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Departure for Changsha

Mao worked desperately hard at his lessons, and by the end of the five months, he had made such progress that it was decided he should be allowed to stay.⁽¹³⁾ His classmates, who had been quite afraid of him in the beginning, adopted a more friendly attitude toward him and before long, they returned his two novels which they had hidden. Mao was surprised to discover that now he could read them much more easily than he had before.

Soon he was regarded by his companions as an authority on the history of the Three Kingdoms and the story of the Hundred Bandits. He often recounted episodes to them from his books, and they would listen to him with rapt attention.

It happens, however, that *San Kuo Chih Yen I* is not the true story of the Three Kingdoms. It is merely a highly romanticized version of the historical facts. This was something that Mao could not admit. The tale had assumed such importance in his life that any doubts cast on its veracity assumed the proportions of accusations against his own personal truthfulness. He often held heated discussions with his history teacher on this subject and with each argument he became more stubborn in the maintenance of his own personal views. He even went so far as to suggest to his schoolmates that they start a movement to get rid of the teacher. One day he went to see the Headmaster about their difference, but the more the Headmaster tried to explain the misunderstanding the more stubborn and determined Mao became. He informed his schoolmates that the Headmaster, who was deliberately protecting the teacher because they were cousins, was really not very well informed in the true history of those times. He urged them to band together to get rid of this headmaster. He even produced a petition addressed to the mayor of the city asking that the Headmaster be replaced and he urged all the students to sign it. When no one wanted to sign, Mao was furious. "You're nothing but a bunch of cowards," he yelled at them. "A lot of useless cowards!"

The little boys stood staring at him like a flock of sheep because

they were afraid of his brute strength. Only little Wang, who had become one of Mao's closest friends, plucked up courage to open his mouth. "I don't see how you can possibly know more about history than the Headmaster does," he said. "He has a degree and he's written a lot of books on history. My father is always telling me how much he knows. I don't think you know more than the Headmaster does!"

"Wang!" shouted Mao. "You don't believe me? But surely you can read my books."

"Tell me, Mao, what books?" asked little Wang.

"The *San Kuo Chih Yen I*!"

"But, Mao, hasn't the Headmaster told you that the *San Kuo Chih Yen I* is only a romantic novel? It is based on history but it is not a true account."

"But it is history, I tell you. History! It's just nonsense for you to say it's not true. Of course it's true!" he shouted. Then suddenly changing to a sneering tone of voice, "Little Wang, how clever you are! You know so many things! You must be a very great scholar like the Headmaster! Are you his nephew?"

Little Wang knew Mao was being sarcastic and he replied, "No, you know I am not his nephew!"

"Oh, then you are undoubtedly his stepson."

"Mao, why do you say such things? You know I am not his stepson."

"Why not? I say that little Wang is the stepson of Kung Chi-an, the Headmaster!"

"And I say that Mao Tse-tung is the Headmaster's grandson!"

Mao, who couldn't stand to have anyone cross him, was furious. He flew into a rage, shouting, "Traitor! Traitor!" and threw a chair at Wang, who quickly moved to one side and escaped harm.

"I'm going to report you to the Headmaster," cried little Wang.

"I'm not afraid of him," boasted Mao, "but if you do go, I warn you, I shall kill you!"

Little Wang was really frightened by this threat and now he began to cry quietly. The other boys, meanwhile, looked on without saying a word, like spectators in a theater.

Suddenly, Mao turned his attention away from Wang and toward Chang. "Little Chang, what a coward you are," he said.

"Why?" asked Chang.

"Why? You have often boasted that you were a good friend of mine, but it seems you forgot that you were my friend when Wang was arguing with me just now. Why didn't you back me up? When I threw the chair at him, if you were my friend, you would have thrown another. You are not a true and loyal friend."

"No, no, no, Mao," protested Chang. "I've always been faithful and true to you. I thought what little Wang said was right just now. That's why I didn't say anything against him. But neither did I say anything against you, who are my friend."

"Oh, so you think Wang is right, do you? Good! Now I know whose side you are on. You're a traitor, Chang, and I shall kill you. Just you watch out!"

"No, no, please, Mao! I do want to be on your side. Really I do. I shall fight little Wang any time you ask me to. I really am your true and faithful friend."

From that time Mao lost the sympathy of his teachers and his schoolmates. Even the protestations of little Chang to the effect that he was Mao's friend were no longer sincere, since they sprang from fear rather than from true feelings or sentiment.(14)

The feelings of fear and animosity which he had stirred up in the Tungshan School were so strong that Mao finally decided to leave for good. One fine day, he packed up his simple belongings and set off on foot for Changsha, the capital city.(15)