"Of course, if you like. The beggar life is really for only one person and for never more than two. But the two of us should get along very well."

"Good! I do want to go with you. When do we start?" (25)

"My summer vacation begins next week but I shall wait a week till you are free and then we can decide definitely on the date and complete the details."

The date was finally fixed and since the idea was mine, it was decided that we would start out from Ch’u Yi School where I lived. Mao arrived early in the morning on a beautiful summer day. He wore his old school clothes which consisted of white shorts and tunic, both very old and worn. Being a teacher, I wore the traditional long robe in the school; but for this occasion I had changed into a coarse old jacket, shorts and cloth shoes. Mao always shaved his head, soldier fashion; so the day before I had done likewise. My disguise was thus complete.

Mao had brought an old umbrella and a cloth bundle containing a change of clothes, a towel, notebook, writing brush and the ink box. The less we carried the lighter we could walk; so we had agreed to take nothing more with us. I had bought an umbrella and my bundle was the same as Mao’s with the addition of some stationery and a rhyme book, just in case I was inspired to write a poem.

I had left my money with the school manager and now I put the loose coins from my pocket into my desk. Neither of us was to take a cent on the journey, nothing but the umbrella and a bundle of clothes.

When we were all ready, I said, "Please wait for just a moment. I want to go and see the Director and tell him good-bye."

When the Director’s servant saw me, he opened his eyes wide, staring at the old, worn out garments which I wore. He hesitated, apparently wondering what to say. Finally he asked, "Mr. Siao, what is
the matter? What has happened? Have you had—have you had a
fight with someone?"

The only explanation he could think of was that I had put on these
clothes to fight a duel and that I now had come to tell the Director.
"Who would I want to fight with?" I asked. "I just want a few words
with the Director."

The Director was as surprised as his servant with my appearance.
"Mr. Siao!" he ejaculated. "How are you? What has happened? Why
are you dressed like that?"

"Nothing has happened," I answered calmly. "I'm just going on a
journey."

"Where in the world would you go in such clothes?" he asked.

"I want to get acquainted with our province; so I have decided to
travel on foot. This dress is most comfortable for walking," I explained.

"You must be very careful on the road," he continued, quite con-
cerned for my safety.

"Thank you," I replied. "I have a companion, Mao Tse-tung, who
is going with me."

"Oh! The young man who comes here to visit you so often? He was
a student of mine when I was Director of Fourth Normal. A strange
fellow! A very strange fellow. You're going with him? Two strange
fellows! Very good. But do be careful all the same."

Returning to my room from the Director's office, I came face to face
with one of my best students in the large hall. He stared at me in
open-mouthed astonishment, and then at a distance of some ten steps,
he bowed to me. As we came abreast, I asked him why he was in
school, since all the students had gone on vacation the week before.
But suddenly he became mute and he said not a word. His face turned
dark red, he dropped his head, and he dared not look at me. I un-
derstood without his speaking that he was thinking how ugly and
undignified I looked, dressed as a laborer, but he dared not ask any
questions. When I spoke again, he lowered his head still further, made
a deep bow, and walked rapidly away.

When I returned to my room, Mao and I discussed which way we
would go when we started out, to the right or left? It mattered little
since begging would be the same in either case, but there was one
difference. If we turned right, we should be outside the city and out
in open country after a ten minutes' walk. To the left, we would have
to cross a wide river, the Siang Kiang, within ten minutes.

Mao said, "You go first and I'll follow."

"I want to go left and cross the river," I said.

"Very well," he replied, "we'll go left. But why do you want to
cross the river?"

"If we turn right, it's all flat open country with no obstacles, and it
would be uninteresting. If we go left, we have to find a way to get
across the river and that will be our first obstacle."

Mao laughed loudly and said, "That's true! We're going to avoid
the easy path and look for difficulties. Good. Let's go! To the left."

When we had picked up our bundles, I locked the study door and
we were on our way. We put our umbrella over the right shoulder and
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