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THE GOOD
EARTH



The Promise

A NOVEL OF
CHINA AND BURMA



The Promise

Pearl S. Buck



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IN THEIR DESPAIR MEN must hope, when a promise is given, though it be only a promise. Thus, though his second son always shook his head when Ling Tan spoke of the promise, still the old man believed in it. The truth was that Ling Tan, as many did, believed the men of Ying and Mei to be the strongest and fiercest of all men on earth, and he and all others in this enemy-ridden land daily hoped that by some provocation the enemy would overstep themselves and enrage those foreigners across the sea and force them to come into the war, and thus bring an end to it. For, evil and strong as the enemy was, none believed even this enemy could conquer the foreigners, the hairy men of Ying and Mei.

Nor would Ling Tan listen to his sons when they told him that these foreigners were not so strong as they had once been. Thus in the city one day where Lao Er had gone to sell some salted duck eggs he saw an enemy guardsman spit into the face of a foreigner, and the foreigner did no more than wipe it off with a white cloth he took out of his pocket.

“He keeps that white cloth in his pocket, doubtless,” Lao Er said to his father when he came back. “and he keeps it just to wipe off enemy spittle from his face. All we who saw it were amazed, and the man who stood near me to sell his dumplings to those who passed said that he would never have believed it. He said that it used to be when a foreign man or even a foreign woman was given an insult or so much as what they thought an insult, men with guns came down from foreign warships that lay always ready in the river.”

“Where are those warships now?” Lao Ta asked. “There are only enemy warships in the river these days. And one day when I went into the city gate from the river side, I saw foreigners stopped even as we are stopped and their clothes taken off and their bodies searched by the enemy guardsmen and they were as meek and helpless as we are, having no guns. Do not hope too much now, old father.”

Thus his two sons begged Ling Tan lest he be too grieved for his own good when the promise the foreigners had made was not kept. But he still hoped, for where was there hope in any other place?

All through that evil autumn, though the skies were so tranquil and clear above the harvest fields the times grew steadily worse. The village of Ling lived as though it were in the middle of a silent world. No news came in from the outside except such as could leak in by the whispers of messengers hastening through on plans of their own. From these Ling Tan and his sons heard that the war still went on in the free land. They heard, too, that though the capital of the country was moved far inland even there the enemy went and sent down the great bombs which had torn up the earth near the village a single bomb strong enough to make the large pond. That hole was full of water now, and on the day that Ling Tan heard how the inland capital was bombed he went and looked at the hole and thought of himself how it would be if great pits like that were dug into a city and what of the people? Even if they hid in the rocky hills, as it was said they did, could it go on forever? He was compelled the more

hope that from the world outside there might come help against this bitter enemy.

And again in the eighth month of that year Ling Tan and his sons heard that outside in the frontier land there was now war made on the enemy in five provinces at once, and this was the first time they had heard of Lao San. The word came through a traveling priest, who said that all young and strong men were gathering together for that new war. Then he took out a paper from his gray robe, and in the paper was a piece of black hair that lay in a curl and he said, "This was given to me by the tallest young man I have ever seen, and he told me to go out of my way to pass this house and that you would give me food when you saw this piece of hair which he cut from his own head as he stood before me. He took his short sword and cut it off and gave it to me."

Now when Ling Sao heard the priest say this she cried out that this was surely her third son's hair who had gone away many days before this and with him some of the hill men whom he led.

"Whose hair curls like this except my third son's?" she cried. "I never saw any hair like it, and I always said it was because when he was in my womb I craved eels. Do you remember how I ate eels when I carried your third son, old man?"

"I do remember," Ling Tan said, "and when he was born we were all grieved at the way his hair curled on his head, like eels, as you say, old woman. But it was too late then. And it has always grown out of him like that. Where did you say you saw him, good priest?"

"Near the city of Long Sands," the priest said.

"Was he in rags?" Ling Sao asked anxiously.

"No, he was in whole cloth," the priest said, "and he looked full fed and happy enough. But he was on the way to battle, as all young men were in those parts, for it is expected that the enemy was gathering itself for a new attack upon that city."

Ling Sao took the hair from the priest's hand and wrapped it in a bit of red paper that she had kept in a drawer of the table in her own room, and Ling Tan told the wife of his eldest son to prepare food for the priest, as much as he could eat, and then more to take with him. This the woman did, for she had become in this house a willing, faithful soul whom all called upon and she never said she was weary. Even the work that Jade once did this woman now took for her own duty and if Jade mentioned it, she laughed and said, "If you suckle those two boys of yours what else can be asked of you?" And it was true that Jade's twin sons were always hungry, and it seemed however much Jade ate and however she drank rice gruel mixed with red sugar and however she supped broths and ate eggs boiled in tea she could never turn the food fast enough into milk for those two thirsty boys at her breasts.

That day after the priest had gone, his belly swelled under his girdle with what he had eaten and his basket full of food for tomorrow, they all sat and wondered about the third son and whether he would be killed in the battle or not, and what would become of him.

It was not long after this that Jade had a letter and when she opened it she found it was written by Mayli, and it came from that province which is called Yünnan, or South of the Clouds, and it was from

the city of Kunming. There Mayli had told Jade she would go, and there she was. It was a short letter seemingly full of playful talk and yet it ended with this question, "How is it your husband's young brother has not brought me back my little silk flag?"

Now none but Jade and Lao Er knew about that small silk flag or how Mayli had given it to Jade to give to Ling San as a sign that she was going to the free land if he cared to follow her. So now when Jade was reading the letter to them aloud as they sat in the sunshine in the court one day in the autumn of that year, she saw that question ahead and did not read it aloud to them, lest they press her with questions she could not answer. But afterward when she was in their own bedroom she told Lao Er about it and he smiled.

"He will be there one of these days," he said.

And so it was that something more than a month later there was another letter to Jade and this time Mayli said, "Tell your parents that their third son has come here to this city, and he has fought the battle of Long Sands, and he is full of the great victory we won there against the enemy."

More than this Mayli did not say, but so much they all heard and were greatly cheered to know that somewhere there was a victory and that Lao San was alive. Only Ling Sao fretted because there was not more in the letter to tell her whether her third son and this Mayli were to be married or not. But no, there was not a word of marriage, not in this letter or another that came afterward, and Ling Sao grew angry and said:

"I wish I had that third son of mine here and I would jerk his ears! When did a son of mine ever go smelling around a woman when she was not his wife? If he is hungry for her, why does he not marry her? And she is worse than he is, to let him come near her, the bold daughter of a rotten mother!"

"Give over cursing, woman," Ling Tan said. "Why is it that women will curse each other so easily?"

"Perhaps she will not marry my brother," Lao Ta said. "You must remember, mother, that she is full of learning, and my brother does not know even his name on paper when he sees it."

But Ling Sao flung up her head at her son. "If she has her belly full of ink, she is not the woman for him anyway," she said, "and all the more he ought not to go near her."

By this time they were all laughing at her and she seized one of the twins from Jade's arms, and bore him away to comfort herself in the kitchen. For this woman could always be comforted by one of her grandsons. Her older children she could find fault with but the little ones were perfect in her eyes.

These were the small things of Ling Tan's house, and somehow the house went on, even though the countryside was under the heavy rule of the enemy. Somehow they got enough food out of the earth for themselves, and Lao Ta and Lao Er grew clever in ways of deceiving the enemy. Since he had married the woman he found one day in his trap, Lao Ta had ceased to set traps any more, for she loved him beyond all reason, and she would not have him risk his life. So she wept until she had made

him come home and live in his father's house again, and till the fields, and be once more a decent farmer. Yet though this family seemed nothing but a common family such as in any country may be found upon the soil, they never for one moment gave up their hatred of the enemy nor their will that when Heaven set the day, all the people, and they among them, would sweep the enemy into the sea.

To himself Ling Tan always said that the day would be that one when the men of Mei could be made so enraged that they, too, would join this war.

"On that day," he said to his sons one night, "when we hear that the men of Mei have come in this war on our side, we shall all be given strength to rise up and fall upon the enemy and drive them out. Each man in his place will rise and fall upon the enemy next him, even though he has only his bare hands to put at the enemy's throat, and then we shall all be free."

It was on a cool night at the end of that month when he said this—so cool that Ling Sao had begged her two sons move the table from the court and set it inside the main room, so that they could eat their night meal in warmth. There had not yet been frost, but she lifted her head and sniffed the night air before she shut the door.

"I smell winter tonight," she said.

"The fifth winter of this war," Ling Tan said gravely. "But next winter we shall be free again."

None spoke when he said this, not wanting to take away hope from him. He had come to believe too much in that day of his hope, plucking his belief out of the air, for there was still not one word of news from the outside world to tell him that the promise would be kept by the men of Mei and Yin. Even the random news they had been used to hearing from their old cousin who had lived in the city was now gone. For that old scholar had one night taken too much opium and had not waked again. The man who owned the poor room where he slept his life away found him dead the next morning, and was about to throw his frail body outside the city wall, for in these times the dead were not valuable as they once were. There were too many dead bodies in the streets each dawn, some starved and some diseased and some stabbed by who knows what dagger? Then the man saw that the dead one wore a good cotton vest under his ragged scholar's robe, and so he thought he would take the vest off for himself, and then he found tied to it with a bit of thread a command from the dead man. "Should I be found dead," the old scholar had written, "take my body to my wife who lives in the village of Lin outside the south wall of the city."

This the man had done, wishing a reward for it, and Ling Tan gave it to him, be sure. But what a day that had been, when at last the cousin's wife got back her old man! It was a day of mixed rage and sorrow, for she was so vexed that she could not mourn properly because however she scolded her old man could not hear her as he lay in the coffin Ling Tan gave him. It was Ling Sao's own coffin, for both Ling Tan and Ling Sao had their coffins ready in an outhouse, and this had been done in the summer when Ling Tan was sixty years old. It was a comfort to them both to know that should death come down upon them, unseen, their coffins were ready and waiting for sleep.

But now Ling Sao let the cousin's wife have hers. "I can get another the next time my sons go into the city," she said, "and let the old scholar's bones rest at last."

So they did as she said, and the cousin's wife wept and grew angry by turns. First she wept and moaned and then when she fell to thinking of those many months this old corpse had hidden himself in the city and how he had put all he earned into opium she grew angry and she stopped weeping and washed her face and combed her hair and cried out that she was glad he was dead, for he had been no use to her alive, and then she would remember that now indeed she was a widow and so she wept again, and all in all she made such commotion in the village that all were glad to have the old man under ground.

Once during the day before he was buried, Ling Tan looked down into the coffin and smiled. The old scholar, though wasted to his skeleton with opium, looked so peaceful that Ling Tan knew he was pleased as he lay there. He told Ling Sao that night, "I swear I believe the old rascal knows that he has the best of it because she cannot make him hear any more."

Still, after the dead scholar was under ground, there was no other way of knowing what was going on beyond the seas, and Ling Tan had now only the promise to hold to, for hope.

How then could he be ready for that most evil day which came down upon them from heaven? On that day the enemy took by surprise the men of Mei. They fell upon the foreign ships as they lay side by side in a foreign harbor, and they set fire to the airplanes, resting wing to wing upon the ground. And those who had the keeping of these ships of sea and cloud were sleeping or finding their pleasure on a day when all were idle. Be sure that the enemy made known everywhere their victory. They cried it upon the streets and it was written upon the walls in great letters, and voices took it over the land faster than the winds could carry it. So the news reached the village of Ling. It was a clear cool day such a day as in better times Ling Tan would have cried out to Ling Sao to make him noodles of white wheat flour. He had smelled the frost at the door that morning and he looked out and saw it white on the threshing ground.

"If it were the real times," he said to her, "I would eat wheaten noodles today."

"There is only the same millet," she said, "but it is hot."

So he ate his hot millet and the day went as it always did, his sons busy with their tasks, and he sitting in the sun to smoke his water pipe. Then suddenly one came running toward the house. It was a young fellow, the son of a neighbor in the next village and he came to Ling Tan first. He was weeping as he ran, and Ling Tan shouted at him.

"What now? Can there be anything more than what has happened to us already?"

"There is worse and it has happened," the lad said, and then gasping and sobbing he told him. In the early morning of that day the enemy had fallen upon the ships and the airplanes of the people of Mei, thousands of miles across the sea, and had destroyed them utterly. The men of Mei were full of rage—but helpless.

Ling Tan sat, his water pipe in his hand and heard this black news. "I will not believe it," he said.

But his mouth went dry. For the young man went on with such a close story that Ling Tan saw it might have happened thus to a people unwatching. If the men of Mei were unmindful, it might have been so. And well he knew the cunning of this enemy. He called the young man in and before his sons he made him tell the story over again. Then he sent his sons for the other men in the village and they all came into Ling Tan's court, and once again the young man told his story. Each time it seemed more possible.

When it had been told for the third time, Ling Tan knocked the cold ash from his pipe which he had forgotten to smoke. Then he turned to Ling Sao.

"Get my bed ready," he said. "I must lie down, and I do not know whether I shall ever get up again."

They were frightened at his words and all urged him not to give up his hope. They told him that there were yet the men of Ying who had not been destroyed, but well he heard the faltering in their voices, and he shook his head.

"Get my bed ready, mother of my sons, get my bed ready," he said.

He lay in his bed with eyes closed for eleven days and in all that time he would not eat a full meal nor did he wash himself all over. On the twelfth day Ling Sao came in with ashes on her hands and face and a length of coarse white mourning cloth in her hand and she let out her voice in loud weeping.

"If you die I will swallow the gold earrings you gave me," she said, "I cannot live on without you, old man."

Then his sons came in and their wives and children, and they wept and begged him for the sake of all to rouse himself and to wash and to eat.

But it was Jade who said the word that made him move. "Will you let the enemy kill you at last when in all these years you have been the one to give us courage?" she said.

He thought for a moment, she looking at him shrewdly. Then he dragged himself up. "You would find the right word to make me live when I long to die," he said in feeble anger.

He rose, nevertheless, and his sons leaped forward to help him, and the women went away and with his sons' help he was washed and dressed, and he ate a bowl of broth with two eggs in it, the Ling Sao had ready, and so he began to live again.

But he was never what he had been. His withers were weak, and when he walked he clung to the wall or the table or to the shoulder of a son, or he leaned on Ling Sao. Nor did he ever mention the war again, nor the enemy, nor the hope he had lost. From then on Ling Tan was an old, old man, and the all saw that he was, and they took turns caring for him, and never leaving him alone.

After that day Ling Tan could never remember well again anything that he was told and most of all he fretted because he could not remember where his third son was. He forgot again and again that Jade had read him a letter which had come last from Mayli, and he asked for it each day saying that he

had not heard it. So she read the letters to him patiently. One day when she had read for the sixth time a letter which had come six days before, he put out his hand.

“Give the letter to me,” he said.

Jade gave him the letter and he took it in his right hand and as he held it his hand began to tremble with that small tremor which he could not still, however hard he tried. It had come on him with his weakness and it always made him angry.

“Look at that hand,” he now said with scorn, as though the hand did not belong to him. “See, it shakes like an old leaf ready to drop from the tree!”

Jade moved the weight of the child she held. One or the other of her twin sons she had in her arms all day, and whichever she did not hold, Ling Sao held. Between them they were never without a burden, whatever they did. “It is only one hand,” she now said to soothe the old man.

“But it is the hand I used to sow seed in the earth,” Ling Tan grumbled.

“Therefore the more weary,” Jade said gently.

Ling Tan gave a great sigh and took the letter in both hands and turned it slowly around and around. He would not for pride’s sake ask which was top and which bottom, and Jade would not tell him when at last he held it wrongly, after all. Why should she shame an old one? So he held the letter and stared at it carefully, imagining into the marks he saw the things which he had just heard from his lips.

“It is strange she writes about him and they are not wed,” he said at last. “Why are they not wed?”

“How can I tell why another woman will not wed one of your sons?” Jade said laughing.

Ling Tan did not smile.

“I will never see my third son again,” he said sadly. “Foreign winds and foreign waters—they are all ill things.”

“Do not allow such thoughts,” Jade replied. The child in her arms was asleep and she was thinking that she might lay him on the bed and rest her arms a while. Thus thinking she rose and tiptoed through the court where she had been sitting with the old man and so he was alone.

For a while he continued to stare at the letter which he could not read, but at last he folded it up small and put it inside his girdle. There he would keep it until it wore into dust, as he had kept the other letters which the woman had sent, the woman whom his third son loved. Yes, he could not understand this woman who though she would not marry so fine a man as his third son yet faithfully wrote to them now and again, sending the letters by any messenger whom she could find. But nothing was usual in these years of war and men and women were the strangest of all. He sighed again and laid his head on his arms on the table. The sun came down warm into the court and all around him was still. He heard the sound of the loom again, the loom which had been silent since his third daughter Pansiao had been sent away to the inland mountains to school. They had not heard of Pansiao now for

many months. He had almost forgotten how that small daughter of his looked. But he thought of her now when he heard the loom.

He knew it was not Pansiao who now sat at the loom but the widow whom his eldest son had married. She was a good weaver, good everywhere in the house, though Ling Sao was often impatient with her because she was always anxious lest she did not please and, being too anxious, she did not please, and she would creep away to weep. Then Ling Sao cried after her angrily: "Give over weeping poor stupid good soul! It is true you always try to please me, but I swear it would be easier if you were not always at my side, like a cat rubbing my legs and in my way. Do not try so hard, daughter-in-law, and I will like you better!"

But this the woman could not understand. She would only roll her tearful eyes at her mother-in-law. "It seems to me I cannot try too hard to please you," she whimpered.

Time and again this quarrel had come between the two women until one day Ling Tan had taken it upon himself to say to Ling Sao, "Since my eldest son has found this woman for himself and likes her, leave her alone. Am I to have a miserable old age because of you and this woman? Since there is no peace in the world, can I not have it in my own house?" Ling Sao did her grumbling out of his hearing after he said this and so he had peace.

Now the light clack of the loom beat through the warm sunshine of a mild winter's day and carried him away from all thought and he slept.

II

A THOUSAND AND MORE miles away from where this old man slept in his courtyard in the sun, his third son, Lao San, stood in another courtyard.

This Lao San had in these days another name. Lao San, or Lao Three, is well enough for the name of a farmer's son, but after the victory of Long Sands he had been made into a commander of other men, and his General, with his new rank, had given him a new name and this name was Sheng, and Sheng he was called from that day on.

He had been sitting until a moment ago, talking across a small porcelain garden table to the woman he loved who would not marry him. It could be said rather that she persuaded him to talk, drawing out of him by her shrewd questions all that he had been doing since they last met, more than two months ago. Then she fell silent, and her handsome head drooped as though she were thinking about what he had said. What she thought about he did not know, indeed. He loved her very well but he did not pretend that he knew her thoughts. She was not a usual woman when it came to the stuff of her brain. He could talk to her as though she were a soldier and she to him. But when she was silent she seemed always beyond him. Now she lifted her head suddenly, as though she felt his eyes, and smiled a small smile.

"You look beautiful in that uniform," she said. Her smile twisted. "But why do I tell you? You know it."

He did not answer this, for he never answered her when her red mouth twisted.

"How many characters can you write now?" she asked again.

"Enough for me," he said.

"Then why did you not write me a letter?" she asked.

"Why should I write when I knew I was coming here in a month or two at most?"

"If you see no reason for writing to me, then there is no reason," she said.

She took up her tea bowl in her hand and held it and he looked at that long narrow hand of hers with its nails painted scarlet. He knew the scent in her palm. But he did not move toward her. Instead he put his hand into the breast of his new soldier's uniform and took out a handful of colored silk. She sipped her tea, her lips still smiling, and her great black eyes smiling.

"Here is the flag," he said.

"You still have that flag?" she said.

"You gave it to me," he retorted. "It was your command to me to come to you."

It was true that when Mayli left Jade that day now six months behind them she had given the small bright flag to Jade and she had said, "Tell him I go to the free lands—tell him I go to Kunming." To Kunming he had come after the victory. But when he had come she was not willing to marry him.

She was still not willing, though he had been here for days and each day he had come to see her.

“Why do you keep that flag in your bosom?” she asked him.

“That you may remember you bade me come here,” he said.

He leaned over the porcelain table and looked down upon her upturned face. Behind his head over the wall of the courtyard, she could see the high tops of the mountains which surrounded the city. Bare mountains, purple against the clear winter sky. The day was not cold. It was seldom cold here and in another climate it could have been spring. The light of the sun fell upon her face and his, and each saw the other's beauty, how fine their skin was, the golden fine skin of their people, and how black were their eyes and how white.

“I ask you again if you will marry me,” he said. “Yesterday I asked and today I ask.”

Her eyelids fell. “You are very bold these days,” she said. “When you first came you would not have thought of asking me yourself. Do you remember how you found some one who knew a friend of mine and then through the two of them you proposed marriage to me?”

“I have little time now,” he said. “A soldier must go by the straightest road to what he wants. I ask you this—will you marry me before I march to my next battle?”

She lifted her lids again and he saw what he feared in her more than anything—her laughter. “Is this the last time you ask me?” She put the question to him as playfully as a kitten tosses a ball.

“No,” he said. “I shall ask you until you yield.”

“At least wait until you come back before you ask again,” she said.

Each of them thought the same thought—what if he never came back? But neither would speak aloud.

“Do you know why you will not wed me?” he asked her at last.

“If I did I would tell you,” she said.

There was one more long moment between them, eyes looking into eyes. Then he took up the bright silk flag that lay between them and crumpled it and put it back into his bosom.

She rose. “Do you go?”

“Yes,” he said.

“Do you go because you must or because you wish?” she asked him. Now that he was going away she felt her heart pull at him to stay.

“What does it matter?” he said. “I have said what I came to say. There is no reason for staying longer today.”

She did not answer him. She stood near him, tall for a woman, but still only a little beyond his shoulder.

“I swear I think you are still growing,” she said willfully. “Can you blame me that I do not want a growing boy for my husband?”

“I do blame you for not wanting me,” he said gravely. “I blame you because you know we are

destined for marriage. Do not our horoscopes promise us to each other? Are you not gold and am I not fire?"

"But I will not be consumed!" she cried.

"I am the man," he said, "and you are the woman."

The air around them was so clear, so still, the sunshine so pure, that their two shadows lay on the white stones beneath their feet as though they were one. She saw the closeness and stepped back from him and the shadows parted.

"Go away," she said. "When you are finished growing you may come back."

He gave her a long look, so long and fierce that she stamped her foot. "Don't think I am afraid of your eyes!" she cried.

"Don't think I am afraid of you," he said sturdily, and turned and without another word he went away.

And she, left alone in the courtyard, walked here and there, and back and forth, and stopped in front of a cluster of bamboo trees and plucked off a smooth hard leaf, and tore it between her teeth into sharp shreds. When would she be sure of this man for whom her flesh longed? She would not marry a lout, and was he more than a lout? Who knew? A month ago he had been chosen by those above to lead other men. But it had taken him months to prove that he could lead something more than the handful of ragged men who had escaped with him out of the hills near his father's house. For those months he had drilled in the common ranks of soldiers and at night he had learned like a schoolboy the strokes and dots and hooks that go to make writing and reading. He could read a book today but only if it were simple. And she did not yet know whether or not his mind were simple. Marry him she could as women did marry in these days, and then cast him off. But she was not of such hot blood that she must marry for nothing but that. She wanted to marry a man whom she could love until she died and keep her love he must have more than beauty—he must have the power to be great. Had he that power? She did not know.

An old woman in a black coat and trousers came to a door that opened upon the court.

"Your food is ready," she said. She looked about the court. "Is he gone? I went out and bought a pound of pork and some chestnuts because I thought he was here."

"I will eat them," Mayli said.

"No, you will not," the old woman said. "You are the child of your mother, who was a follower of Mohammed, and not while these hands of mine prepare your food will flesh of pig enter into you, who nursed you as a child in your mother's house!"

"Why did I ever find you?" Mayli pretended to complain. For she had found this old woman in the city of her birth where now the puppet of the enemy ruled. In that way which poor people know everything about those above, this old woman heard that Mayli had returned from over the seas and one day she came and told Mayli who she was and told such things about Mayli's mother that she

proved herself as the one who had been Mayli's wet nurse. She, too, was a follower of Mohammed. else would the child Mayli not have been allowed to suckle her, and yet it was often an inconvenience now that she still made much of rites and foods which had no meaning for Mayli, reared far off from such ways in the land of the foreigners.

"Your dead mother put it into my mind to come to you," old Liu Ma now said. "I felt her ghost stirring the bed curtains for two nights and I knew it was she because I smelled the cassia flowers she used always to wear in her hair."

"My father still loves cassia flowers," Mayli said. One reason why she had wanted the old woman near her was that she might hear these small stories about the mother who had died when she was born.

"Do you think you can tell me anything I do not already know?" the woman said. "What happened to your mother happened to me. I have forgotten nothing. Now come and eat."

She seized Mayli's hand in her dry old hand and pulled her toward the door into the main room of the house where Mayli lived alone with this one old woman. "Sit down," she commanded and when Mayli had sat down she brought a brass bowl of hot water and a small white towel for hand washing. And while she did this she grumbled steadfastly.

"I will throw the pork to the street dogs," she said. "It is dog's food, anyway. But that great turn of a soldier who you say is your foster brother—though it is only in days like these when all reason has gone from the minds of the people that a young girl has a foster brother! A brother or nothing—what is a foster brother but a man, and what have you to do with a man who is not your brother? It spoils the name of this house to see a tall soldier stoop his head to enter the gate. I lie for you, but can I lie deny that he is here when any one on the street can see him come in? That hag in the hot water shop next door, she says, 'I see your master is home again.' And how can I say he is not the master here, when she sees him come into our gate?"

To such talk which the old woman poured out all day like water from a dripping fountain, Mayli said nothing. She smiled, smoothed her black hair with her long pale hand, sat down at the table in the main room of the house and ate heartily of the lamb's meat and rice and cabbage on the table, while the old woman hovered about her, keeping her tea hot and watching her while she ate and always talking.

Now suddenly Mayli broke across that talk with a sharp look of mischief. She had eaten well but she did not put down her chopsticks.

"Where is that pork, Liu Ma?" she asked.

"It is in the kitchen waiting for me to throw it to the dogs," the old woman said.

"Give it to me," Mayli said, "I am still hungry."

Liu Ma opened her old eyes and thrust out her under lip. "I will not give it to you, and you know it, you wicked one," she said loudly. "I will let you starve before with my own hands I give you so vi

a meat.”

“But if Sheng had stayed to eat with me as he often does, I would have eaten the pork,” Mayli said.

“I always know my place,” Liu Ma declared. “Of course then I would only wait to scold you private.”

“Oh, you old fool,” Mayli said, still laughing. And she rose and swept past the old woman and into the kitchen and there on the edge of the earthen stove was the bowl of pork, very hot and fragrant with chestnuts cooked in it. “It does not look like a dish ready to throw to a dog,” Mayli said, her black eyes still bright with mischief. “It looks like a dish an old woman puts aside for her own dinner.”

“Oh, how I wish your mother had lived!” Liu Ma groaned. “Had she lived she would have beaten you with a bamboo and made you into a decent maid! But your father was always a man as soft as smoke. Yes, he never made a shape for himself in anything. It was she who would have beaten you.”

By now Mayli had the dish on the table and she dipped into it with her chopsticks and brought out the best bits of sweet pork, crusted with delicately brown fat and tender parboiled skin.

“How well you do cook pork when it is a dish you never even taste,” she said to the old woman.

She looked at Liu Ma and suddenly Liu Ma’s brown face crinkled. “You young accursed!” she said laughing. “If you were not so much taller than I am, I would smack the palm of my hand across your bottom. I am glad that dragon’s son whom you call your foster brother is bigger than you. When he loses his temper with you after you are married I will not beg him to stay his hand. I will call out to him, ‘Beat her another blow, beat her another one for me!’ ”

“You old bone,” Mayli said gaily. “How do you know I will marry him when I do not know myself whether or not I will?”

... At this moment Sheng stood at attention before his General. This General was a man of the southwest, a man still young and hearty, who was in command of the armies of this region. He had a notable story of his own, being sometimes a rebel but now a loyal soldier against the common enemy. For in times of peace men will fight for this or that small cause, but when an enemy from outside the nation comes down upon all alike, then no man may fight for his own cause, and so this General had brought all his soldiers behind him and he had gone to the One Above and given himself and his men to the common war.

When he saw Sheng stand at attention before him he made a motion to him. “Sit down,” he said. “I have something to say to you, not as your superior but as a man to another man. I have had an order from the One Above that our two best divisions are to march into Burma. It is against my will and I cannot obey the One Above and put my command on you without letting you know that I do not approve the thing I am compelled to command you. Sit down—sit down!”

At this Sheng sat down, but he took off his cap and held it and he sat down on the edge of his chair so as not to show himself at ease before his superior. He kept silent, too, and waited, so that he might prove his respect. There were two guards in the room, standing like idols against the wall. Then these the General lifted his eyelids and they went out. So the two of them were alone. The General leaned back in the wooden chair in which he sat and played with a small clay buffalo that was on his desk.

“Your father is a farmer, you told me once,” he said to Sheng.

“I am the son of the son of farmers for a thousand years,” Sheng replied.

“Are you your father’s only son?” the General asked.

“I am the youngest of three,” Sheng replied. “And all are living.”

The General sighed. “Then I may send you out to an unlucky war without cutting off your father’s life.”

“My father’s life is not in me,” Sheng replied. “He has my two brothers and they have sons.”

“And you, are you wed?” the General asked.

“No, and not likely to be,” Sheng said bitterly.

The General smiled at this. “You are young to say that,” he said.

But Sheng did not answer this for a moment. Then he said, “It is as well for one who is about to be sent into battle not to have a wife. At least I go alone and free.”

“You are right,” the General said. He put down the clay toy in his hand and picked up a brush. “Where is your father’s house and what is his name? I shall write him myself if you do not come back from this battle.”

“Ling Tan of the village of Ling, to the south of the city of Nanking, in the province of Kiangsu,” Sheng said.

The General dropped his brush. “But that is land held by the enemy,” he said.

“Do I not know that?” Sheng replied. “They came in and burned and they ravaged and they murdered wherever they could. I fought there together with the hillmen and we killed the enemy by the handful, and then I came out because a handful now and again was not enough for the thirst in me for their blood. I shall be thirsty until I can kill them by the hundreds and the thousands. So I came out and I have spent the months learning until the battle of Long Sands.”

“That tells me why you have learned so well,” the General replied.

When he had brushed quickly the name of Ling Tan and where he lived he put down the brush and put his hands on the sides of his chair and fixed his eyes upon Sheng’s face.

“It is against my will that I send these two divisions to Burma,” he said. “I have reasoned with the One Above. I have told him that we must not fight on soil that is not our own, and this for two reasons. In the first place the people of Burma are not for us. They will not welcome us when they know we come to help those who rule them. They do not love the men of Ying who have been the

rulers and when we come to aid the men of Ying they will hate us, too. In the second place, the men of Ying despise those not of their own pale color, and even though we come to help them they will not treat us as true allies. They will look on us as servants and they the lords, and shall we endure that when we go to succor them?"

"What does the One Above say when you tell him these true things?" Sheng asked.

The General leaned forward. "He says the men of Ying must know how small are their chances to hold their rule in Burma and they will be grateful to us. He says that since they need our help they will show us courtesy and we will fight by their side and win a great victory over the enemy at last."

"Is the One Above so sure that we can win?" Sheng asked.

"Is he not sending our best divisions? You are all seasoned and young and strong."

The General sighed and it was like a groan. "So he says, even though Hongkong has fallen to the enemy, and all know that the men of Ying gave that great city to the enemy as though it were a present for a feast day. I say, the men of Ying are doomed and if we go with them we are doomed. I have had all my life a knowledge of which way doom lay ahead, and I have that knowledge now. We ought to stay on our own earth and fight only from our own land. These men of Ying—have we reason to think they will change suddenly in their hearts to us? Have they not always despised us?"

The General fell silent and sat like a man of stone for a moment. But Sheng saw the veins begin to swell under his ears and on his temples and his clenched fists, which lay out on the table before him like two hammers, grew white on the knuckles and the veins in his wrists swelled. He did not lift his eyes to Sheng's face and Sheng could not see what was in them. But after a moment this man began to speak in a low voice, thick as though he were choking.

"The men of Ying have treated us like dogs on our own earth! They have lorded it over us since they won those wars against us—opium wars, they called them, but they were wars of conquest. Their battleships have sailed our rivers and their soldiers have paraded our streets. They took land from us for their own. They refused to obey our laws and here in our country they have set up their own laws for themselves, and their own courts and their own judges, and when one of them robbed us and even when one of them killed one of us, there has been no justice. Their priests have paid no taxes. Tax free they have gone where they liked and preached their religion which is not ours. They have turned the hearts of our young away from our elders. They have sat at our customs gates and taken the toll of our merchandise."

Suddenly he leaped to his feet and his wrath burst out of his eyes like lightning. He paced back and forth in the long narrow room in which they were. "And I am commanded to send my best young men to fight for these men who have despised us and trodden us down for all these years!" he shouted.

Now Sheng himself had lived always in his father's house outside the city and the few times he had ever seen these foreign men whom the General so hated could be counted on the fingers of his right hand. Once or twice he had seen them on the streets, and once or twice hunting wild beasts in the

autumn when the grass was long on the hills. He had stared at them and heard their loud voices and the harsh language of which he understood not one word. But he himself did not know of all these hateful things they had done to his people. So now he listened and said nothing, because he had not knowledge of it himself. Moreover, he was a soldier. In these months he had learned to obey the one above him and he made his own men beneath him obey his smallest command, and he did not answer. He waited to see what the General would tell him to do.

So the General walked back and forth a few times, grinding his teeth together under his mustaches, and then he sat down again and slapped the table with both his hands outspread.

“What must be done must be done!” he said still loudly. “For many days I have resisted the One Above and I have held back my men. Now his commands have come down on me as commands from heaven and either I must obey or take my life. What use is it to take my life since then another would obey his same commands?”

He had told Sheng to sit down, but now Sheng rose, and he stood to receive his orders for battle.

“You will prepare your men to go to Burma with the others,” the General said harshly. “I myself will lead you. When we are at the edge of Burma we are all to encamp upon our own soil until we receive orders to march on.”

Sheng put his heels together and saluted and then he waited.

“Where we shall go from there is not yet clear,” the General went on. “It is said some of our men will be sent into Indo-China and it may be we will invade that land. The enemy promised that they would not enter the land of the Thai. But they did enter it. The Thais yielded to them in five hours. Everywhere the enemy is winning. They do not need arms to win—everywhere all are ready for them. It is only we who resist, though we die.”

The General sighed and leaned forward and clutched his hair in his two hands. “We go to fight in a battle already lost,” he sighed. “I know it but what shall we do to make the One Above know it?”

“Let your heart rest,” Sheng said sturdily. “If the battle has not been fought yet, how can we have lost it?”

The General sighed again. He lifted his head and looked at Sheng’s brave and honest face. He remembered this man when he had first come from the hills six months before. In six months it was hard to believe that so great a change had been made. Sheng had come as wild as a tiger, his hair long and shaggy over his eyes, and his garments ragged blue cotton such as peasants wear. Had he been a smaller man none might have noticed him and he might have been put into the common ranks and let there to work his way up. But Sheng was not a small man. He was a head taller than most men, and the strange thing was that he was still growing, though he was more than twenty-two years old. His hands were twice as large as a usual man’s, and his feet were too big for any sandals except such as were made to his measure, and all of his body was large to match. Even his eyes were large and the look that gave out of them was large and clear. Wherever he went men’s heads turned to stare after him and

cry out at his size. Thus because he was so large he was the more easily a leader among his fellows.

Yet had he been stupid or timid, of what use would his size have been to him? He would have been only a bigger lump of clay. But he was sensible and high-tempered and he learned eagerly, and he obeyed faithfully until he had learned. When he in turn taught another, he saw to it that he himself was obeyed, and while all his men liked him, still they were afraid of him, too, and so men should be of the one who leads them.

Besides all this there was yet another reason why he had risen so quickly to be a commander. He had proved himself well in this war. In the eighth month of the year the war was pushed into many new places, and Sheng had fought through that campaign, always well. He had come out with his life too, and with only small wounds, and so when those higher than he were killed, he was moved quickly upward. Then in the ninth month in that great battle of Long Sands, it was he who led his men and another officer's who had fallen, and had driven the last of the enemy out of the city. Behind the young giant the men gathered and followed with fresh courage, and he was so tall that he could be seen above them all and always at the front. When at last the battle was won it was the men left alive that day who sent their messengers to the General and begged him to give them Sheng for their leader. This wish was granted and these men were put, Sheng at their head, with others into that division which was famous for its bravery. And the General was so proud of them that he saw to it that these men had the best of everything, the best food, the best guns.

As for Sheng, he learned to cut his hair short as his General did, and he kept himself clean, and he wore a uniform, not better than his men had, for all dressed alike, but better than the ragged blue garments he had worn in the hills.

And still besides all this there was Mayli. Mayli had taken trouble to know the General, and to speak good words for Sheng here and there, gay words, half fun, so that none might think she cared whether this tall fellow lived or died. But she praised him sometimes where the General heard, and she told of the brave things he had done in the hills.

"I come from the city near where he lives," she told the General, "and he is famous there for his strength and his bravery. Why, it is told there that wherever he met a small company of the enemy he would capture them alone with his two hands and an old gun. And his skill at surprising the enemy made him the talk of all the countryside and the children and the common people made songs about him in the streets."

This was true, and she sang one of these songs which she had heard on the streets of Nanking.

*"A dragon sits upon the hills,
He sleeps by day, he hunts by night.
His belly fills
With what he kills*

The General laughed at the rough song, but still the next time his eyes fell on Sheng he remembered it and it made him think even better than he had of the huge young soldier under his command.

And be sure that Mayli had something too to do with Sheng's looks. She could by her laughter send him away determined to change himself, though at the time he might refuse to do what she wished. He swore to her always that he would stay what he was and that if she would not love him as he was, then let it be so. But as long as she did refuse to love him, when he left her he made the change she wanted, and she was clever enough when he came back to her with some change she had wanted not to speak of it or seem to notice it, so that he would think she had forgotten it. But she was kind to him by a little each time that he did what she had wanted him to do.

And yet she knew that she could never rule him. He loved her and told her he did, but she knew that he would never love her better than all else. Yet she knew that she must love him better than all besides or else she did not love him enough.

Here was the middle of the road where these two stood on that day when the General told Sheng to prepare to lead his men to Burma to fight by the side of the men of Ying.

"I have only one thing to ask," Sheng now said to his General. "How shall we get to Burma?"

"How can we, except on our own feet?" the General retorted. "There is no railroad. We go by the Big Road."

Sheng considered this awhile. "And our food?" he asked.

"We will get it where we can as we go," the General replied.

Sheng considered again. "And when do we go?" He inquired.

"In four days," the General answered.

Now as soon as Sheng had received these orders, he saluted his General again and turned and went out. It would take two days to prepare his men for the long journey, but not more, for they were hard and ready. But they ought to have some hours in which to tell their women good-by and to eat a good meal or two of the sort they would not get while they fought, and a few more hours to make an extra pair of sandals apiece, and all such things that men must do when they prepare for a journey which is new to them and from which they may not return.

And then, when he came out of the room where the General was, when he had passed the guard who saluted him, it suddenly came to Sheng that he, too, was one of those who might never return. For he knew very well that this would be the bitterest battle that he had ever fought. To lead his men a thousand miles by foot over mountain and river, dragging their field guns with them as they were carrying their guns on their backs, eating as they could find food, and then at last to fight on foreign soil, their comrades men of strange blood and unknown temper, this was gravest hazard.

He stood for a moment outside the gate and the people passed him. The street was bright with the hard clear sunshine of winter, but it grew gray before him. It would be a long time before he could see again that woman whom he loved. What if he never saw her again? He turned to the left instead of the right and strode through the crowd, head and shoulders above them, toward the south of the city where Mayli lived.

III

MAYLI'S HOUSE, AT THE end of the narrow street, was very still when Sheng entered it. It was mid-afternoon. In a corner of the court under the scattered shade of a clump of bamboos, Liu Ma sat asleep. She had fallen asleep as she sewed, and over her left hand was drawn one of Mayli's long foreign silk stockings. On the right hand she wore a brass thimble like a ring about the middle finger, but the needle had dropped from this hand and hung dangling by its thread. A small dog, which Mayli had found lost one day on the street and had brought home with her, lay asleep on the flag stones beside the old woman. It opened its eyes at Sheng and, seeing who he was, went back to sleep again.

Sheng smiled at the two and tiptoed across the court and into the main room of the little house. Perhaps Mayli was asleep, too, for the house was as quiet as the court. He entered. She was not in the main room and he was about to sit down and wait for her when his eye fell on the door into the room where she slept and which he had never entered.

The door was open, and through it he saw her standing before the window. She had washed her hair and was tossing it, long and wet, into the sunlight which streamed in, and she did not see him. He stood watching her, and his heart beat hard. How beautiful a woman she was, how beautiful her black hair! He was glad she had not cut her hair as the students and girl soldiers did. She wore it coiled about her neck, but not oiled, so that the fine black hairs sprang out about her face.

His heart suffocated him. "Mayli!" he called roughly.

She parted her hair with her hands and looked and saw him, and instantly she leaped forward and slammed the door between them. He heard her push the wooden bar into place. "Oh, you big stupid!" he heard her breathe through the cracks of the door. And in a moment she was calling for Liu Ma.

Sheng sat down quickly at the right of the table, laughing to himself. Liu Ma was stumbling across the threshold, rubbing her eyes.

"How did you get in, Big Soldier?" she asked crossly. "I swear I did not see you come in."

"What would you say if I told you I have a magic dagger?" he asked to tease her. "I carry it in my girdle, and when I say 'Small!' I am so small I can blow myself over the wall in a particle of dust and when I say 'Big!' I blow myself over the wall like the west wind." This he said knowing the old woman must often have heard the wandering story-tellers tell their tales of such daggers.

But she thrust out her lower lip at him and would not smile. "We ought to have a better watchdog," she said. "This dog is only a sleeve dog, and it is no better than a cat for barking at a thief when he comes in."

"Do not blame the dog, good mother," Sheng called after her.

By this time the old soul was out of the room and in the kitchen to heat some water for tea, and the little dog came in wagging its tail, and Sheng leaned over and pulled its long ears. It was nothing

but a toy, this small creature, left behind by some mistress fleeing the city when the enemy bombs had fallen in the year just past. He was not used to such little city dogs. The dogs he knew were the village beasts whose ancestors were wolves, and they were still wolves in their fierceness toward strangers. Such a dog had been in his own father's house, and when a stranger came, he had often as a boy hold back the dog by the hair of its neck, lest the beast spring at the stranger's throat. But there were not many of these dogs left now. The enemy taxgatherers and soldiers, coming to villages to rob and to rape, always killed first the dogs who sprang at them so bravely.

"Of what use are you?" Sheng now inquired of the small dog. Its large brown eyes hung out of its small face like dark glass balls, and its body quivered. When it heard Sheng's voice, it put out a paw and touched his foot delicately, then wrinkling its black nose, smelled him and shrank back. Sheng burst into loud laughter, and at that moment Mayli opened the door. She had put on an apple green robe and her hair was bound in its coil on her neck. On her finger was a ring of green jade.

"Why are you laughing at the little dog?" she asked.

"I am too strong for him," Sheng said. "He smelled me and drew back afraid."

"He is a wise little dog," Mayli said.

She came in and picked up the tiny creature and sat down with him on her knees and Sheng watched her.

"Why do you hold a dog as though it were a child?" he asked. "It is not fitting."

"Why not?" she asked. "He is clean—I washed him only yesterday."

"That also," Sheng replied. "To wash a dog as though it were a child! It makes the hair on me rise to think of it. To treat a beast as though it were human—is this decent?"

"It is a nice little dog," Mayli said fondling it. "At night it sleeps on my bed."

"Now that is the worst of all," Sheng said impatiently.

Mayli did not cease to smooth the silk smooth hair of the little dog which lay curled tightly on her knees. "You should see the foreign ladies," she said smiling, "how they love their dogs! They lead them on chains, and they put little coats on them when it's cold—"

Sheng gave a loud snort. "I know that you learned all the ways of the foreigners," he said. "But none of them all this love of a dog is the one that sickens me most."

Suddenly as he spoke he leaped up from his chair and in one instant before she had time to say what he did he seized the dog from her lap and flung it across the room and out of the door into the little pool in the middle of the court.

"Oh you—you beast, yourself!" Mayli cried and she ran into the court and took the dripping crying creature out of the water. But now she could not hold it against her silk gown, and so she cried out again for Liu Ma, and Liu Ma came running.

"Fetch a towel!" she commanded the old woman. "Look what Sheng has done—he threw my little dog into the cold water."

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