? You don't come back to Greenfields that often. Why bother lighting your stove and cooking for yourself?"

Fan thanked his solicitous hostess with a smile. His eyes traveled to the new certificate, awarded to Greenfields by the district office, hanging on the wall. The large characters inscribed on it read: PATRIOTIC PRODUCTION AND EXEMPLARY SPRING PLANTING. He accepted a cigarette from Xiuhua, lit up and took a few puffs. Shouts sounded outside the gate, "Whose policy is this? I don't believe the government would handle things this way!"

"Shut up."

"Even if I do shut up, my stomach won't."

"I'm fed up with your garbage about being hungry."

Recognizing the voices of Jinfa and Tough Hide, Xiuhua and Fan were not the least perturbed. Fan sat down again.

Tough Hide yelled, "This time even if you convince my dead father to stand up in his grave, I won't give up. I'm going to get my relief grain! No two ways about it!"

"You have no right to demand grain just because you want it. The government doesn't own a machine that turns out rice and flour from thin air. Even if it did, it wouldn't support a lazy bum like you."

"So who should support it? Those who come from eight generations of exploiters? It seems to me that they are getting all the fat again. After all this fuss about liberation and *fanshen* they are still the ones eating high off the hog. Is my poor peasant status useless? What kind of Communist are you, not serving the people!"

"Call me anything you want. If I don't suit your taste, go report me. Get a few hundred men with guts and go to the district, to the county or even to the capital. See if Jinfa will be scared! See if you can knock me down!"

Xiuhua was growing impatient. "Those two will go on forever. Old Fan, will you get Jinfa to come in!"

"Don't worry," Fan said. "A little quarreling won't hurt. They may throw a few nasty words at each other, but they're still friends. It's good that the village hears them have it out. Otherwise when the relief grain comes, it will be hard for Jinfa to put Tough Hide on the dole."

Xiuhua smiled knowingly: You can see right through my husband, she said to herself.

The quarreling suddenly stopped. A moment later Jinfa entered his courtyard in a huff.

Xiuhua came out and queried, "Where is Tough Hide? Aren't you going to ask him in for a bite to eat?"

"Zhou Shiqin and Zhankui pulled him away." He walked

inside and saw Fan. "When did you get here? I just came back from Lotus Pool. I heard someone there wanted to sell a cotton gin. The machine wasn't bad but the price was too steep — highway robbery." Jinfa bellowed to his wife, "Bring out the liquor and fry us some eggs."

"You shouldn't drink in the middle of the day," Fan said. "I need it to boost my spirits."

Fan did not persist. He noticed Jinfa's bad mood and knew it could not have come from the quarrel with Tough Hide.

Over lunch Fan commented, "Jinfa, I know you've been wrapped up in your private affairs lately. Of course I'm completely for it — after all you are a commander in Greenfields and a model leader in our district. You have to do well for yourself before anyone will listen to you. But you need to be a little more flexible and take care of both ends — public and self. You have to watch out for back stabbers."

The village head downed a cup of liquor and said, "No sweat. Jinfa isn't made of paper. It's not so easy for me to get blown away. If anyone thinks he can knock me down with a note to the county office, he is sadly mistaken."

"You already know? Did you run into the district education officer in Lotus Pool?"

"No matter how versatile the Monkey King he can never escape from the palm of Tathagata.\* The education officer beat around the bush. He just advised me to pay more attention to how I relate to people in the village and build unity. He said someone wrote a letter charging that my report was false, but he refused to name the bastard. Even if he won't tell me, others will. Who can wrap up a fire in paper?"

\* One of the ten names of Sakyamuni Buddha, the founder of Buddhism.

"Don't let this upset —"

"I'm not paying any attention to it."

"That's not right either."

"I want to see exactly what magic powers Daquan has, what he can do to me."

Fan put down his chopsticks, moved closer to Jinfa and whispered, "It's very dangerous, Jinfa. Do you know I made a special trip back to the village just on account of this? It is not a simple note. Daquan has already linked up with County Party Secretary Liang."

"That can't be," Jinfa said in alarm, shaking his head. "Who is Daquan? Why would a county Party secretary waste any time on an ordinary Party member like him?"

"Right now it is only a loose link. But if you don't think of a way to break it, it could be very dangerous. Daquan is vicious. Once he has a foothold, he's going to latch on for dear life. You cannot take this lightly." Fan moved even closer to Jinfa and said in a low voice, "Last night I lay in bed for a long time thinking. Daquan was a poor man too, and we struggled together for our *fanshen*. He should have been like the two of us, caring about each other and supporting each other. Why is he always trying to pick on you? Have you ever thought about this?"

"You don't know his past. He was born stubborn. And he's grown weirder every year."

Fan shook his head. "If he's so weird, how come he gets along with people like Liu Xiang?"

"Liu Xiang is so simple-minded. He always goes along with Daquan."

Fan shook his head again. "Well, Tiehan isn't all that easy going. But Daquan gets along with him much better than with you."

Jinfa thought about it for a while, then said, "You're



right. It's not just that he's weird. He likes to show off."

Fan still shook his head. "No, no. Would he cause you all this trouble just to show off? Jinfa, no wonder you are a few moves behind. You're too naive about him. The old saying goes, 'If you know yourself and know your enemy, you'll win every time.' You haven't seen through Daquan yet."

"So what do you think?"

"He wants your position."

Jinfa was dumbfounded. "Really? I guess it's possible."

"Possible is not the word. He definitely is after your position. Just think about his maneuvers — first he tried to gain support from below. He put in a lot of time and energy to win people's sympathy. Once he attracted a crowd around him, he immediately made moves to hook up with the top. If you give him a free hand to secure both ends there'll be no room for you in Greenfields."

Jinfa shivered, almost spilling his liquor.

"Let me tell you something else," Fan said. "This Secretary Liang that Daquan got in touch with is different. To put it simply, he's not like County Head Gu or Secretary Wang. In the few months since he took office, his desk has gathered a thick layer of dust while he has been out in the villages and mountain gullies. Yesterday Li Peilin told me with great delight about some new scheme Secretary Liang is working on in Yanshan District. It is totally different from the get-rich campaign. I'm afraid Secretary Liang will pump these ideas into Daquan and that Daquan will bring them back to Greenfields. That would be a real disaster."

Jinfa was aghast.

Fan further advised, "Give Daquan a dose of his own medicine. Rally support from above and below like he did. You're in a much better position to do this than him. As

long as you are clear about what's going on you can work effectively and stay on top. But you have to be merciless."

Jinfa downed another cup of wine, refilled his cup, and downed it again. His face turned pale, his eyes bulged like two red dates.

"Oh Jinfa, you've worked hard to make Greenfields what it is. We don't want to see the monkey dig a hole and then have a tiger come along and grab it for his den. You have a name in Heavenly Gate. We don't want to see it trampled. Everyone in Greenfields has high hopes that you will lead us to a better life. We don't want to see you pushed under and all of us fall into the hands of a stepmother."

Jinfa suddenly pounded the table. "No way! I won't let it happen. I'm going to show him what Jinfa is made of."

Fan quickly refilled the cups. Raising his, he toasted, "Let's drink to the old saying, 'No gentleman has a petty mind and no true man is without venom.' I have complete faith in you."

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## Temptation

The setting moon cast its light into the Gao family courtyard where willow branches lolled in their shadows and windows were shrouded in gray. The small donkey dozed at the trough and the chickens were nodding in their coops.

Erlin lay on his *kang* engrossed in thought. His shoes on the floor were covered with ashes from his pipe which

flickered in the dark like a lightning bug. Smoke enveloped his gaunt face. He spat, turned over and pulled a pillow under his chest.

Caifeng's beautiful image flashed before his eyes; then his thoughts were seized by the haunting vision of a lonely old man from his home town in Shandong, particularly his ghastly face when his corpse had been found in an old shrine.

Erlin's chance meeting with Caifeng on that unforgettable snowy evening last winter had kindled the flames of his first love. He was enraptured by her and could not bear to think of being without her. However, romance was not the only inspiration for their strong attraction to one another or their rush toward wedlock. For Erlin, who had had to cope with a precarious existence since birth, and for Caifeng, who had suffered from an old-fashioned marriage, another factor was more compelling. Tradition unequivocally dictated marriage. Erlin would not always be strong enough to work the land; he needed children to support him in his old age. He could not bear the thought of that lonely old man whose corpse had been wrapped in straw matting and thrown into the wilds by a few beggars. Viewing the plight of the older generation as an immutable lesson, Erlin had tied his whole future to Caifeng.

But now, he felt like he was drawing water with a bamboo basket; everything was falling through. He bemoaned: Caifeng loves me and wants to marry me. Some people are concerned and want to help out. But my brother and sister-in-law are apathetic.

He had neither seen nor heard from Caifeng after she poured out her sadness and despair that spring evening. This void tortured Erlin. He lost his appetite and moped around all day. When he passed by a bunch of gossip

women at the millstone that afternoon, Wan Shuhua had stopped him and advised, "You'd better learn how to judge people. Don't get hooked by a hussy."

Alarmed, Erlin pressed her for more.

"If your brother weren't so nice, I wouldn't waste my time passing this on to you. Did you hear what Caifeng's aunt did? She found Caifeng a man who is willing to give up his name and marry into *her* family. What a disgrace!"

"That can't be."

"It's true," Wan Shuhua bellowed. "Do you think I have nothing better to do than make up stories? This noon Shaohuai's wife came over to my place. She said she liked my sewing and asked me to make Caifeng a few pairs of embroidered shoes right away for her wedding."

Erlin abruptly dashed off, threw down his baskets at home and ran over to Shaohuai's.

Through the wide open awesome gate, Erlin saw Shaohuai standing in his courtyard brushing the black mule. Erlin came to an abrupt halt and stood for a moment in a daze. His trembling feet created a rim of fine dust around them. A string of questions ran through his mind: What are you trying to do? Pick a fight? Beg? What if they ask, who is Caifeng to you? Your wife? Have you signed an engagement note? Have you sent a bride price? What would you answer? How embarrassing if the whole village found out! How could you face anyone after such a humiliation?

Erlin spun around and ran back even though Shaohuai called him. He reached home, flopped on his *kang* and lay awake deep into the night. His mind was blank.

Just as he tried to force himself to sleep he heard knocking at the window. "Who's there?"

No answer. The door latch rattled.

"Who is it?"

Still no answer. Suddenly someone stood in front of him. Erlin sat up with a jolt.

"It's me." The voice was soft and quivering.

Lightning flashed through Erlin's heart. He scrambled to the edge of the *kang* and grabbed her. He felt warm drops of water splatter on his wrist.

Erlin held her arm and quietly cooed, "Caifeng, Caifeng. Is it really you? I'm dreaming, aren't I?"

Caifeng tried to pull her arm away from Erlin's grasp. "Better light the lamp," she said.

Unwilling to loosen his grasp lest she disappear again, Erlin said, "I used my last match to light my pipe. Let's just talk in the dark. I can't believe this. I was just thinking about you and here you are."

Caifeng stubbornly extricated herself from Erlin's hold and sat on the edge of the *kang*. She lifted up the corner of her shirt to wipe her tears, then sighed deeply. "I've been standing outside for a long time. I didn't know what to do. It's so late. But I had to see you."

"What's the matter? Why are you acting like this?"

"I just wanted to see you, that's all. Then I don't care what happens to me."

"Please don't talk like that."

"You won't hate me, will you?"

"Of course not. You never did anything wrong to me. I'm the one who let you down. And even if you did, I wouldn't —"

"Don't think about me."

"Who else can I think about?"

"You will be happy. You are a good man. I know someone will love you and give you a good life."

"No. The only person who really cares about me, really loves me, and can make me happy is you."

"But what can we do if luck isn't with us? There is no way to force it. . . . You must have already heard. . . ."

Silence hung in the darkness.

After a while Erlin said as tears welled up in his eyes, "Caifeng, does it have to be this way? Can't it be changed?"

Caifeng sniffled, "It's hard."

"I'd rather die than see you marry someone else."

Caifeng shook her head. "I can't wait forever. How can a woman survive without being married? I have to have a home of my own."

"Why?" Erlin asked with pain. "Aren't I good enough for you?"

Wiping her tears, Caifeng replied, "There is nothing wrong with you. It's your family. My aunt is against me marrying into it and I don't see how I can either. When Shaohuai came for me this afternoon, he told my aunt everything your brother had done recently. She cried and screamed. She said your family is nothing but trouble. I started to get really frightened. I've just been saved from a fire pit. I can't bear the thought of suffering again."

"My brother is my brother. He doesn't have to affect us. As long as we love each other, that's all that matters."

"But we'll have to eat out of the same pot and work in the same field with them. Shaohuai is right. We'll bring in the harvest while he's handing it out. Even if we manage to grow a money tree, it can never last with so many people picking it. All our hard work will be wasted. We'll stay poor forever along with your brother."

"We can set up our own house. How does that sound?"

"If we break up with them as soon as I marry into your family, won't we become the laughing stock of the village?"

"Then I'll settle with my brother before we get married."

Caifeng remained silent for a moment, then said, "Will

this really work? Think it through carefully. Shaohuai actually mentioned it as a possibility. He said if we lived by ourselves, he and his wife would persuade my aunt to drop the other arrangement."

"Then that's the answer. I'll do anything for you and for our happiness."

Caifeng started to sob even harder. "Oh, you can never imagine how torn I've felt. I couldn't bear to leave you but I couldn't offend my aunt either. You know she doesn't have any children. She said if I married a good man, she would leave me all her property. Her three tile-roofed rooms and seven mu of land are better than most in Temple Village, or even in Greenfields. We couldn't earn enough money to buy all that in half our lifetime. If we don't live with Daquan there is no reason why she won't leave it to me. I'm just afraid it will be too hard for you."

"As long as you're willing to marry me I'll do anything you say. I won't have any regrets."

Caifeng wiped her tears after a moment of reflection and said, "All right. Brothers have to set up different households sooner or later. You might as well do it now. But my aunt won't take my word for it. You'll have to go promise her in person. Is that all right?"

"That's easy. I'd even agree to announce it to the whole village if necessary."

"I'll wait for you at Shaohuai's house tomorrow morning."

After Caifeng left, the ecstatic Erlin felt like bursting into song. He closed the thatched gate, added some fodder to the trough, and returned to his room ready to enjoy a good night's sleep. But when he pulled off his socks, his heart sank; they were Daquan's. The day before his brother left, Erlin had taken his socks off to dump out the dirt while they were working together in the fields. Daquan had smiled

when he saw Erlin's toe poking out of one sock and his heel out of the other. He took off his own socks and insisted that Erlin wear them. Now Daquan had trooped off to far away places in Erlin's holey socks.

Erlin was distraught as he reconsidered the matter: All that talk about splitting came out at an emotional moment. Do I really want to live apart from Daquan and Ruifen and treat them like any other family in Greenfields?

Erlin filled his pipe though he had no match. He nervously twisted his tobacco pouch as he agonized over leaving his brother. Finally Erlin decided he would beg Shaohuai to plead with Caifeng's aunt on his behalf, to ask her to restrain her anger against Daquan and allow them to live with him for a few years before setting up their own house.

Erlin tossed through another sleepless night.

The next morning he quickly gulped down some porridge, put on clean pants that Ruifen had washed for him, sewed a missing button on his jacket and knocked the dirt off his cloth shoes. As he was leaving, he suddenly thought about taking his donkey. Caifeng could ride it and her aunt would see that he had a draft animal. It would make Erlin seem very respectable. Too embarrassed to tell Ruifen, Erlin quietly untied his donkey and surreptitiously skirted around the village to Shaohuai's house.

Shaohuai's magnificent entranceway eclipsed all others in Greenfields; the gate alone was as wide as the entire side wall of an ordinary home. His courtyard, the most spacious in the village, reeked of wealth: heaps of hay, piles of logs, stacks of bricks. Two grain bins stood like forts with glinting new sheet-iron roofs. The crimson ideograph "prosperity" loomed large on the doors which were secured with a huge bronze lock. Along the east wall was a large tiled-

roof pigsty housing two enormous pigs. The gate to the inner courtyard was slightly ajar. Beyond a wall draped in wisteria, Erlin could see a large brick house built in a semi-traditional, semi-modern style. The roof tiles were as large as winnowing baskets while the beams were as thick as cross rafters. Erlin pushed open the inner gate and a flock of chickens and ducks came squawking out.

Since Erlin was last here as a child, Shaohuai had prospered considerably. As Erlin visualized his own bleak courtyard and humble adobe, resentment flared in him: With all the good conditions in the new society and such strong workers in our family, it should be a cinch for us to do better than Shaohuai. What has come over you, Daquan? You refuse to take the smart road leading to wealth. Instead you insist on sticking to the path that keeps you poor.

Shaohuai appeared at his door wearing black pants and a white jacket. His paunchy face exuded an air of conceitedness as he picked his teeth with a twig. He smiled at Erlin without the slightest sense of estrangement and casually greeted, "What an early bird. I guess that's how young people are."

Erlin felt extremely awkward and tongue-tied.

"Bring your donkey over to the trough," Shaohuai said. "There's plenty of hay. Let him eat all he wants."

Erlin pulled his donkey through the inner gate.

"I just ground a batch of fine feed. I'll get you some," Shaohuai said and went back inside.

Erlin pulled his donkey toward the spacious shed; his animal seemed to instantly shrink, looking like a midget in comparison to the lofty locust wood trough. The donkey abruptly backed out of the shed at the sight of the sleek black mule with glaring eyes, whinnying arrogantly and swishing its tail.

After a bout of tugging and hollering, Erlin finally maneuvered his donkey into the shed. The sweet smelling fodder whetted its appetite but its long lips could not reach the trough even when it stretched out its neck and rose up on the tips of its hoofs.

Erlin, who had always handled his donkey gently, was now overwhelmed by disgust. He threw the reins over the beam and yanked on them while pulling up the bridle. The donkey's head was hoisted up to the trough but its front legs were suspended in midair.

Shaohuai came in with a ladle of crushed black beans. "What a way to treat your donkey. It can't eat like this! It'll die hanging there." Shaohuai handed Erlin the ladle, took a bamboo basket from a nail on the wall and used it to mix some fodder and black bean feed. As he dusted off his hands, he smiled at Erlin and instructed, "Let it down. It had better eat from the ground."

Erlin blushed all the way down his neck.

Caifeng came in and threw Erlin a glance of approval. Then without a word she went into the house smiling.

"Go in and sit down," Shaohuai directed. "I'll get my wife. She's over talking to the local gossip."

Erlin went in and sat on the edge of the *kang*, ashamed to look around the sunny, well-furnished room. As he smoked with downcast eyes Caifeng busily flitted around the room. Suddenly Erlin felt his straw hat lifted off his head and replaced by a light cloth cap. He was about to touch it when Caifeng deftly slipped off his old shoes and put on a new pair of black denim ones with thick soles. "You don't have to do all this," he awkwardly protested.

Caifeng shook out a folded jacket made of bleached white cloth and said, "You have to look good. I bought

the cloth with money I earned sewing and made these clothes for you."

Erlin looked quite dapper. A furtive glance in the mirror Caifeng was holding before him revealed a new person.

Purple Eggplant came in with her husband and teased, "Oh, what a handsome young man. No wonder our Caifeng picked you."

Caifeng put away the mirror with embarrassment. Noticing a colorfully wrapped pastry box in Shaohuai's hand, she said, "Oh, why buy all this stuff?"

"You can't go empty-handed the first time you take Erlin to meet your aunt," Shaohuai said.

"Then the Gao family should pay for it," Caifeng declared.

"Well, I hate to speak badly of Daquan in front of Erlin," Shaohuai said. "I really do care a lot about him. But I'm not happy that he's throwing good opportunities out the window as if he enjoys being poor. If he keeps this up, the day will come when we'll see him cry." He glanced at Erlin and continued, "But of course, this is none of my business."

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### The Split

Ruifen stood beside a pigpen, nervously wringing her apron, and pleaded with Tiehan. "This is no joke. Don't be so casual about it. You have to help me find him. I was so worried I couldn't sleep."

Tiehan, stripped to the waist, was cleaning out his pigpen. He laughed at Ruifen and said, "What a worry wart! There's nothing to be upset about. How can a grown man like Erlin get lost?"

"But he hasn't been home since yesterday morning."

"Well, maybe he's at somebody else's home. Anyway, he can't have disappeared into thin air."

"He has no place to go."

"That's what you think. I bet he's at Temple Village right now gorging himself."

"Nonsense. Wan Shuhua told me she saw Shaohuai bringing Caifeng to Greenfields the night before last. Who else would Erlin see in Temple Village?"

"Maybe he went to Lotus Pool to visit Grandma Xu."

"That's unlikely. He's very conscientious. He wouldn't forget to tell me if he were spending a night out."

"He's head over heels in love right now. He could forget almost anything."

"He didn't seem at all troubled. He was in good spirits and even wanted to take Xiao Long fishing. But I was afraid Erlin would get a chill from the cold water so I didn't let him go."

"Just calm down. I'll borrow a bicycle in a while and search through a few villages. I'll track him down for you."

Mother Zhu came out into the courtyard. "I thought I heard someone talking. Oh, it's you, Ruifen. Is Daquan back?"

"No," Ruifen answered distraughtly. "But he said he might be gone a few days."

"It's a good sign if the leaders have asked him to stay over. It might mean that he's made some headway," Mother Zhu said.

Tiehan happily chimed in, "Of course he's made head-

way. Li Peilin just passed through and told me that our letter hit the jackpot. County Secretary Liang read it himself. He said that we wrote a great letter, that it represented the cry of the *fanshen* peasants. He couldn't stop praising us."

Mother Zhu concealed her pleasure and glared at Tiehan out of the corner of her eye. "Already getting swelled-headed. In all these years I've raised you, isn't this the only brilliant thing you've ever done?"

"Do you realize what a breakthrough this is?" Tiehan said. "The *fanshen* families have found solid backing. There's hope for us now. Daquan will come back loaded with good ideas. That'll put those rotten eggs in their place."

"Nothing is certain and you are already so cocky. You're not cut out for doing anything big," Mother Zhu scolded. Then she said to Ruifen, "Don't listen to him brag. Come inside for a chat."

"Some other time," Ruifen refused. "Xiao Long is still asleep. He'll cry if he wakes up and finds I'm not there."

On the street Ruifen saw Chunhe and told him about Erlin's disappearance. Then she said, "I'm afraid Tiehan might not take it very seriously. Could you go talk it over with him?"

Chunhe's mind immediately started to turn, but he maintained his composure and said, "I'm sure he's not lost. I just hope nothing else is wrong. Tiehan and I will handle it."

Ruifen went home with a tremendous weight still pressing down on her. In the last few months she had become increasingly aware of the significance of Daquan's work and wanted to give him a lot of support. She felt the least she could do was to provide a comfortable home for him and look after her son and brother-in-law well so that her

husband could have a free hand to deal with problems in the village. She had noticed Erlin's recent disaffection and felt the brunt of it more than Daquan. Erlin's sudden disappearance when Daquan was not at home painfully distressed her.

Ruifen arrived home and was astonished to find Erlin there unsaddling his donkey. "Oh, where were you?"

"Out visiting."

Ruifen was so happy she was at a loss for words. She quickly helped Erlin tie the donkey in the shed and put fodder in the trough. Then she brought out a brush to dust off his clothes. Noticing Erlin's sullen expression, she decided not to reproach him. As long as he was safely back, she could forgive anything. She assumed he must be hungry and ran inside to prepare a meal.

Erlin stood in the courtyard at a loss. He was not at all hungry. He had been wined and dined at Caifeng's house. Now he was like a powder keg waiting for a spark, annoyed that no excuse for blowing up presented itself. Ruifen not only had not complained, she had been extremely understanding and warm. He felt as if two large hands were pulling him in opposite directions. The spectacle of the huge grain bins and the big trough in Shaohuai's courtyard, the seven mu of good land belonging to Caifeng's aunt and the promise that he could be married three days after he split with Daquan now seemed formidably overpowering.

Erlin walked into the house, took the lid off the flour jar and started to scoop some out.

Ruifen raised the basin in her hand and said, "I've already started to mix the dough."

Erlin, his face to the wall, said, "I'll do my own cooking."

Ruifen smiled and ordered in a jocular manner, "No

need to. Go rest. When you finish eating you're going to be interrogated."

"No need to interrogate me. I'll tell you everything right now. Starting from today, I'm going to do things for myself."

"Nonsense."

"Will you get all my clothes out?"

"Why?"

"Just get them out."

Ruifen was overwhelmed. Her heart pounded as she stared at Erlin's broad back. Only then did she notice his new hat and shoes. She stepped closer to him and asked in a quivering voice, "Erlin, what's the matter with you today?"

Erlin flinched and said, "Nothing. Let's not quarrel about it. Don't make a fuss. That's just how it's going to be."

Ruifen wrinkled her brow. "You're getting me all confused."

Erlin suddenly turned around and declared, "I want to divide up the property and set up my own house."

Ruifen felt like she had been struck by a thunderbolt. The earthenware basin slipped from her hand and shattered on the floor, leaving a pile of flour. In a faltering voice she stammered, "Erlin, Erlin, don't say that. Don't even think about it."

Xiao Long was awakened by the racket and started to cry. When he saw Erlin, he hopped up and jumped into his arms. "Uncle, where did you go?" he asked as he put his arms around Erlin's neck. "I dreamed you grew a big white beard and walked with a cane. You wanted me to catch fish for you. I caught you a big one."

Warmth and pain surged through Erlin. Twinges of re-

morse pricked his heart, pressing him to recant, but were quickly blocked by another force which tenaciously resisted and steeled his emotions. He thought, right now your uncle is young and strong. He can catch fish for you so you dream about catching fish for him. But what will you do when he gets old? You might not even be willing to bring him a cup of water. No matter how sweet you are, you're still not my own son. . . . He put Xiao Long down on the *kang* and walked out of the room.

Ruifen collected herself and followed Erlin across the courtyard into his room.

Erlin was already laying stiffly on the *kang*, covered from head to toe with his quilt.

Ruifen shook him. "Erlin, you can't do this."

Erlin remained beneath his quilt and remarked, "Spilt water can't be scooped back into the bucket."

Ruifen sat down beside Erlin and said, "What's come over you? Everything was fine when your brother was around. Now two days after he goes away you want to split."

"I've thought about it for a long time."

"Did I do anything wrong? Did I mistreat you? Tell me everything. I can change." Tears which she had been restraining with all her will streamed down her face.

"You didn't do anything wrong. You were both very good to me."

"Then tell me what's bothering you. I'll do anything I can to make you happy. But don't think about splitting."

"Sooner or later I'll have to set up my own home."

"Later, not sooner. After you get married, after I see that you and your wife are happy and prosperous. Then if you want to live separately, that's fine."

"You don't need to trouble yourself."



"Don't say *you*, it's *us*. Erlin, we are different from other families. I came into the Gao family when I was nine. I knew you before I met Daquan. We were like brother and sister to each other. We fetched water and collected wild vegetables together. When your mother was dying, she held me with one hand and you with the other and told us to stay together and wait for your brother to come back."

Underneath the quilt Erlin's face felt wet as he remembered the mud hut in Wen River Village, the cracked waist-high water jugs in front of his home, the wild vegetables and dandelions hidden amongst the weeds on the vast plain before Golden Ox Mountain, his mother's large bony hands bespattered with tears.

Ruifen continued, "And now we've survived and are together. We never dreamed of living in such a good society. We should stay together and make our lives even happier."

Erlin's thoughts suddenly turned to the mass meeting which had called for the get-rich competition and Shaohuai's courtyard which had been such an eye-opener for him — the grain bins and the good land. Why, he thought, do you people scorn the chance to get rich? Why are you so determined to be poor?

"Even if you don't care how I feel," Ruifen said, "you should care about your brother. Your mother had ten children and you two are the only survivors. Your brother loves you. I know this for a fact. You cannot hurt him, you cannot demoralize him like this, especially when he's already under so much pressure."

Daquan's kindness to him seemed rather hazy, but his faults were vivid in Erlin's mind: hauling manure for others at night and plowing for them in the day, devoting all his time to village affairs without the slightest concern for his own farm, and having such a cavalier attitude toward his

marriage. What is the use of staying with a brother like him? Erlin thought. He may care about me, but he sure misses the boat when it comes to thinking about what I need.

"Even if your brother has wronged you," Ruifen said, "you should think of our friends, all the people who suffered with us in the past. They are looking toward Daquan. They are waiting for him to lead them down a new path."

Erlin was shaken. Now he was surrounded by Liu Xiang, Jiukuan, Zhankui and others. They were stretching out their hands toward him; they were scraping grain out of his bin; they were trying to get him to work for them. Forget it, he spitefully thought. The more you talk about this, the more I shudder. I am not a fool. I am not going to let people take advantage of me.

"No matter what you think, Erlin, no matter how wronged you feel, you have to at least wait until your brother comes back. Don't tell anybody about splitting up. We shouldn't dishearten our friends and encourage our enemies. You have to at least agree to this much. Don't tell anyone. Say yes, good brother Erlin."

Erlin did not respond.

"Give me an answer, please. Will you say yes?"

Erlin turned over.

"Please say something."

He flung off his quilt and stared at Ruifen's teary face and her red-rimmed eyes. "Don't push me. I said spilt water can't be scooped back into the bucket. I have already told other people."

Ruifen was alarmed. "Who?"

"The village head."

"What! You told Jinfa!"

"Of course I would talk to the government about a thing like this."

Ruifen wiped her tears and pulled back her shoulders. With furious eyes, she roared, "Then you must have told Shaohuai too?"

Erlin did not answer.

Ruifen turned around and walked to the door. She breathed heavily and shouted, "Go tell Crooked Mouth. Tell him you are going to split up with your brother who has shared years of hardship with you."

"What does this have to do with Crooked Mouth?"

"It has everything to do with him," Ruifen screamed. "The house you are living in used to belong to Crooked Mouth and the land you now own used to belong to Crooked Mouth. Oh, Erlin, I never thought you would turn into this. All right, you resent Daquan. You want to split up with him because he is working for socialism. Well, I like him. I'll stick with him through thick and thin. You can do whatever you damn well please."

## 42

### Persuasion

"Bad news, bad news," Wenqing shouted at Tiehan who was pumping up a bicycle tire.

Tiehan turned around and looked at Wenqing's pale face.

"What's wrong now?"

"Erlin —"

"Oh, I already know. You sound just like a silly woman, getting so alarmed. He can't be lost."

"That's not it. He's back."

"Then we should celebrate. Why are you in such a panic?"

"Oh my. As soon as he got back, he wanted to split with his brother."

"Bullshit!"

"Really. He and Ruifen started quarreling."

"He's bluffing. How could he live by himself?"

"You know he's already found himself a helper."

"That's it! He's fussing about getting married. Once that's arranged, he'll calm down."

"He's really determined to live separately."

"You are too much of a bookworm. Watch how I handle it. I can straighten him out."

"Then get yourself over there fast." Distrustful of Tiehan's ability to convince people or resolve disputes, Wenqing then added, "I'm going to look for Zhou Zhong."

As Wenqing sped off, Tiehan called out, "No need to get him. I'll handle this. I'll turn him around in no time."

Tiehan was supremely confident that he could influence Erlin. Their friendship dated back to before land reform when Erlin came to Greenfields and stayed at Tiehan's house. The two of them became the most intimate of friends. Although Erlin had never been particularly keen about politics, Tiehan knew that he was kind and honest. He would never hurt anyone, nor let down a friend.

Jinfa walked out of the village office and hailed Tiehan. Since his conversation with Fan Keming he had become much more public-spirited and congenial. He had devoted a half day to straightening up the village office: dusting chairs, sweeping away the cobwebs and pasting new paper on the windows. Aside from a little volunteer help from Qin Kai,

Jinfa did everything himself, desisting from ordering anyone to public duty. Every lunch hour and evening he opened the village office, thereby attracting the peasants' attention to the public office which had been locked for so long.

"Tiehan, I was just looking for you."

"What instructions do you have for me, Village Head?"

"There's trouble in Daquan's house."

"Everything's fine there."

"I'm not kidding. It's true."

"Their house didn't burn down. No one died. There are no debt collectors banging at their door. What's the big deal?"

"Erlin just came to talk with me. He wants to set up his own house."

"Hey, he must be pulling your leg."

"No, no, he's not. Shaohuai also mentioned it and asked me to help solve the problem."

"Well, aren't you two eager to help!"

"Of course. I'm a fellow cadre and Shaohuai is a relative. We are both close to them. How could we turn our backs when they're in difficulty? No matter how troublesome, we have to lend a hand."

Tiehan scowled. "What kind of help are you planning to give?"

Jinfa speciously smiled and threw back a ready reply. "We should do our best to bring them together. It hurts Daquan's prestige to have his younger brother move out before his marriage. A split would also reflect badly on all of us cadres."

Tiehan, no longer so gullible, felt that these words came from Jinfa's armpit, not his heart. He baited, "What if Erlin insists?"

Not suspecting any cunningness from the ingenuous Tie-

han, Jinfa casually answered, "Well, everyone is free to choose how he wants to live in the new society. If Erlin insists, we can't deny him his rights. As long as we've done everything possible to save the situation, we've fulfilled our duty. There's nothing more we can do except make sure that the property and household belongings are fairly divided. We can't favor either side."

Tiehan suddenly waved his hand and said, "Hell! You'd better keep your goddamn hands out of this."

"How can I do that?" Jinfa earnestly countered. "You group leaders can pass the buck but I'm the village head, I'm the government. How can I ignore people's problems?"

Tiehan threw back his head and roared with laughter. "Ha, ha, ha! What a bill of goods. Jinfa, Village Head, to put it in your own words — This is none of the government's business."

Despite a telltale blush, Jinfa tried to appear unperturbed. He pulled a long face and said, "What's wrong with you? I'm trying to have a serious discussion. Why do you keep playing around?"

"You're the one who is playing around. I'm dead serious."

"Let's not waste any more time. All right, you've been notified about the meeting. Come to the village office in a little while. I'll tell the other group leaders. We have to make this decision collectively."

Tiehan yelled at Jinfa's back, "I am taking over this whole prized deal of yours. You won't even be able to get a finger in. You'll just have to stand back and drool."

Jinfa turned around and scoffingly cursed Tiehan.

Meanwhile Chunhe was talking to Erlin, sorely pressed for some persuasive arguments. He soon concluded that the situation was irreversible. He had an inkling that the prob-

lem was more complicated than Erlin fussing over a wife and setting up a separate household—that something dangerously insidious was involved. But he was not experienced enough to diagnose the problem.

All else having failed, Chunhe delicately cautioned, “Brother Erlin, you are older than me and you’ve been through much more. You must consider this from all sides. Don’t get so fixated on one thing that you make the wrong move.”

“I’ve thought it over. Nothing is wrong. You’ll see.”

Chunhe shook his head. “I wonder. You don’t sound so sure of yourself. I can tell that you’re very unsettled even though you talk so adamantly.”

Erlin glanced at Chunhe; his heart contracted and his face waxened.

Just as Chunhe felt that he might be getting somewhere, Tiehan appeared at the door. Chunhe feared that this tactless zealot would immediately fly into a quarrel and lay all his efforts to waste.

Tiehan darted across the room, frightening Erlin who unwittingly shuffled back on the *kang*. He jumped onto the *kang* and sat amiably beside Erlin as if he had come to play chess and eat peanuts. “Erlin, you know we’ve been terribly busy lately,” Tiehan started. “We’ve been killing ourselves trying to get everything done. Didn’t you notice how long Daquan’s hair was getting? It could almost be braided. The night before he left I figured it would be embarrassing for him to go talk to the leaders looking so scruffy, so I gave him a haircut. And you know what? Even as I was cutting his hair he discussed business with members of the mutual-aid team. Have you ever seen anyone that busy?”

Tiehan was speaking with more gentleness than he was

deemed capable. Deeply touched, Chunhe said to himself: Erlin, I hope you can appreciate this.

“But how could it be otherwise?” Tiehan continued in the same manner. “Just think. So many of our villagers were driven to this marshland by the rich bastards and worked for generations without an inch of their own land. Even though they’ve been through land reform they still have very little. No matter how good the new society is and how concerned the government is, the *fanshen* peasants can’t build themselves up overnight like blowing up a balloon. It takes time. Besides, our village has followed the wrong path in the last few months, so things have been worse. That’s why we’ve been madly scrambling since planting started. In our frenzy we neglected some things. You live with Daquan. You know better than I how little time he has. But the beginning is always hard. This won’t last forever. That’s why I think you should forgive him if he’s been somewhat inconsiderate lately.”

Erlin twisted his head. “He didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Yes, he did,” Tiehan said. “Let’s be frank. He didn’t get around to helping you arrange your marriage.”

“That has nothing to do with it.”

“Come on. Isn’t this what’s bothering you? I think it is. I know you as well as the back of my hand. I can understand why you feel the way you do, but you should look at this from another side as well. Daquan neglected your marriage because he had too much on his mind. But he did a great deal for our village and for the revolution. Erlin, try to think in broader terms. If he hadn’t worked the way he did, our first spring planting after land reform would have been a pitiful mess. Many families wouldn’t have gotten their land planted and many more would have gone into debt. The district office praised our spring planting and said

our success was all because of the get-rich competition. Bullshit! The magician can't fool the gong-beater standing behind him. That competition is clearly a scramble to see who can squeeze the most out of others. If you act like Qin Fu and only see what's under your nose, you'll always feel you are getting the short end of the stick and you'll never be happy. Besides, Daquan didn't actually forget your marriage. He discussed it with Zhou Zhong and asked Liu Xiang's wife to find out more about Caifeng's family when she went to Temple Village. He has so much to do, can't you give him a little time to get around to it? How come you are so impatient?" Tiehan waved his hand and said, "Since Daquan's not here, Ruifen and I will work it out for you. Of course I'm new at these things. Chunhe, don't laugh. You're not experienced either. It's true we don't have gold or silver, but we do have wise friends. We'll get Zhou Zhong and Grandma Deng to back the deal. Won't that look respectable?"

Erlin shook his head. "Don't bother. That's not the reason. Sooner or later we'll have to live separately. I might as well do it now."

"I think you are doing a very bad thing," Tiehan said. "I dare say everyone in Greenfields with a conscience will disagree with you. You'll regret it yourself before long. Think it over carefully. You'll see what I mean."

"I can't be bothered."

"Why are you so stubborn?"

"I'll be happier once I'm on my own."

"Nonsense. You are happier here in this house. I'm not Daquan's brother but I love and respect him. When I don't see him for a day, I miss him. Why? 'Cause he's a nice guy. He's good to everyone. He thinks about others before himself. And I don't have to tell you how he treats you.

Everyone has eyes. Where could you find such a good brother and sister-in-law?"

"They're good and I'm no good. I won't burden them anymore."

"You were good too. But you have changed recently. You really have. Even a numskull like me can see it. Just look at yourself. New hat, new shoes —"

"Oh, so I have to look poor, huh? I can't even wear a pair of new shoes after *fanshen*? Is that the kind of revolution you have in mind?"

"We want to create a new world. Erlin, I'm trying to give you a little advice, to open your eyes. I want you to see how much you've changed. Erlin, act like a real man. Don't turn against your brother for a stupid dame."

Erlin flushed. "That's a lot of crap."

Tiehan rose to his feet and squatted on the *kang*. "I'm not making it up. I've heard her talk. What was she nagging you about that day you were out by the reed pond?"

Erlin's embarrassment turned to rage. He also squatted. "Can't we even talk without having to report to you?"

Tiehan restrained his anger, but his words still deeply jabbed Erlin. "I don't have the right to demand anything but I can offer an opinion. I'd rather stay a bachelor for eight lives than get mixed up with a bitch like Caifeng who starts snapping at others before she's even been accepted into the pack."

"You can say whatever you want, but I like her!" Erlin yelled.

Tiehan grimaced contemptuously at Erlin. "Oh Erlin, think about what you are doing. This new hat of yours is like the metal band around the Monkey King's head. As soon as Caifeng chants, your head gets muddled. And, wearing those shoes, which path are you following her down?"

Erlin yelled, "Even if I walked into a fire pit, I wouldn't ask you for help."

Tiehan paused and composed himself, then said in a milder tone, "Erlin, can you say I haven't been patient with you today?"

Erlin turned his face away.

"Erlin," Tiehan started to yell, "listen to me. In all my twenty-one years, I have never stooped down to beg anyone. And now for Daquan, for his dignity, for his ease of mind, I stooped down to plead with you. I never imagined you could be so hardened. Have you lost all your feelings?" He gritted his teeth and shook his fist. "All right, we'll see!" Unable to contain his rage any longer, Tiehan jumped off the *kang* and rushed out into the courtyard.

The image of Daquan came to his mind. Tiehan had promised to take care of everything in the village the morning Daquan left. Now he found his failure insufferable, particularly since the calamity had erupted right in Daquan's own home. Tiehan felt like crying but he did not know how; he had never shed a tear in his life. He stood gazing into the sky with his hands in his pockets. The porcelain ornament on a bicycle key chain was crushed in his grip.

## 43

### The Ax

It was a wonderfully clear sunny morning when Daquan bid farewell to Tian Yu, Liang Haishan and the peasants at Rooster Village. In the last three days he had surveyed the seasonal mutual-aid team in East Willow Village, the permanent mutual-aid team in Red Date Village and the co-

operative in Rooster Village. He felt these examples of organized work and planned production represented a burgeoning brilliant future breaking through the new-born countryside for hundreds of millions of peasants. Now Daquan was anxious to reach home and spread his new ideas so that they could take root and blossom in Greenfields.

Daquan arrived around noon when the streets were practically deserted. The few people who were out greeted him with reserve.

"Daquan, you're back."

"Yes. Mixing plaster?"

"That's right." The man quickly returned to his work.

"Daquan, you just get back?"

"Yes. Coming home from the fields?"

"Mm-hmm." The person hastily went into his courtyard.

After a few similar episodes, Daquan began to notice how flustered everyone seemed. And when he glanced back, they had stopped their work and were staring at him or peering out their gates. He wondered if they had been riled up by some malicious rumor about his trip.

Upon reaching home he was startled to find a large opening battered through his front wall. As he was puzzling over it, someone called out, "Daquan, Daquan."

Liu Xiang came up with a hoe over his shoulder — an indication that he could now work again. "Daquan," Liu Xiang said in a low voice, "I want to talk to you."

"Uncle Liu Xiang, you're completely well? Has your wife also recovered?"

Liu Xiang's mouth twitched as he tried to smile. "Yes," he eagerly nodded. "We're fine. Thanks to you and our friends."

"Everybody wants to see you well."

"Yes, yes."

"From now on we are going to do even better. I've found the golden road. Come in. I want to tell you all about it."

"Wait a second. I have to talk to you about something else. It took everyone by surprise. I hope you won't get too upset. It's. . . ."

"What's happened?"

"Daquan, sometimes it's hard to know what another person is thinking, even if you are close to him."

"What is it?"

"Erlin is setting up his own place."

"What?"

"He started cooking for himself last night."

Daquan was utterly astounded. He had never expected such a situation awaiting him in Greenfields.

Liu Xiang's eyes misted as he tried to console his good friend. "Daquan, you don't need me to tell you he has been changing for a long time. He's been moving away from you ever since he got together with that woman. It would be pointless to force things back together again now. No one would enjoy it anyway. We've been on edge these days waiting for you to come home. Many folks are afraid this will break you. Please don't take it too hard. We hope you'll be strong and help your poor brothers like you always have. We all look forward to following you down that golden road you just mentioned."

Daquan looked down and began pulverizing clods of dirt with his feet. Suddenly he raised his head and said, "Uncle Liu Xiang, if this had happened before I left, before I had found the golden road, I might have been heartbroken. But now I know why this has happened. Come to think of it, I am also partly responsible. I was too slow at figuring out what was going on. But this blow will be like adding fuel to the flame, not throwing water on the fire. I won't be broken."

"It's good to hear you talk like this. I'm not worried anymore. You're taking it even better than I did."

"Let's go inside. I want to tell you what I learned while I was away."

"Better spend some time with your wife and son first. I'll take my hoe home and come over later."

Daquan walked through his gate and saw a sorghum stalk fence dividing the courtyard. He walked straight into his house without looking across.

Xiao Long, who was catching ants by the window, came racing over as soon as he saw his father. Daquan picked him up and kissed his soft face.

"Daddy, I missed you. I waited at the gate for you. But you never came."

"Xiao Long, I bought you some candy."

Daquan searched in his pocket and brought out a glass mouthpiece for a pipe. He immediately clenched it in his fist.

"Daddy, what is it? I want to see."

"It's not for you."

"I want it, I want it!"

"It's for your uncle."

"Don't give it to him. He's bad now."

"Xiao Long, don't talk that way."

"He's bad. He made Mommy cry, and he won't let me go into his room anymore."

Daquan hurriedly took out some candy and put it in Xiao Long's hand. He looked up and saw his wife leaning against the doorway watching him.

Ruifen seemed thinner. Her beautiful face, normally wreathed in warm smiles, was clouded with gloom.

The two stood face to face with rare uneasiness, neither knowing what to say.

Finally Daquan broke the ice. "Hey boss, can I have a bite to eat? I'm hungry. I have a lot of work ahead of me."

Ruifen wanted to smile but could not. "You go wash up and take a rest. I'll borrow some wheat flour from Grandma Deng."

They went into the house. The room seemed empty. Only one large crook jar stood where there had been two and only one wooden bench was left of the pair. Other things were missing as well, but Daquan did not bother to check closely.

"I can eat whatever we have," Daquan said. "Don't borrow any flour."

Ruifen stopped at the door. "I let Erlin take all our flour. After the wedding, the new couple will need it for their guests."

"That's even more reason not to borrow."

Ruifen put down the ladle. "What about some corn pancakes? I know you like them."

"Fine," Daquan said with a smile, "add some scallions and salt. Spiff it up." He went into the courtyard and then called through the window, "Where did you put the basin?"

Ruifen came out and motioned with her head to the other side of the fence. "He took it."

"Oh, well. We'll buy a new one when we get some money."

"I let him take anything he wanted."

"Good."

"He was so grabby. This house is practically bare."

"Now we're really part of the proletariat. Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's not funny. Even the firewood got fenced in on his side. We have to go out onto the street, then go into his yard to get some."

"Don't bother. I'll find you some."

Ruifen frowned. "The whole yard has been cleaned out. There's not a scrap of wood."

"Why are you frowning? I don't want anyone close to me moping."

"You're lucky I didn't cry when you came home! Can't I even frown?"

"We have to be optimists." Daquan lifted up a huge stump from the corner and heaved it into the center of the courtyard. It bounced a few times, notching the ground. He and Erlin had removed it from the fields he got during land reform and lugged it home. Its roots were thick and long, fanned like the claws of a monster.

Daquan felt the blade of his ax and began to sharpen it on the whetstone. Rusty water ran onto the ground as the dark metal started to gleam.

This broad-blade ax had been forged from top grade steel and its long, thick handle had been fashioned from the hardest date wood. Reputed to have been tempered by the first Dong Blacksmith three generations earlier, it had passed through many working hands and witnessed the blood and tears of the oppressed.

Daquan took off his shirt, spat on his hands and swung the ax. It flew into the stump with a swish.

Ruifen watched Daquan's powerful swings with amazement. As he repeatedly hurled the ax into the stump, sweat beaded his forehead. Finally with one loud crash the stump split apart.

Ruifen and Xiao Long cheered. "You're great," Ruifen commended. Xiao Long jumped up and down repeating, "Daddy is great, daddy is great."

"With determination, anything can be overcome." Daquan lifted the ax again and ripped the stump asunder.

A few minutes later, Tiehan, Chunhe, Liping and Wenqing came running into Daquan's courtyard. Worried that



Daquan would be demoralized by the bad news, they were astounded to find him chopping a stump while Ruifen was busy starting a fire and Xiao Long was jumping around shouting as he gathered woodchips and gave them to his mother.

Wenqing greeted Daquan, then picked up the water-bucket and carrying-pole, and ran out. Chunhe took the broom and started sweeping the yard. Liping went inside, made a face at Ruifen and began mixing dough.

Invariably awkward at such moments, Tiehan barely noticed his friends' diligence. Like a stone statue, he stood gaping at Daquan.

Suddenly Tiehan burst out laughing.

Daquan stopped swinging his ax. "What's so funny?"

"Ha, ha, ha," Tiehan could not control his hearty laugh.

Daquan wiped his sweat. "Don't stand there like a damn fool. I walked fifty li and chopped half this stump, and you don't even offer to help! Can't you see that I'm soaked with sweat? Are you planning on holding a memorial meeting for me?"

Tiehan laughed even more boisterously, chasing away the birds and the rooster.

"What a clown," Ruifen remarked.

Liping said, "He's a nut."

Tiehan rolled up his sleeves, tightened his belt and took over the big ax. "What did you say?" he bellowed at Daquan. "Memorial meeting? You won't die. I know you. You are as tough as this ax. Anything that hits you, no matter how hard will fall to pieces."

The courtyard was spotlessly clean, the fire crackling and a delicious smell rose from the pot. Tiehan was drenched with perspiration when he hewed the last of the stump.

Daquan could not wait any longer. He called them all

together and took out a mimeographed document from his pocket. It was Chairman Mao's essay "Get Organized" which Secretary Liang had given him at Rooster Village. Daquan opened it and slowly read it aloud. Then he told his friends about what he had seen in Yanshan District. An unprecedented joy exploded in the tiny courtyard.

"What do you know? Chairman Mao had already pointed out the road for us when we were in our cradles."

"I thought we set up our mutual-aid team just to solve our immediate problems. I never imagined it was the first step toward socialism."

"Yanshan District is quite far ahead of us. They started organizing mutual-aid teams right after land reform."

"How come Heavenly Gate District is so backward? We've just been turning around in the same spot like a donkey pulling a millstone."

"Brother Daquan, let's start right away."

"Good," Daquan said. "But the difficulties will be greater than we have ever met up against before. Our enemies aren't out in the open anymore, waving their knives. They are hidden. And their thinking can infect people among our own ranks."

## Another Test of Strength

While the young people were excitedly talking in Daquan's courtyard, Jinfa and Shaohuai were winding up a conversation in the village office. Jinfa was acting extremely poised.

Although he felt like he was searching for a foothold in a rugged ravine, he flaunted his "village head" pomp. "You can go now," he told Shaohuai. "I'll take care of this."

A cryptic expression suffused Shaohuai's face as he said, "Let Daquan know I won't let him off easy if he bullies Erlin."

"He won't do that," Jinfa said. "Even though he is difficult, he's not likely to rashly fly in the face of village opinion. He probably won't be too unreasonable with Erlin."

"Come on. You two belong to the same Party. You should be even closer. How does he treat you?"

"That's nothing. I'm not so petty as to hold a grudge against him. The old proverb says: The prime minister's mind should be broad enough for poling a boat. Well, my mind is broad enough for a huge train to run through."

"Don't underestimate him. He's very tricky. Erlin's too nice and honest. He won't be able to deal with his brother. I'm afraid once Daquan sees that he is losing out, he'll put away his stick and bring out his carrot. Erlin might be hoodwinked."

"Daquan's tricks can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Don't worry."

"Of course. I won't worry if you intervene. I just want to make it clear that if Daquan tries to push Erlin around, I won't hesitate to challenge him before the county officials."

"There's no need."

"Just the same, I'm prepared to do this. Erlin's my relative. I have to stand behind him and his wife. And I'm not afraid of others bad-mouthing me for it."

Shaohuai left a few minutes later and hurried home to bolster Erlin who was now staying at his house to avoid his brother. Shaohuai was surprised that Tiehan's crowd had shown such restraint. Since the dispute had not gotten out

of hand, Daquan now had room to maneuver. He would certainly try to cement the crack by exploiting the favorable climate and sweet-talking Erlin. Shaohuai felt he had to rally all possible forces to drive his wedge in deeper. Thus his rush to talk with Jinfa. From now on, Shaohuai thought, it is going to be mighty hard for Daquan to concentrate on being an activist.

Jinfa's mind was also turning. It was interesting how the unexpected incident in Daquan's house had pushed him closer to Shaohuai. He had once been envious of Shaohuai's wealth and thoroughly resented his smugness. He knew Shaohuai's ostensible congeniality toward him was merely a facade for his disdain. But now Shaohuai not only needed his support, but also his connection with Fan Keming who was a link with the higher leaders. An invisible bond was growing between the old antagonists: Shaohuai was forced to rely on Jinfa because of his power and his friction with Daquan, while Jinfa, eager to revive his prestige after Fan's warnings, decided that he at least should not offend an influential person like Shaohuai.

Jinfa hurried over to Daquan's place. He wanted to see how arrogant Daquan had become since being commended by the county Party secretary and whether he could regain lost ground with the new ideas he had brought back from the county office. Jinfa thought: Now that Shaohuai has destroyed the Gao's cosy home Daquan must be in fix. He has to soften, he has to beg for my help and listen to me.

"Jinfa," Qin Kai, who had been waiting down the road, hailed, "I need to talk to you. I know you are busy. It won't take long." He had witnessed the unprecedented chumminess between Jinfa and Shaohuai and guessed what they had been discussing.

Jinfa cordially greeted Qin Kai, mindful of his need to

whip up support. "Why certainly. I'm not so busy that I can't talk to people. After all, it's my duty to serve the village. Besides, you always have something pertinent to say. I'm glad to talk with you any time. What is it?"

"It's about the problem in the Gao family."

"We've already discussed it in the cadre meeting. Is there something more?"

"We agreed that since both Erlin and Ruifen were quite upset, we would let them set up different households for the time being, and wait until Daquan came back before making the final decision."

"That's right."

"All the group leaders felt we should urge them to stay together."

"Of course."

"You know I don't have any personal stake in Daquan's case."

"Yes. We live in the same village and all feel for one another."

"You both are in the Party. You should be even closer and care for each other more. Am I right?"

"Sure."

"What you say makes a big difference in Greenfields. If you try harder, they might get back together. That would be good for Daquan and even better for Erlin. Erlin is too gullible and it's easy for him to be cheated. He's in the clouds right now. We keep talking about serving the people. Now is the time that we are needed. Jinfa, lots of folks like me who have no reason to get involved are hoping that you can help."

"Of course people should help one another. You can be sure that I'll try to bring them back together. Even if I

weren't doing it for Daquan, I would do it for all of you who place such high hopes on me."

Jinfa disliked Qin Kai's tone, but he knew he could not blithely discount his request, which indicated the sentiments of a significant number of people. Qin Kai enjoyed considerable prestige among the villagers and was the most representative of the middle peasants whose support was indispensable to Jinfa's career. Jinfa decided to employ greater discretion. He would be content to see Daquan stunned by a lighter blow and forced to treat him with more deference. Even if Daquan managed to coerce Erlin into staying, his home could never be the same.

Jinfa reached the Gao's gate and was amazed to hear sounds of merriment coming from inside. As he stood there, puzzled, someone came rushing out and ran into him.

Tiehan helped the village head to his feet and broke into convulsive fits of laughter. "Oh, it's you . . . gee . . . you fall easily."

Jinfa dusted himself off and said, "You have a lot of nerve. I've never seen anyone blindly race around like you do."

Tiehan rolled back his eyeballs. "Racing around blindly? Not me. Ha, ha! I've got some big bright lights now and a nice smooth road." Then he seriously said, "Village Head, Daquan just called a meeting of the mutual-aid team for this afternoon. He wants us three Party members to have a meeting too. He said we should work together, and I'm all for it. It's not very good for a Party member's family to split like this when we should be joining together. We'll talk about everything in the meeting." He then ran off merrily.

Baffled, Jinfa walked into Daquan's house and, once he

had dispensed with the usual amenities, found himself at a loss for words in front of the beaming faces.

Daquan was squatting on the *kang* eating. He said to Jinfa, "I was going to look you up after lunch."

Jinfa assumed that this meant Daquan was anxious to solicit his help so he said, "I was working at the village office. As soon as I heard you were back, I came over."

Daquan took a bite of corn bread and said, "I want to tell you what I've been thinking."

"Fine, fine. As long as it is workable, I'll support you."

"Sometime we should have a Party meeting," Daquan said.

"The village cadres have already met," Jinfa said. "The only legality left is the Party meeting. Fine. Now that you're back, we can hold it any time."

"We should try to reach a concensus within our Party group so that we can provide good leadership. I think the county Party committee will send down an official directive in a few days."

"What?" Jinfa said, taken aback. "Even the county leaders have found out about your family problem."

Realizing the misunderstanding, all the young people roared with laughter.

Daquan stopped them and said, "I'm talking about mutual aid."

Jinfa was nonplused. "Mutual aid? What mutual aid?"

"We should mobilize the people, help them organize, and move step by step toward socialism. I've brought back an important document. We should study it together. In the past we have had various differences but from now on we should work hard to resolve them."

Jinfa waved his hand impatiently. "Oh, you. How can you think about something so remote when your family is in such a mess? Let's not deal with that one for a while."

Daquan glanced at him and said, "Well, I can wait until you're ready. As far as my family goes, what is your opinion?"

"We have to listen to you," Jinfa said. "When the village cadres discussed it, I made sure that the issue was left open until you came back."

Daquan stopped eating and said after a moment, "I have one objection."

"What is it? It's not too late for changes."

"It certainly has to be changed."

"What if Erlin refuses?"

"I'll insist."

"Whether he listens to you depends on how important you are to him. Of course deep down everyone wants you to stay together. This split makes you look bad and it undermines the prestige of the Party members."

"You are right," Daquan said. "It is precisely because I want to defend the prestige of the Party that I have agreed to the split."

Jinfa tilted his head. "What? You agreed?"

Daquan nodded. "We both are determined to go our own way. Unless he learns from his own experiences, he won't follow me. There's no point in pushing him. He'll always be wavering. On the other hand, if I try to change to suit him, the villagers won't allow it. I would not be a true Communist."

"I'm lost. What are you talking about?"

"It's very clear. To separate now is for rejoining in the future when he is willing to take the socialist road. I'm confident that day will come."

"But didn't you say it has to be changed?"

"Yes. I mean the housing arrangement. You probably

know that our family was so poor that for generations marriages took place in a shabby hut or a rundown temple. I would like to see Erlin married in a new brick house, but it is impossible right now. The least I can do is to fix up my own house and let them live here. The three of us will move to his room."

## 45

### Bogged Down in the Mud

The following noon the sunny sky suddenly clouded over. A strong wind sprung up, followed by a clap of thunder and a bolt of lightning. Torrential rains beat down as if poured from a huge ladle.

The tempest buffeted Greenfields, deluging the fields, battering the trees, drenching the roads, and lashing the cart drivers and wayfarers.

Amidst the tumult, Purple Eggplant thought she heard a rattling and a hoarse cry from the main gate. She listened awhile, to be sure the noises were coming from her gate, then covered her shoulders with a piece of oil cloth and slowly walked outside. She skirted along under the eaves, carefully avoiding the puddles, and reached the inner gate, where she stopped under the gatehouse roof. "Who is it?" she called.

"It's me. Are you all dead?"

Purple Eggplant was astounded. "You came back in this rain!" She hurriedly opened the front gate and was shocked

to find Shaohuai covered with mud, his face a mottled yellow and white like a rotten pumpkin.

"Hurry up. Get everybody out," he ordered through chattering teeth.

"What?"

"The cart. I've bought that cart."

"Oh, where is it?"

"It's stuck out on West Bound Road."

"Oh, my goodness!"

"Hurry up."

"Your nephew went to Lihua Landing to pick up some clothes."

"God damn it! He's always taking days off. Get Caifeng. Bring the shovels."

Purple Eggplant, Caifeng, and the child bride plodded through the storm behind Shaohuai, terrified. Footprints and cart tracks were submerged under muddy water which tumbled down West Bound Road, carrying leaves and manure.

The new rubber-tire cart was mired in the mud; it looked like an old coffin halfway extracted from its grave. The mule sat back between the shafts, its mouth almost touching the water. With its hair matted against its flanks, it looked like a big black fish fresh out of the pond.

Erlin, holding the whip, squatted beside the mule, shivering and huddling like a prisoner of war. His face and hands were drained of color, his lips blue.

"Hurry up, Erlin," Shaohuai shouted. "You're the strongest. You dig in front of the wheel." Erlin threw down his whip, dragged his stiff body up and started clumsily digging.

"Caifeng, get behind the cart and push," Shaohuai shouted again. "You can't get any leverage standing there."

Get in the water. You don't have to test it, it's not deep."

Caifeng jumped into the puddle and positioned herself against the cart. Shaohuai directed Purple Eggplant and the child bride to each lift a wheel. Erlin went behind the cart to help Caifeng push when he finished digging. Shaohuai then picked up the whip, grabbed the bridle, and bellowed, "Giddy up! Push, push, push."

The crew, slipping and sliding in the mud, exerted all their strength. The mule struggled with its hind legs, standing up, then squatting back down several times as its front legs churned in the mudhole. The cart seemed riveted to the ground.

The gale howled. The driving rains fitfully drummed down, abated, then surged with renewed fury, pelting their heads, cutting their faces and evoking an ear-splitting din.

Erlin had never experienced such a trial. His stamina was depleted, his will ebbing. He remembered one stormy day five years ago when his innkeeper boss, hopeful of attracting travelers seeking refuge from the downpour, ordered him to go out to the crossroads near the village and hail customers. Erlin stood out in the rain from noon to midnight and was ill for the next two weeks. His pay was docked and his miniscule savings were spent on medicine. As these past experiences flashed in front of Erlin's eyes, he suddenly felt the repugnance of being kept. He turned to look at Caifeng who was also looking at him. Her gaze carried a passionate plea for him to try to endure it, to please Shaohuai. Erlin flung the shovel and dug assiduously.

The cart did not budge. Purple Eggplant, exhausted, started screaming, "Oh, my God! This is killing me."

Shaohuai scowled at her, "Oh, how delicate! Do you think you're a princess or something? Stop whining. Hurry up and push."

The crew mustered the last of its strength and mounted two more futile attempts. Erlin's sweat washed the rain from his face. Caifeng was as pale as windowpane paper. Purple Eggplant abruptly sat down on the ground with a splash. She shook her head and moaned, "I can't take this any longer, even if you hold a knife to my throat!"

Shaohuai looked at Purple Eggplant wallowing in agony. "You are such a failure," he sighed. "Do you want this cart to soak all night and get ruined? Do you want to leave it here on exhibition and make me look bad?"

Purple Eggplant, on the verge of tears, covered her face with her hands. "You have lots of money and influence. Why don't you go to the village and ask for help?"

Shaohuai's face creased as he stood silently for a while. Then he sighed, "You keep trying. I'll go back to the village. But I'm afraid I won't have much luck in this rain."

The crew felt like condemned prisoners reprieved by a general amnesty.

Shaohuai had never experienced such a vexing predicament. Originally everything seemed to be going so well. He had succeeded in procuring the cheap help of Erlin and Caifeng with great ease and in the same stroke had struck a blow at both Daquan and the *fanshen* peasants. He felt he was ready to plunge into the get-rich competition with greater momentum. But yesterday afternoon some terrifying news reached his ears — "Mutual-aid teams are the first step toward socialism in the countryside." At first he had just sneered, but upon more reflection he grew increasingly apprehensive. After a sleepless night, he decided to buy his cart earlier than originally planned and parade it through Greenfields just like he had done with his mule. He wanted to sway people who were attracted to the idea of getting organized.

As Shaohuai walked down the village street he looked at one gate after another, but had trouble deciding whom he could ask for help.

A red ball bobbed toward him; it was a large umbrella sheltering Zhankui and Qin Kai. Shaohuai thought: Qin Kai is quite sensible and Zhankui is very warmhearted. They might be willing to help. I could repay them with a dinner afterward. "Hey, where are you two going?" Shaohuai greeted with a smile.

Zhankui glanced at him and haughtily replied, "Our mutual-aid team is having a meeting."

Qin Kai enthusiastically added, "We are using the rainy day to talk over production plans."

Shaohuai felt like he had been clobbered with a club. His courage deserted him. Then he remembered his neighbor and decided to knock at his gate.

Qin Fu opened the door without his habitual interrogation through the crack. He was surprised to see Shaohuai. "I wondered who it could be," he said. "You scared me."

Shaohuai, oblivious to Qin Fu's abnormal behavior, came right to the point. "I need your help."

"My help?"

"I bought a cart."

"You're short of cash?"

"No, no. My cart got stuck in a ditch out on West Bound Road. Please come help me push it out."

"Oh, Shaohuai, I'm in trouble myself."

"What's wrong?"

"That rascal Wenqing is destroying my family."

"He wants to drag you into the mutual-aid team?"

"That crowd ruined him."

"You'd better watch your step with that mutual-aid team.

Daquan can't even live with his own brother. How can he 'mutual-aid' with others?"

"You're right."

"With all the strong men in your family, why mess around with a bunch of wrecks? They'll eat you out of house and home. You'll be broke in no time."

"I know. Boy, am I worried. Yesterday Wenqing tagged along after that crowd and parroted them about mutual aid. He came back in the middle of the night and then ran off again this morning. Only the rain brought him home today. Now he is washing his feet. From the looks of it, he's going to lay down his cards pretty soon. What should I do, neighbor?"

"You are a capable guy. Can't you and Wenji make him behave himself?"

"Make him. Huh! I feel like a hungry man who's caught a fat porcupine. It's pricking my hands but I can't bear to throw it away."

"Can't be that hard. No matter what society, the young have to obey the old. What could he do to you?"

"What he could do is worse than beating or cursing me. There has already been one case. I'm afraid he will learn from Erlin and split. God damn it! How I hate those scoundrels who whip up trouble in other people's families. I hope heaven won't give them any children. Then their lines will die out and they'll rot in hell."

"Calm down. What's the use of cursing people behind their backs."

"I wouldn't dare curse him to his face, would I?"

"Well, it looks like you have enough troubles without me bothering you."

As Qin Fu watched Shaohuai go away like a beaten dog, he thought: One never knows. Every family has their prob-

lems. Even Shaohuai who is usually so pompous can get into difficult straits. Qin Fu sighed and walked slowly back toward his house, unheeding of the wind and rain beating down on him.

A tense atmosphere pervaded his house. His wife was crumpled up on the *kang* with a troubled expression on her face. Wenji stood against the cabinet, fidgeting with his pipe, and Yu'e sat on the edge of the *kang* stitching a shoe sole while she breast-fed her baby. As usual she kept silent but today she also closely scrutinized everyone in the room, as if waiting for something.

The entire Qin family focused their attention on Wenqing, who sat on the stool washing his feet. His serious expression, differing from the usual hostility which stemmed from a resentful helplessness, now symbolized a dignified self-confidence. He washed his feet leisurely, scooping water over his ankles. The splashing noises further strained the atmosphere.

Qin Fu came in and stood before the stove, shaking out the gunny sack which he had used to repel the rain, and tried to make up his mind. For the last two days he and Wenji had carefully assessed the struggle about to erupt in their home and discussed their strategy for dealing with the recalcitrant Wenqing. They were sure that the *fansben* peasants, envious of the Qin's property, wanted to add this "hunk of fatty meat" to their "watery soup", that the activists in the mutual-aid team had primed Wenqing and then sent this stick of dynamite home to press the family to join. If Qin Fu declined, Wenqing would be encouraged to emulate Erlin and break with his family. Qin Fu rethought his strategy for the zillionth time and finally decided as soon as Wenqing suggested joining the mutual-aid team, he would throw a tantrum and try to scare him off.

If Wenqing threatened to move out, then Qin Fu would give in. He figured belonging to the mutual-aid team for a couple of days was preferable to losing a section of housing and a piece of land. Once he had joined the mutual-aid team and weathered the crisis, he could then start being a nuisance until everyone in the team was so fed up with him they would kick him out. Wenqing would be unable to say a thing and the team would certainly never ask him to re-join. Then Qin Fu could live in peace. . . . Even the thought of belonging to the team for those few days repulsed Qin Fu, but he could not come up with a better alternative. As soon as Wenqing lifted his feet out of the basin, his mother threw him a towel. It fell short of its mark and Wenji swiftly picked it up and, smiling ingratiatingly, passed it over. The deference they showed toward Wenqing made Yu'e want to laugh.

"I have something to discuss with all of you," Wenqing finally declared.

His father, mother, and brother all moved as if a drill master had just barked a command.

"It's about joining the mutual-aid team."

The three tensed up.

"Last night Daquan had a long talk with me."

Their resentments flared.

"He said if you people were not willing to join. . . ."

Their hearts jumped.

"That you should not be forced to."

They could not believe their ears.

"Brother Daquan said that you haven't seen the benefits of getting organized yet, that you haven't suffered from working alone, that your selfish thinking from the old society won't disappear in a short time. He kept telling me not to push you but to give you time to see for yourselves."



A broad grin lit the faces of his mother and brother. Qin Fu, fidgety with ecstasy, picked up Wenqing's basin and dumped the water outside.

Yu'e was overwhelmed with disappointment. What sounded like music to the rest of the family shattered her morale. Ever since her horizons had been broadened by the events in spring planting, she could no longer bear this confining household. She hoped the Qin family would break up, giving her and Wenji a chance to pull away from the pernicious influence of Qin Fu and follow Daquan down the new road. When the "get organized" hurricane shook this tiny courtyard, she thought her wishes were about to be fulfilled, that the final collapse of the family was imminent. Now Yu'e was lost in bewilderment: Wenqing's pronouncement was like giving crutches to this household on its last legs.

Qin Fu had collected himself by the time he returned with the basin. He smugly said, "Very good. Who needs to join a team? We'll work together, father and sons. That's better than any mutual aid. Let other families go ahead and mutual aid. We'll strike it rich on our own. We won't let anyone take advantage of —"

"You're wrong," Wenqing said, cutting his father short. "Mutual aid is better than working alone. Organized together, families can help out one another in times of difficulty and guarantee that no one will be exploited. Even if you manage to pile up a fortune alone, can you guarantee that your descendants won't become poor? Socialism can guarantee this. And secondly, it is for your own good that others want you to join the mutual-aid team. Don't think they can't live without you. In the spring you predicted that some people's land would go to waste unless they hired your animal. But what happened? Did any land go unplow-

ed? When Daquan cautioned me not to push you, he was taking the volunteer policy seriously. He and the *fanshen* families also want to show you their strength. One day they'll own countless animals, carts and even machines and reap huge crops. Then you'll regret you didn't join earlier."

"Don't be envious of them," Qin Fu said. "We can do it too. Now that you've let me have my way, I'll give you a free hand to develop the family fortune. You can build a new house, get a work animal, buy a cart, anything you want."

"That's not what I have in mind at all," Wenqing said. "The family can't prosper working by itself unless it cheats or exploits others. I'm a Youth League member, a revolutionary. How can I do that?"

Qin Fu anxiously said, "What do you mean? Who have I cheated in all these years? Who have I exploited? Do you think I'm so shameless that I would ask you to do such a thing?"

"If you take the capitalist road, you have to be shameless," Wenqing said. "Under that system if you don't want to be shameless, then you'll be harmed and exploited by others. There is no middle road. I know you don't want to be exploited. So you can only be a decent person if you take the socialist road. Just to give you an example, I made up my mind to join the mutual-aid team by myself. But Daquan tried hard to persuade me not to split from the family. He said to split wouldn't help you see the light and it would reflect badly on the mutual-aid team and its organizers. He also said it would give troublemakers a chance to spread rumors and scare well-meaning people who are confused."

Qin Fu's mind started ticking again. No matter what Wenqing says, he thought, as long as the family stays intact and out of the mutual-aid team, then everything is fine.

But he knew that Wenqing had not changed his mind about joining the mutual-aid team and feared that once Daquan's sensible influence wore off, there would be another showdown. Qin Fu groped for a way to conclude this conversation. If only he could find an excuse to get out of the house! But where could he go in such a rainstorm? He suddenly said to Wenji, "Let's go help Shaohuai. His cart is stuck out on the road."

Qin Fu and Wenji rushed down West Bound Road. They met Shaohuai and his family walking home, leading the shivering mule. Hanging their heads, they looked as lifeless as uprooted vines which had been scorched in the sun, then washed by the rain.

"Shaohuai, where's your cart?" Qin Fu asked.

Shaohuai glanced at him, shook his head and heaved a long sigh.

"What a pity," Qin Fu said. "Now I'm doing better than you."

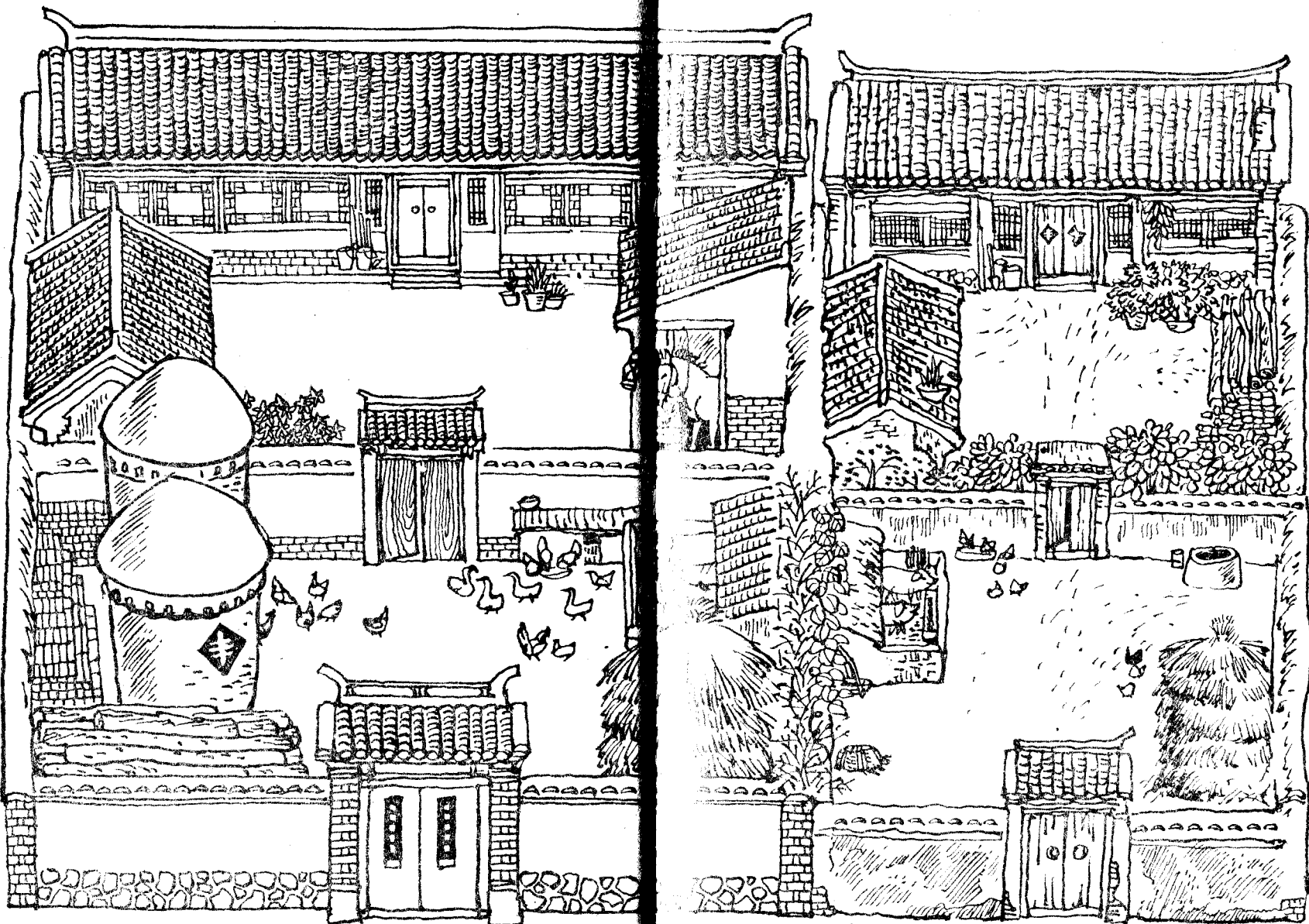
"You've gotten that mess under control?"

"Yes. Wenqing didn't make a fuss at all. This time Daquan acted decent for a change. He told Wenqing not to push me and not to split. . . ."

Shaohuai immediately shook his head. "Oh, you! If you ask me, you're in the same boat as me, stuck in the mud!"

金 光 大 道  
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The Courtyards of Shaohuai and Qin Fu



THE GOLDEN ROAD was an instant success when it first appeared in 1972 and remains the most significant Chinese novel to have emerged in the last fifteen years. Its plot concerns the fate of one North China community in the uncertain days after land reform. The privilege of the landlords has been destroyed and their land parceled out to the poorer peasants. But the euphoria of victory soon fades with the rigors of the first spring planting. For though the yoke of landlord power has been broken, the yoke of poverty has not. The poor peasants in this village are quickly faced with an ultimate challenge to their cherished land and perhaps even to their new life, which they had fought so hard to achieve.

*The Golden Road* is the second major novel of the prolific peasant writer Hao Ran. Born in 1932 to an impoverished peasant family, he grew up in times of great social turmoil. His experiences in his youth and after 1949 in setting up mutual-aid teams and cooperatives as a grass-roots cadre provided invaluable first-hand material for his writings. Hao Ran's works derive much of their strength from his extensive knowledge of the speech, customs and way of life of North China peasants.

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