

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.

But the road through the mountains grew wearisome, too, and we longed for the flatness of the plains. When we walked through the flat plains, we remembered the beauty of the mountains. Nature seemed to be familiar with this peculiarity of man and had kindly alternated the long stretches of flat plains with the beautiful mountains. Soon we lost count of the number of fields and mountains we passed on our journey.

We talked of all sorts of interesting things as we walked. Time had ceased to exist. Neither of us wore a watch and we judged the hour by the length of the sun's shadow. When the shadows began to point eastward, we judged that it must be two o'clock, and suddenly we realized that we had not eaten and that we were hungry! When we were engrossed in our talk, we had not noticed the time but now we felt real hunger pangs in our empty stomachs and the more we thought of it, the hungrier we became. Our feet, too, became hotter and more tired with every step.

Soon we came to a little eating place alongside the road where it was customary for travelers to stop and rest even though they did not expect to eat. We dropped thankfully into two seats out of the sun and it was so pleasantly cool that we were sound asleep with a breeze fanning us gently and quietly. I have no idea how long I slept, but when I awakened, Mao Tse-tung was still sound asleep. Soon, however, a big, heavy cart passed close beside us and the vibration and the noise wakened him with a start.

The woman who ran the eating place studied us curiously, no doubt thinking it strange that we should arrive so obviously tired and hot, yet buy no refreshment. She now inquired if we had had tea, but we thanked her and said we were not thirsty. It was quite true that we did not want tea; what we did want was some good solid food for we were ravenously hungry! Should we beg her for some food? She looked kind and probably would have given us a bowl of rice, but to ask her directly was too easy; so we said nothing. She must have guessed our situation for soon she brought us two cups of tea explaining that there was no charge. We gratefully gulped down the hot tea, but shortly regretted it because it just served to increase our hunger.

"Come on," said Mao. "Let's start begging. I can't wait a second

longer. I'm starved. Let's start with those farmhouses."

"The trouble is," I explained, "each family will give us only a small quantity of food and we shall have to go to four or five houses before we can satisfy our hunger. Again, some people will probably give us uncooked rice as a symbolical gift and that will be of little help to us. No, I think the best plan would be for us to find if any family of intellectuals live near here. If so, we shall pay them a visit. No doubt we will have better luck there."

Mao turned to the woman and asked, "Do you know of any family of intellectuals living near here?"

"Oh yes," she said, "about half a kilometer from here is a family called Wang. They have two sons studying in Changsha. Their neighbors are called Tsao. The head of that family is a doctor and his son, who is fifteen, is also studying medicine at home. In the hills at the back of my restaurant lives an old gentleman called Liu. He is an Imperial Doctor of Arts and a retired Prefect. He has no son, but several daughters, all married."

"Jun-chih," I cried, "Dr. Liu will be our host today! We shall direct our first attack upon him. I think the best approach would be for us to write a poem to present to him in which we tell him the purpose of our visit in symbolical language."

"Good idea!" agreed Mao. "Let's see, the first line could go: *Toiling over the mountains, following the rushing streams, we finally reach a famous district.*"

"That's good," I approved, "The second line, *With sticks of bamboo and straw sandals we come from afar to pay homage to the great scholar.* Then we could continue with, *The road we have traveled was deep in white clouds like a celestial sea.*"

"We could finish it with, *And the dew from our wet clothes soaked into our hungry bodies,*" finished Mao.

The reference to the clouds was an allusion to the fact that Liu was a scholarly hermit, living in his distant mountain retreat far from the petty struggles of humanity, while the mention of our "hungry bodies" and "long journey" seemed obvious enough.

When the poem was finished, we read it through several times, quite pleased with ourselves. "Imperial Doctor Liu ought to admire our prowess!" said Mao. "We'll soon see what sort of literary critic

he is." We read the lines again, which in Chinese really sounded very good, and both of us laughed heartily, forgetting our hunger for the moment.

Opening my bundle I took out my brush, ink, paper and envelopes, and in my very best calligraphy, I carefully wrote the poem which we both signed with our real names. On the envelope, I wrote, "To Imperial Doctor of Arts Liu." The woman, seeing us address an envelope, came to the table to ask if we were writing letters home. "There's no post office here," she explained. "You'll have to take it to Ningsiang Town to post it."

Thanking her kindly, we went out to the road, turned left and climbed the slope behind the restaurant. Soon we reached the top, and from there we saw a big white brick house at the foot of the hill. Knowing that it must be Dr. Liu's residence, we set off toward it.

The low hill back of the house was covered with trees forming a uniform green background against which the white brick house stood out clearly even from a great distance. The windows and columns at the front were red and the long white surrounding wall with its even black tiles, made one think of a walled city. To the right was the entrance gate with big trees with red blossoms on each side. Before the wall was a large pond almost covered with large green lotus leaves and exquisitely beautiful red blooms. From the distance the scene looked like a richly colored painting; but it would have required an expert artist to do it justice.

When we reached the stately residence, we saw that a red band had been painted on the polished wood of the gate, and this band bore characters printed in black. Those on the right were: "*Chao jen ch'iu yüeh*," which means "May the autumn moon shine on us," on the left: "*Hui wo ch'un feng*" or "Give me the spring breeze." We admired the beautiful calligraphy which we presumed must be Liu's, since under the old system of Imperial Examinations, calligraphy together with literature and poetry was one of the main subjects. For this reason, the *Han Ning*, the Imperial Doctors of Arts, were all master calligraphers. We hoped that Liu, as a connoisseur of calligraphy and poems, would be pleased with our efforts which we were about to present to him.

The outer gate was closed and locked. Looking through the crack,

we could see a second gate about ten meters further on which was also closed. We could see through into a large courtyard in which stood the house with its doors and windows all wide open. We banged on the outer gate three or four times with our hands and immediately some big dogs in the second court began to bark furiously. We were astonished to hear so many dogs, just a bit scared because they sounded so savage, and we wondered if they could get out. When we stopped knocking, the barking ceased. We had had no previous experience with dogs, so we stopped to talk the matter over. Our umbrellas were useless as weapons because an attacking dog would break them immediately; so Mao got two strong, hard sticks from the dry branches of the trees nearby. Each was about two yards long and as hard as steel.

These clubs gave us assurance and we banged on the gate with them. The more we banged, the louder the dogs barked. But we were not afraid now and we continued our knocking in spite of the horrible howls. After five minutes of this pounding the only result was that the dogs seemed to be getting tired and made less noise. A few minutes later, looking through the crack, we saw an old man dressed in a short tunic coming from the house. He must be Liu's servant. He came slowly across the court toward the gate, followed by half a dozen huge hounds in a variety of colors, all barking furiously. Opening the second gate, he came to the main gate before which we were standing. There he stopped and asked with a rough voice what we wanted. Speaking through the crack in the gate, Mao answered, "We have come from the capital and we have a letter for Dr. Liu."

I slipped the letter through to him, and in a kinder voice he said, "Please wait a moment," and he turned back to the house. No doubt he thought we had brought the letter all the way from Changsha, and we smiled at the thought. The dogs seemed to have realized from their master's voice that we were friends and now they stood wagging their tails in quiet welcome.

As we sat down on the stone steps to wait, all was quiet except for the singing of the birds in the trees back of the house. After waiting patiently for more than ten minutes, Mao wanted to start banging the gate again, but I told him to wait awhile, that Dr. Liu was undoubtedly admiring our poem and our calligraphy. After a further

long wait with nothing but silence, we lost our patience and we started banging on the gate once more, and the dogs started their barking. Almost at once the old man came out and opened the gate. "Please come in, masters," he said, and we followed him through the two gates into the inner court. "I was a bit late returning because my master just wakened from his afternoon sleep. He washed his face before reading the letter, but when he read it, he told me to ask you to come in immediately."

He ushered us through the middle door in the front of the house and on into a large room on the walls of which were hung many scrolls of calligraphy and paintings. We could not examine these in detail, however, because the old man hurried us on through this room and into another smaller one. There he left us. We supposed this was Dr. Liu's private room; so we remained standing.

When Liu finally came out, we saw that he was an old man of about seventy, short and thin and slightly hunch-backed. The white hairs on his head and chin were so sparse they could almost be counted. On the top of his head, he was quite bald. He wore a long, white robe and carried a white silk fan in his hand. We bowed low before him, but he stood staring at us in obvious surprise: "Why are you dressed like that? Have you had an accident? What very strange clothes! But please sit down! Sit down!"

After we were seated, Liu continued, "Did you meet robbers on the way?"

"No, we had no trouble," answered Mao.

"Where have you come from? Where are you going?" asked Liu.

"We have come from Changsha and we are going to Ningsiang Town," I replied.

"What do you do in Changsha?"

"We're students in the capital," said Mao.

"Do you perhaps study in one of the foreign schools? You can write poems, too, I see. You write very good poems, and your calligraphy is very good, also," Liu continued, studying us as before.

"Not only do we learn to write poems in college, we study classics also," I explained.

"Ah, so you study classics? What kind?"

When Mao told him that we studied the Thirteen Classics and

Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, he was very pleased. "If you study Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu whose do you consider to be the best of the commentaries?" he asked.

"The best commentary of Lao Tzu is Wang P'i's and that of Chuang Tzu is Kuo Hsiang's," I answered.

He seemed pleased with my answer, "Quite right! I agree! Where do you come from?"

"My friend Mao Tse-tung comes from Siangtan District and I come from Siangsiang, but right on the border. We really live quite near to each other."

"Siangsiang is where the famous Tseng Kuo-fan was born," Liu commented.

"Yes, my great grandfather was tutor in Tseng Kuo-fan's family," I said.

"He must have been an excellent scholar to teach in the Tseng family. Please wait a moment," he replied, rising and leaving the room.

We waited as patiently as possible under the circumstances. It was difficult to concentrate on the beautiful paintings and scrolls of exquisite calligraphy when our stomachs were rumbling with their emptiness. However, we comforted each other with the thought that he had probably gone to tell his cook to prepare a rich meal for us, and that would take some time. Surely he could not have misunderstood the meaning of our verse! That must be the explanation. That was why he was gone so long. But the more we thought of food, the hungrier we felt!

Finally Liu returned, walking toward us with a smile. He did not mention food. He simply withdrew his hands from the wide sleeves and held out a packet wrapped in red paper. He offered it smilingly, without a word. From its size I realized immediately that it was money and when I took it in my hand, by its weight I realized that it was a generous sum. We both thanked him for his kindness and said goodbye. He accompanied us to the door and handed us over to the old man who took us through the courtyard and the two gates. As soon as we got outside, we hid behind a tree and opened the packet. We had suddenly become rich! The packet contained forty copper *mei!*

No need to discuss what we should do: we hurried as fast as we could go, back to the wayside restaurant where we asked the woman to prepare us a meal as quickly as possible! Soon our rice arrived with bowls of peppered vegetables and soya beans. After we had devoured three bowls apiece, we felt satisfied. The meal had cost us four *mei* each; so we still had thirty-two *mei* left!

After a short rest we started off on our way, always taking the widest road when there was a choice. We had no idea where we were going nor what adventures might lie ahead. When the sky darkened, we decided to spend the night in a little inn by the side of the road.

After we had eaten supper, we talked of our plans for next day. Suddenly we remembered that our friend Ho Shu-heng whom we called Hu-tzu (The Moustache) lived in this district and we should visit him. I had his address in my diary and the innkeeper thought it was about seventy kilometers away. That would be just a good day's walk from the inn. Tomorrow night we should be with our Ho Hu-tzu.

22

Ho Hu-tzu's Home

Early next morning, we had a quick wash and set off for Ho Hu-tzu's home. It was to be our habit to walk ten kilometers each morning before breakfast. It was the habit in Hunan to eat a heavy meal in the morning the same as for lunch and dinner. This custom was very different from the usual breakfast of watery rice or congee, which was customary in Peking, Shanghai, Soochow, and other cities. To eat this congee in Hunan implies that one is very poor since Hunan is one of the big rice producing areas and one must be in the last stages of final misery not to be able to afford a good bowl of rice each meal.

We walked along lightheartedly because we were rich: we did not need to beg today. Also, we knew that when we arrived at our friend's home about nightfall, we would receive a generous and happy welcome! We felt almost as if we were going home.

As we walked, we talked together about the life of Fang Pi-tsung,