slung our bundles over the end, close to our backs; so the weight was better distributed and it seemed lighter. I had learned this trick in my former experiences as a beggar. I suggested that Mao should lead the way, but after a bit of argument, he insisted that I lead and he would follow; so we set off, I walking in front and Mao behind me. For the whole month that we were beggars, we walked in that order with but very few exceptions.

As we were going out to the street, the gatekeeper came and stared at us in astonishment. His mouth slowly opened but no words came.

I spoke to him, "Old Lu, I'm going on a journey and if letters come for me, do not forward them. I'll be back at school in a month."

He still stared at me with open mouth as if he had not heard me; so I asked, "Old Lu, do you understand what I am telling you?"

He answered as if in a daze, "Yes, Mr. Siao. Yes, yes. . . ." Several laborers in the gatekeeper's room followed us with their amazed glances and we continued on our way. They were wondering, I'm sure, what could have happened to the usually dignified teacher for him to have dressed up and gone away in such a strange manner?

But from then on, we were no longer the focus of persons' stares, because there were many, many people on the highway wearing old worn out tunics and shorts. We were right in style.

20

We Overcome Our First Obstacle

Only a few minutes' walk from the Small West Gate of Changsha City took us to the banks of the broad Siang Kiang. At this point the river is five or six hundred meters wide and we knew it was very deep because we had often seen large steamships go past. Since we could walk no further, we sat down on the grass and watched the flow of the river waters.

"How can we get across?" we asked simultaneously. There were three possibilities. First, swimming, but neither of us knew how to swim and besides, we would get our things wet if we attempted to swim and carry our bundles—so swimming was out. Second, if we

walked about half a mile up the river we could take the free ferry; but neither of us wanted to take that way out. It seemed too easy and we seemed to be evading the obstacle that way, instead of overcoming it. Third, there was a small rowboat service, but the fare was two coppers. That was very cheap and many people crossed that way, but we had not a cent. We were indeed penniless beggars.

We sat watching these small boats fill up with passengers and set off for the other side. One left about every ten minutes. We watched one particular boat cross three times and we knew that looking would not get us across. We had to act. Mao suggested that we go down and talk to the ferryman, that we tell him we had no money and ask him to take us across.

To his suggestion I replied, "I doubt that he will accept. And if he refuses, what shall we do then?"

"Well," said Mao, "I'm not afraid. I'm going to ask him." He walked resolutely down to one of the small boats tied up near us and very politely asked the boatman to take us across without paying because we had no money.

The young boatman replied very firmly and emphatically, "If you have no money, you will have to take the public ferry. It is only a few minutes' walk from here."

When Mao returned and asked what we should do next, I said, "I knew he would not take us. My idea is for us to walk down and get into the boat as if we were ordinary passengers. When he collects the fares, we'll be half way across and we can tell him then that we have no money. It's very unlikely that he will turn back and he wouldn't push us out of the boat; so we'll get across. He won't bring us back again because he'll want our space for other paying passengers. Come on, let's try it out."

We jumped up and quickly boarded one of the small boats that had just arrived from the other side. We elbowed our way ahead of the other passengers and went right up to the bow. Since there were no seats, we all stood packed together till about fourteen had boarded and the boat was full. "We're off!" shouted the boatman as he pushed against the bank with all his force with a long pole. Quickly the boat glided forward and soon we were in mid-stream.

A little girl of five or six reached out a plate to us for our fares. Each

passenger tossed in his two *t'ung yuan* and there was a continuous tang, tang, tang, as the coins fell in. When she reached us, the tang stopped. The boatman, watching, said, "Will the two distinguished looking gentlemen please pay the little girl? Two *t'ung yuan* each, please."

"I'm afraid we have no money," answered Mao. "Please will you not take us across?"

"What? No money?" asked the boatman, incredulously. "Then why did you get on this boat? I can't carry passengers without paying. Please give her the money quickly."

"Really it's quite true," I broke in, "we don't have a cent between us. Please take us across now and in a month when we return we shall pay you back double."

"How do you think I can remember you in a month's time?" he asked. "If you have no money, you could leave me one of your umbrellas."

"Oh, no," answered Mao. "We need the umbrellas on our journey. Besides, an umbrella costs fourteen *t'ung yuan* and the trip on the boat for two of us is only four!"

"But if you don't pay, you can't cross the river!" shouted the ferryman.

"Do you say we cannot cross the river?" I asked. "We are in the middle of the river now. What will you do?"

"You are robbers!" said the ferryman. "I've a good mind to turn and take you back."

At this, all the others loudly protested. They had listened with amusement to our conversation, but now they shouted, "No, no. We're in a hurry. We have paid our fare! Be quick and get us across."

Among the passengers was a kind old man who now stepped forward. "I'll contribute two *t'ung yuan* toward their fare," he said, "and the other passengers can pay the other two. We don't want to go back."

Several other passengers agreed to that, but Mao and I cried, "No, no! We do not agree. You must not pay for us!" Then I had an idea, "The boat is in the middle of the stream. The boatman can rest while we row across. That way we'll be working our way across."

But the ferryman did not agree. "I'll still be four *t'ung yuan* short, and I don't need a rest," he said. "If my best customer wants to pay

for you, why don't you let him? You're just trying to make things difficult for me! You're just plain robbers!"

By now the passengers were shouting impatiently, "Let's get moving!" and the old man assured the ferryman that when we reached the other shore, he would see that the trouble was all cleared up before he left the boat.

As soon as the other passengers were off, the ferryman pushed the boat about twenty feet from the shore lest we try to escape. Meanwhile the old man quietly offered again to pay the money for us but Mao insisted that we would return in a month and would pay the boatman at that time.

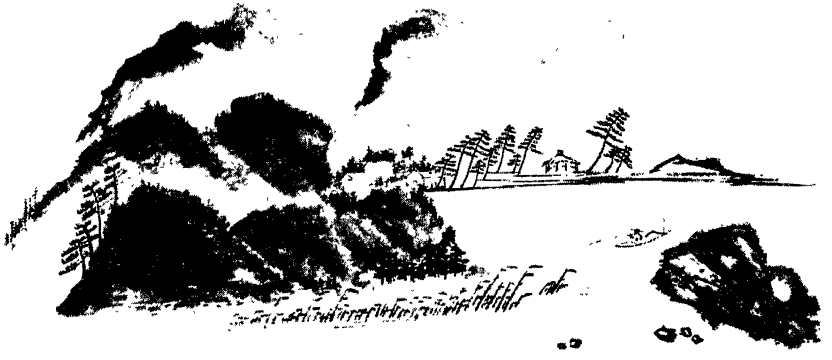
I broke in with, "Sir, if you pay the four *t'ung yuan,* it will be like giving us a slap in the face. We shall be offended."

The ferryman heard the last of our conversation and he shouted, "What's that about a slap on the face? If you don't pay up, I'll give you more than a slap!"

"If you want to fight to settle it, we're not afraid," said Mao.

By this time a number of people were waiting on the bank to take the ferry across and another little boat was already in mid-stream on its way over. The boatman realized that if the other boat got to shore first, he would lose those customers; so finally he gave us up as a bad job and he pushed to shore again, telling us in no uncertain terms exactly what he thought of us!

As soon as the boat touched shore, the old man, Mao and I jumped



ashore and, as we gave the ferryman a sweet smile, we said, "Thank you, and goodbye."

The old man went quickly on his way and we set off along the road which stretched in front of us. We didn't know where it would take us. We just knew it was a road from Changsha to the District of Ningsiang.

"It was very kind of that old man to offer to pay our fares," I said as we walked along. "And since we are beggars, we could have accepted; but that would have been too easy. We must try to do things the hard way."

"It's too bad all those people were waiting for the ferry," mused Mao. "If no one had been there, we might have had a good fight with the boatman!"

We strolled on toward Ningsiang District.

21

The Second Obstacle: Hunger

Modern motor highways were undreamed of at that time and this main road was only a meter wide, paved with slate slabs down the middle to form an uneven but relatively clean path during the wet season. On both sides of the road were fields of young rice plants. At the crossroads were stone signposts with chiseled characters, but often we didn't look at these; rather, we looked at the roads and took the one that was widest.

Though the sun was very hot and we had no hats, still we did not need to use our umbrellas to protect our shaven heads. It was our feet that felt the heat most! The slate seemed to be red hot, and though it was quite smooth, we preferred to walk on the grass at the side of the road. When we left the school, we wore heavy-soled cloth shoes; but after we crossed the river, we changed to straw sandals.

As we walked along, the long straight road ahead seemed to pull us like a magnet. The flatness became monotonous, but soon we saw a mountain ahead which we would have to climb! When the scenery changed, we were quite happy again.