

**HEROES OF CHINA'S  
GREAT LEAP FORWARD**

**TWO STORIES**

**EDITED BY  
RICHARD KING**



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**CONTENTS**

Introduction

1

*A Brief Biography of Li Shuangshuang*

LI ZHUN

15

*The Story of the Criminal Li Tongzhong*

ZHANG YIGONG

63

Glossary

129

**THE STORY OF THE CRIMINAL**  
**LI TONGZHONG**

by Zhang Yigong

**1. Qingming Festival, 1979**

Why does it always have to rain at Qingming?<sup>1</sup> Fine strands of silent rain wove themselves into a silver net, enmeshing the thoughts that swirled in the mind of the District Party Secretary Tian Zhenshan.

Tian Zhenshan was riding in a jeep, traveling to a remote county in the mountains to attend a ceremony that would restore the good name of a Party branch secretary.

This Party branch secretary was a man who had left the human world nineteen years before. Over the course of those nineteen

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1. The Qingming Festival, which falls in the first week of April every year, is the day for visiting and tidying graves and remembering the dead.

years, history had brought unimaginable turmoil and played who knows how many terrible tricks! But throughout that time, Tian Zhenshan had never forgotten this man, Li Tongzhong, born in the flight from famine, indentured as a shepherd for the local landlord the year he turned ten, local militia chief at the time of Land Reform, Korean War volunteer, demobilized disabled veteran, Li Family Stockade Brigade's "peg-legged Party secretary" Li Tongzhong. This was the Li Tongzhong who had ended his life as Li Tongzhong "the Criminal Ringleader, guilty of colluding with the Hillside Inn Grain Station manager, inciting the unwitting masses, and plundering a state granary."

Now history had come to a new verdict: Li Tongzhong had committed no crime. Though there had been fierce conflict in the County and District Party Committees over the rehabilitation of Li Tongzhong, and though there had been some comrades who were still uncomfortable with the decision, the newly appointed district Party secretary had decided to attend the rehabilitation ceremony. In order to make the living wiser, in order to straighten out the affairs of the world, he wanted to go to the little mountain hamlet he had left nineteen years before to free a shackled ghost from his chains.

The jeep jolted as it sped up the mountain road. Tian Zhongshan opened the window and let the fresh mountain breeze blow the silent drizzle onto the deep wrinkles that lined his face. He closed his eyes and thought back to the extraordinary events that had unfolded nineteen years before. . . .

## 2. The spring famine

It was in the spring of the year 1960 that Party Branch Secretary Li Tongzhong became the Criminal Plunderer Li Tongzhong.

When that accursed spring came to Li Family Stockade, it brought with it a famine the like of which had seldom been seen.

Since the first day of spring, when the last pot of corn mush had been mixed with ten buckets of water in the great communal cooking vat, the 490-odd men, women, and children of Li Family Stockade had had nothing to eat but a thin gruel of sweet potatoes. At noon the "Master of the Three Halls" Uncle Gang, canteen superintendent for the three production teams, squatted in the corner of a storeroom bereft of rice and flour and secretly began to cry: "God in heaven! *Ai, ai, ai, ai* . . . open your eyes, . . . you can't be making us pick up the begging bowls again, *ai ai ai* . . ."

Crying, too, is a contagion. The sound of Uncle Gang's crying slipped out through a crack in the door that wasn't sealed tight enough; first it infected the old women who had come to the canteen bearing food bowls to be filled with gruel, then it spread to young wives whose children were complaining of hunger, and later it became a plague that even the men had no power to resist.

"Don't cry. You mustn't cry!" Li Tongzhong hurried over from the brigade office, his heavy artificial leg crunching in the snow, to explain to everyone why they weren't to cry: "If you cry too much, your eyes will be sore and your heads will spin. If you cry too much, you'll harm your health. I'm just off to check at commune headquarters again. Maybe there will be news of a grain allocation!"

The crying died down. Wordlessly, everyone stared at the Party secretary. This remarkably robust young man was himself showing the strains of hunger. His eyelids were so swollen it looked as if you could squeeze water out of them, and his cheeks were sunken into his square face. But when he set off out of the village on his seven-and-a-half-pound artificial leg, he thrust the willow staff his wife Zhang Cuiying had given him a good distance ahead; his five feet four-and-a-half-inch frame was as upright as ever in its faded army uniform, and his dark bloodshot eyes still gleamed. His posture and his expression told them all: there were still a few battles left in this military veteran.

But Li Tongzhong's heart was heavy. He was discouraged and resentful at the prospect of begging for food from "Hot-shot Secretary" Yang Wenxiu.

The Hot-shot Secretary was an exceptional literary talent and had been an elementary school teacher. Later he was promoted to a job with the Propaganda Office of the County Party Committee. He slaved away at this for five years and gradually came to the realization that someone like him, with no experience at the regional or township level, would never get any further in his career than writing Party documents to order. He was trapped in a confined space, like dough rising inside an eggshell. So in 1958 he volunteered enthusiastically to be sent to work at the grassroots level and was appointed Party secretary at Ten-mile Store People's Commune. From that point on, he had dedicated all his efforts to anticipating the wishes of his superiors and providing them, within a couple of days, with exemplary models appropriate to whatever it was they had in mind. For example, he had heard even before he went to Ten-mile Store of a debate among Party theoreticians as to whether one country could achieve communism in advance of the rest of the world, and it immediately occurred to him that this was the same kind of thinking as Lenin's proposal that socialist revolution might first be victorious in one country or a group of countries. Extrapolating from this, he came up with the theory that it would be entirely feasible for one *commune* to be the first to achieve communism. And this commune would, of course, be Ten-mile Store. Therefore, on the day after he took office, he announced to everyone that Ten-mile Store Commune would enter communism in two years. From that point on, he smoked two packs of cigarettes every day, and his eyes, so narrow that they looked as if they had been cut into his face with a knife, were forever squinting, blinking, flashing with a mystical gleam, as he figured out ways to make Ten-mile Store stay out in front in all respects, selecting

times when County Party Secretary Tian Zhenshan was not away on business to announce each item of good news to the County Party Committee.

At times of overexertion, actions can easily become distorted. The designs of his superiors—regardless of whether they made sense or not—would be extravagantly embellished once Yang Wenxiu got to work on them. During the campaign to produce iron and steel, he ordered all villages and production teams to smash cooking utensils for smelting into iron and to confiscate every metal object they could lay their hands on. Not a single door stud or door knocker was spared, and all were tipped into the numerous rustic furnaces. Li Tongzhong's wife was in a panic and prayed the whole day that they would not be ordered to smelt copper, since her husband's name Tongzhong meant "Copper Bell." When the County Party Committee called for the cultivation of High-yield Experimental Plots, Yang Wenxiu added an extra instruction to the teams: these high-yield plots were to be set up by the side of the road, to create the best possible impression. In order to manifest the dynamic spirit quoted in the papers, with "Old men surpassing the fierce Huang Zhong, young wives outclassing the woman warrior Mu Guiying,"<sup>2</sup> he had the commune members working the plots in costume; to a mighty din of drums and gongs, the old men went to the fields sporting long beards borrowed from the amateur operatic group, the women in medieval theatrical dress, brandishing banners like Mu Guiying's inscribed with the word "General."

Li Tongzhong watched all this sadly. He felt that the new commune Party secretary was putting on a show all day, a show aimed at his superiors, with the hope of winning their admiration and praise. He urged the cadres of Li Family Stockade: "We're all farmers here

2. Huang Zhong was an army commander from the Three Kingdoms period in the third century; for Mu Guiying, see note 2 to *Li Shuangshuang* above.

in Li Family Stockade, not actors; we don't want to be fooling around with stage gestures and fake weapons."

But Li Family Stockade wasn't able to escape the misfortune that accompanied the Hot-shot Party Secretary. The previous year had been dry, and the year before that the Iron and Steel Battalion hadn't come back from their work in the mountains in time for planting wheat, so the summer plantings had gone in late, and the shoots had been sparse. Then in autumn there had been a "choking drought," so neither the summer nor the autumn weather was as favorable as in the previous years. But the Hot-shot Party Secretary had led the way with the bold slogan "In Years without Rain, Three Things Won't Change," those three things being that production wouldn't change, the amount provided to the state wouldn't change, and allocations to commune members wouldn't change. The result was that two of the things that weren't going to change fell by the wayside, and it was only by enforcing the policy against concealing production that the middle one was made to come about. And it was precisely because their payment to the state didn't change that, in the very year that Ten-mile Store Commune was supposed to be entering communism, Li Tongzhong was obliged to hobble to the commune headquarters again and again to make reports to Yang Wenxiu about a spring famine that made the prospect of communism seem more than somewhat uncertain.

Every trip to the commune was a sore test of Li Tongzhong's patience. The first occasion came at a time when the commune members of Li Family Stockade were still able to eat two ounces of grain per day, and it also came as Yang Wenxiu was hanging up on the wall a certificate of commendation awarded to him by the County Party Committee and the County Management Committee for fulfilling his duties in requisitioning grain above and beyond the set quota.

"Comrade Li Tongzhong?" Yang Wenxiu's voice was stern. "Do you know what kind of people they are that are complaining about a problem with grain?"

"Yes, I do."

"Who are they?"

"The poor and lower-middle peasants."

"What's that?" Yang Wenxiu was momentarily nonplussed, his cigarette poised awkwardly in mid-air, but he quickly recovered and brought it back round. "That's the *new* middle peasants, it must be the *new, wpper*-middle peasants, comrade. You shouldn't be sitting on a bench with wealthy peasants."

Without waiting for a reply from Li Tongzhong, the Hot-shot Party Secretary hurried out of the office with Great Leaping strides.

The second occasion was when Li Family Stockade was on the verge of running out of grain, and it was also when Yang Wenxiu saw with his own eyes that the elm trees of Li Family Stockade had been stripped of their bark for food.

"Li Family Stockade's grain is a little tight," Yang Wenxiu avoided Li Tongzhong's eyes, which had dark heavy bags under them.

"But the spirit of the moment is still Opposing Rightism, opposing those who look up to their superiors with hands outstretched. It's not that I mind asking the county for some grain, I'm just concerned that the Rightist hat would not be a comfortable one to wear!"

"Then you can give the hat to me," Li Tongzhong said dourly.

"If opposing Rightism can produce some grain, or get us anything to eat, then I'm prepared to wear the Rightist hat for the next ten thousand years."

"Comrade, you mustn't let your emotions get the better of you." Yang Wenxiu was pacing back and forth. "It's not only Li Family Stockade that is short of grain. I've heard that the District Party Committee is having a meeting right now to talk about protecting the people and preserving the livestock, and Secretary Tian from

the county is taking part. When he gets back we can find out about the spirit of the meeting and then decide what to do. Your canteen vegetable plots look okay. Just hold out a bit longer."

Li Tongzhong, you have a remarkable capacity for endurance! But history proves that there are limits to how much the stomach can bear. After three days of turnip gruel, there were sounds of weeping from the commune members at the door of the public canteen. Three days earlier Li Tongzhong had sent someone to County Party Secretary Tian Zhenshan with an Emergency Report; at the suggestion of Li Family Stockade's resident scholar, the accountant Cui Wen, he had inscribed three explosive exclamation marks at the end. As yet, however, there had been no reply. Li Tongzhong had to hobble back again, his artificial leg clattering on the black stone steps up to the commune office.

"Tongzhong, you don't need to say anything." Yang Wenxiu was pushing his bike out to the gate. "Secretary Tian is back, the County Committee has given notice of a special meeting to discuss the living conditions of the commune members. Why don't you just go home and wait?"

"But what are we going to do right now?"

Yang Wenxiu was already on his bike and pedaling like the wind. He turned back and yelled: "Turnips!"

Li Tongzhong went back. As he was walking up Hero Slope, he felt dizzy, lost his footing, and tumbled into a ditch. He lay motionless in a snowdrift, too weak to pull himself up. He really wanted to just to lie there like that, lie down forever and never get up again. But then he thought of the hundreds of people waiting for him and remembered the meeting that was going on at the County Committee. Perhaps Secretary Tian had already received his Emergency Report. He swallowed a few mouthfuls of snow and struggled to his feet. When he got to the village gate at Li Family Stockade, he stood tall and told the cadres waiting for him at the gate: "Kill the ox!"

### 3. The tragedy of Spotted Leopard

"Why don't you just slaughter me! Boil me up in a pot!" In the Team Three feed yard, Old Man Li Tao held on to Spotted Leopard's halter for dear life, yelling furiously: "Whose idea is it to eat the livestock? Just eat me instead and have done with it!"

Leading the animal away, team leader Xiao Kuan replied: "Think about it, Uncle Tao—which is more important, looking after people or animals? Besides, this is a brigade decision, proposed by Brother Tongzhong!"

"Tongzhong?" Old Man Li Tao was dumbfounded. It had not occurred to him that this decision could have been made by his own crippled son. He might be head of the family, but Tongzhong outranked him in the official hierarchy. It looked as if Spotted Leopard's fate was sealed. "Okay, okay! Take him away. Take all the livestock away from the troughs! Clear the stock barn! We're done for!"

Old Man Li Tao did not have the heart to look at Spotted Leopard. He let go of the halter, sat down on a small bench facing the wall and began to cry. Not long after, he heard the sound of bellowing from behind the canteen. He thought it was Spotted Leopard calling out to him; it was like a knife piercing his heart. Everything in front of him went black, and he collapsed on to a pile of straw.

A few commune members carried Old Man Li Tao home. Dr. Wang from the brigade clinic hurried over, supporting himself with his cane. He pinched the pressure point between the old man's upper lip and nose so hard he almost drew blood; Old Man Li Tao finally opened his eyes and spluttered out the air that had stuck in his chest.

His daughter-in-law whispered: "Dad, are you okay?"

Father-in-law just sighed and said nothing.

His grandson Little Grain Bin climbed up onto the bed: "Grandpa, who made you mad?"

Grandfather just sighed and said nothing.

Dr. Wang led Tongzhong outside, his face grave: "He's famished. He can't cope with upset and anxiety. There's nothing I can do. Just let him rest!" Dr. Wang sighed as he thought about the ox and hobbled off with his cane.

Spotted Leopard was already down on the ground, its legs trussed. It bellowed plaintively, and tears the size of beans flowed from its big round knowing eyes. It looked despairingly at those around it, as if to say: "People, don't kill me! I can still till the soil, I can still pull a plough with a seven-inch blade! If you kill me, how many meals will it provide?"

Li Tongzhong could not bear to watch any longer and quietly left the slaughter yard. As he walked away, he just had to glance back. Over the raised collar of his army greatcoat, he looked at Spotted Leopard one last time. Then he pulled the padded flaps of his hat over his ears to block out the sound of its bellowing.

When Tongzhong heard that his father had collapsed, he hurried home to see him. But his dad turned away and faced the wall, ignoring Tongzhong. Tongzhong understood how much his father loved Spotted Leopard. He remembered how the year the mutual aid groups had changed into the collectives, he had taken his demobilization allowance and gone with his father to the Ten-mile Store livestock market, returning with the animal. There is a saying: "When you sell vegetables you don't sell the basket, and when you sell livestock you don't sell the halter." Tongzhong's demobilization allowance had been barely enough to buy this ox, so his father had gone to the mountain general store and picked out a length of straw rope. He joked that this was a golden halter, and with this golden halter he led the ox back from the market. As soon as he entered the village, Father had pointed to the black markings on the ox and bragged to the members of the collective: "I'm bringing home a Spotted Leopard. Look at the legs on him, they're like

four pillars!" The house was cramped, and there was nowhere to put livestock, so Father had tethered it to the crossbeam in their outer room. During the night Spotted Leopard chewed through the rope and made its way into their inner room, where it ate five pounds of seed cotton and six and half pounds of seed grain, and in the process knocked over the new pot that had contained the seed grain and smashed it to pieces. "Fine! Fine!" Father stroked his beard and boasted: "He's got a powerful appetite, so he's sure to be a powerful draft animal!"

When the time came to hand the animal over to the collective, Father got Cuiying to make one of the red silk sashes used in *yangge* song-and-dance performances into a giant rosette and attach it to the ox's horns. Father spread a new cotton quilt over the ox's back and paraded the animal proudly on a tour of the village, twisting and weaving through all sixteen alleys before finally arriving at the newly built stock barn. From then on he moved in with the ox, and there he had stayed for seven years, winter and summer. Even though several animals had joined them in the barn, Father always loved Spotted Leopard best. He would stroke the ox's back and say: "Socialism is a cart, and we can depend on him to pull us the first leg of the journey!"

Now Tongzhong stood at his father's bedside. He said shamefacedly: "Dad, Spotted Leopard was getting on a bit . . ."

"Don't say that, don't say that . . ." Father's beard quivered.

"Dad, next time there's a good harvest, I'll get you another one to take his place. . . ."

"Don't say that, don't say that . . ." Two streams of tears flowed from the corner of Father's eyes.

"Dad, what do you say?"

"What I say is . . ." Father struggled up, propping himself up on his arms, and stared fixedly at his son. He whispered: "Tell your dad the truth. . . . Does the Party still want us or not?" Father suddenly



bit down on the corner of the quilt, his scrawny shoulders shaking convulsively.

"The Party still wants us! The Party still wants us!" Tongzhong struggled to control his emotions; sadly he added: "The Party doesn't know we're hungry. . . ."

"That's okay then, that's okay." Father struggled to a sitting position. He looked compassionately at his son and said: "Then you, as Party secretary, cannot even think about lying down. No, absolutely not. Haven't you seen? The villagers are famished, they're facing starvation, and yet not one of them has left, not one of them has complained. Why? It's because they have faith in the Party! My boy, the life and death of four or five hundred people rests with you. I know that there isn't a grain of wheat in your stomach. If the hunger gets too much to bear, think about how we survived the thirty-first year of the Republic [1942]; think about your mother, who died on the road as a famine refugee. Somehow or other, you have to get the villagers through the spring. My boy, I beg you. I beg you. . . ."

Tongzhong slumped to his knees in front of his father, his eyes full of tears: "Dad, your son will remember what you say."

#### 4. No tax on bullshit

When the beef had all been weighed out, entrails and all, there were 9.3 ounces per person. In order to get the beef into the stomachs of the commune members in a fair and equitable way, the brigade decided to share out the meat household by household. Whatever cabbage, turnips, and charcoal remained in the canteen stores was divided up along with the beef that same night, thus quietly putting an end to the system of collective dining that had been in operation for more than a year. Stoves were lit in the more than 120 peasant cottages of Li Family Stockade, and boiling water bubbled in the

cook pots. Spotted Leopard, like many another old ox, was performing his final service to humanity, in more than 120 steaming pans, crocks, and cauldrons.

"I'm not eating. I can't manage it." Brigade leader Zhang Shuangxi sat cross-legged by the stove and closed his eyes as if in a trance. He pushed away the big green glazed bowl that his wife had passed to him.

His wife asked: "Who are you mad with?"

Zhang Shuangxi suddenly raised a hand and gave his face a resounding slap: "That's who I'm mad with! That's who!"

Panic-stricken, she grabbed his arm. "Oh my God! That's your own face."

"That's what I want to hit!" Zhang Shuangxi began to hit his mouth again: "I'll teach you to tell lies. I'll teach you to tell lies. . . . You falsified production figures, bringing disaster on all the villagers. . . ." This little peasant around forty years of age kept on yelling and flailing away at himself, his mouth swelling up until it looked like a kitchen scoop, and shedding tears of abject misery.

Zhang Shuangxi's thin nicotine-stained lips were not congenitally given to lying. It was in the year 1958 that he had been infected with the contagion that made brains feverish and throats itchy.

That year after the wheat harvest Zhang Shuangxi went with Tongzhong and Cui Wen to county headquarters to attend a Three Levels [brigade, commune, and county] Cadres Meeting. At that time the provincial newspaper printed a supplement (*haowai*) in red characters—Zhang Shuangxi referred to it as a "nickname" (*waihao*)—with a series of announcements about the launching of bumper-crop sputniks, places that had wheat harvests in excess of 3,700 pounds per *mu*, 5,300 pounds, and even 8,700 pounds. It proclaimed the Philosophy of the Great Leap and a Great Leap in Philosophy, according to which "The Earth Can Produce As Much As Men Dare To Demand," thus refuting in both theory and practice

the various heresies of "the conservatives," "the nay-sayers," and the "let's-work-it-out-after-the-harvest-ers."

Even though the county had achieved unprecedented levels of grain production in that summer's harvest, and come up with a plan to keep the Great Leap going by raising production levels by 51.5 percent for the coming year, the county authorities were still severely criticized at a meeting convened by the District Committee for county Party secretaries, citing the following offences: Insufficient Recognition of Human Initiative; Lagging behind the Requirements of the Current Situation in Sustaining the Momentum of the Great Leap; Underestimation of the Activism and Creative Powers of the Masses; and so on and so forth.

In the face of the criticism of the District Committee and the supplement from the Party newspaper, County Secretary Tian Zhenshan and other leading comrades from the County Committee worried that they were falling badly behind. They felt that this piece of land on which they were standing, this land that was vibrating and shaking with the sounds of gongs and drums reporting joyful news, had perhaps already arrived at the time prophesied by Old Man Marx, when "all the springs of collective wealth would gush forth." They assiduously condemned their own Rightist tendencies, and, according to the quota set by the District Committee, they announced at the Three Levels Cadre Meeting a plan to Take Their Spot by meeting quotas in the first year and Cross the River by exceeding targets in the second year.

Hot-shot Party Secretary Yang Wenxiu had long since divined the will of his superiors. In his speech to the meeting he immediately declared that Ten-mile Store Commune would exceed targets in a single year and usher in the era of communism. He quoted from what was said to be a folk ballad from Ten-mile Store, which described the happy conditions under communism. Unfortunately, since the Ministry of Culture was promoting a mass movement for

A Whole Nation of Poets, and since everyone was therefore now a poet, there was no way to authenticate the author of this particular ditty, and some of its lines had been submerged in the deluge of verse. Only these few aphorisms had been fortunate enough to survive and be transmitted by Yang Wenxiu:

We eat steamed buns, dipped in sugar,

D'you think we're doing well or not?

We wear wool, and boots of leather,

D'you think we're doing right or not?

We ride rockets, sit in spaceships,

D'you think we're doing great or not!

On the stage Tian Zhenshan nodded his head: "Great, great!"

In the audience Zhang Shuangxi whispered into Li Tongzhong's ear: "Let's get out of here and make ourselves scarce. That way when the roof gets blown down by all this hot air, we won't be crushed!"

Li Tongzhong just sat there motionless and scowling; he rolled himself a cigarette in paper from the supplement and blew out puffs of acrid smoke like an angry steam train.

When the time came for each brigade to report its production targets to the general assembly, the cadres from the various brigades all became uncharacteristically deferential, each of them declining the invitation, and none daring to fire the first shot. Yang Wenxiu knew that Zhang Shuangxi was a good speaker who could fire people up, and since this was a time when that sort of inspirational address was needed, he called upon Zhang Shuangxi to speak. However, Zhang Shuangxi put a hand over half his face and whistled out between clenched teeth: "Secretary, I got a toothache."

Yang Wenxiu said encouragingly: "We don't need you to say too much, just get to the point. Show the right attitude." Then he led the applause: "Welcome! Welcome!"

Zhang Shuangxi couldn't get out of standing up, and once he was on his feet, he had no choice in what to say. So he coughed a couple of times, and when he'd cleared his throat, he blurted out: "To make a long story short, I've had a talk with our Party secretary and our accountant. Our brigade's lagging behind—we won't Take Our Pot in a year, and if we make it to the 'basin,' it'll only be the number two basin." To gales of laughter, he put on his most earnest and serious expression and looking up at the ceiling, he said: "And when will we Cross the River? We'll wait until we've climbed up to the rim of the Pot; we'll have a smoke, take a look around, and then we'll decide."

Even those farmers who were least inclined to laugh now joined in the merriment, tears of laughter pouring down their faces. With a solemn expression, Zhang Shuangxi sat back down on his half brick and whispered to Tongzhong: "How'd I do?"

Tongzhong prodded him with his fist and said: "The honest truth, real farmer's honesty!" But Cui Wen kicked Shuangxi's foot and gestured with his mouth at the stage. Yang Wenxiu was glowering at them, his face purple with rage, looking like someone who had just inflated a pig.<sup>3</sup>

Who could have foreseen it? This was how Li Family Stockade became a typical case of Rightism. As Yang Wenxiu pointed out in his concluding speech, the struggle between Taking Their Spot and Making It to the Basin was the essential manifestation of the Struggle between Two Lines at Ten-mile Store Commune; this so-called Making It to the Basin was a palpable demonstration of

3. After the people of that region slaughter a pig, they drop the carcass in a vat of boiling water; then they take it out and make an incision in the pig's leg, and the butcher blows air into the carcass, which swells up and makes it easier to shave off the bristles and remove the internal organs. The effort of blowing up the pig leaves the butcher with a purple face and swollen neck. Footnotes 3-5 to this story contain material provided by the author in a telephone conversation in October 2006.

small-producer narrow-mindedness, the idleness of the layabout, the vacillation of the head-shaker, and the stubbornness of the conservative. Those people who were promoting the theory of Making It to the Basin had to transform their standpoint, and the first thing they would have to do would be to make a Great Leap Forward in their ideological awareness, leaping from the Basin to the Spot.

On the way home from the meeting, Zhang Shuangxi, who usually sang on the road, became mute.

Cui Wen complained: "Brother Shuangxi, why weren't you a little bit more tactful in your speech? After all, there's no tax on bullshit!"

Tongzhong said: "I'm in favor of Brother Shuangxi's speech. If the Communist Party is going to act on behalf of the people, it has to be a real stone mortar striking a real stone pestle, reality striking reality, none of that fancy stuff with words."

Shuangxi said: "In any case, from now on I'm sealing up my mouth and putting guards on my lips."

But after 1958 there were all sorts of political campaigns, which required almost daily reports on the Status of the Movement. Li Tongzhong's artificial leg wasn't as serviceable as Zhang Shuangxi's real legs, so the responsibility for making reports to the commune authorities fell like a disaster on Zhang Shuangxi's head.

At a Conference to Appraise the Patriotic Health Campaign, cadres who had just started to make a study of "public speaking strategies" spoke about achieving "cleans and shins," or else about turning "stinks" into "fragrances." Zhang Shuangxi said to himself that it was like "burning damp kindling when it was cold, you have to blow hot air on it." When it came to Zhang Shuangxi's turn to report, Yang Wenxiu glanced over at him and said: "All right, next we'll be taking a look at how things are in Li Family Stockade."

Zhang Shuangxi suppressed the anger that had built up in his stomach and decided on his own special way to get his own back.

He gave a soft cough, and using the deferential voice of a junior officer who does not want to stand in front of anyone, he humbly said, "The Health Campaign in Li Family Stockade is still lagging quite a long way behind, we don't belong in the front ranks. But with the assistance of the leadership, and by doing our best to keep up with those who are more advanced, we have been able to get the young donkey that's just started pulling the grindstone into the habit of having his teeth brushed." This really astonished the whole audience; the reports from other brigades paled in comparison. Zhang Shuangxi saw Yang Wenxiu's expression of amazement, and the way he was discreetly pulling off the cap of his pen, and he couldn't help feeling a certain pleasure, the pleasure that comes from a modest act of revenge. At the thought of a donkey shaking its head from side to side to have its teeth cleaned, he could not stop himself from chuckling. Several dozen mouths, some bearded and some beardless, all dropped open simultaneously and began roaring with laughter.

"Silence!" Yang Wenxiu rapped the table with his pen, and demanded: "How did the donkey get used to having his teeth brushed? What did you do to cultivate this excellent habit?"

This was a tricky question. But while Zhang Shuangxi had never been in the Chinese Department at university, he was not lacking in the capacity to think in images and symbols. He responded: "Early this morning I was heading to the Team Three stock barn when I bumped into Erhang's wife heading off to her family's place dragging the little jackass with white eye patches. That donkey kept on braying "*ber-hang ber-hang*" and refusing to go along with her. She flicked it with the whip, and it wouldn't move, then she whacked it with the whip handle, and it still wouldn't move. Erhang's wife asked the little donkey, 'Are you frightened? Are you scared?' The donkey shook its head. Then she asked it: 'D'you need hay? D'you want feed?' The donkey shook its head again. 'So what on earth is up with you?' Then the little donkey lifted up his chin toward Erhang's wife

and bared its teeth. Erhang's wife was so scared she dropped her bundle on the ground and screamed at the top of her voice: '*Ai yazi* Uncle Tao, your donkey's going to bite me!' The old stockman Li Tao rushed over, and when he saw the donkey baring its teeth, he said to Erhang's wife: 'Don't be afraid, sister. He isn't going to bite you, he's upset with me because I was in too much of a hurry to clean his teeth!' Old Man Li Tao led the little donkey back, and then, with a basin of clean water and a brush, both of which had been sterilized, he brushed the donkey's upper teeth three times, its lower teeth three times, and its gums three times. Only when he'd given them enough of a brushing—three times three makes nine times, this precise number—did Li Tao hand over the halter to Erhang's wife. Then he gave the donkey a slap on the rump and said: 'Off you go.' The little donkey snorted and headed off obediently with Erhang's wife, skipping and frisking all the way." Zhang Shuangxi wiped away the beads of sweat that had formed on his nose as a result of the intensity of his creative processes, and gestured toward Yang Wenxiu: "That's how it happened!"

Yang Wenxiu scribbled all of this down in his notebook, and asked: "What are the benefits of tooth cleaning for livestock?"

To this, Zhang Shuangxi applied logic and replied: "It prevents mouth ulcers and itchy tongue."

Zhang Shuangxi's report proved to be a great success. In a state of fear and trepidation he received from Yang Wenxiu an embroidered banner inscribed: "Public Health Vanguard." But as soon as he left the gates of the commune headquarters, he tucked it into his shirt. When he got home he stuffed it into a hole in the wall, and never told anyone about it.

From this point on, whenever reports were being delivered on the developments in the situation of any political campaign, it only needed Yang Wenxiu to be present, and whether it was by means of Pavlov's theories of the conditioned reflex or Newton's law of

inertia, the desired outcomes would be authenticated every time from the mouth of Zhang Shuangxi. For example, in his report on the campaign to stamp out illiteracy, he said that in Li Family Stockade there was an old couple in their seventies who didn't feel sleepy at night, so the old man would write characters on his wife's back and teach them to her, going on like this until the second cockcrow. When reporting on the campaign to Eradicate the Four Pests, he told of how the cats in Li Family Stockade were mewling plaintively because there were no more mice for them to eat. However, in the wiping out of sparrows, success had been less than total: there had been one nest underneath the eaves of the former ancestral hall that had slipped through the net, and when he went up there with a flashlight to take the eggs out of the nest, all he got was a handful of sparrow shit! It turned out that the family had left home! They're clever little devils, those sparrows!

So Yang Wenxiu praised the transformation of Li Family Stockade on several occasions, and Little Tao, the secretary at the commune offices, was forever calling them on the phone: "Hello! Li Family Stockade? Is Shuangxi there? The commune has to write a report to the county authorities, and Secretary Yang specially assigns this responsibility to him and instructs him to supplement it with some real-life materials! Real life!"

Whenever Zhang Shuangxi had to respond to this kind of phone call, he would be spitting out saliva like someone who just swallowed a bluebottle. He said to Cui Wen: "Huh, you were right when you said there's no tax on bullshit." But he also urged Cui Wen: "Don't you dare tell Tongzhong about it. If he found out, I'd be surprised if he didn't beat me on the mouth with an old shoe!"

Then, the previous fall, Zhang Shuangxi had finally got the punishment for his bullshitting.

That was when he went to the commune's Production Verification Assembly. As soon as he went into the gate of the commune

office compound, he saw a chart on the screen wall of the building. At the top of the chart there was the picture of a rocket, and following that, in declining order, an airplane, a car, an ox cart, and a tortoise. The heading read "Comparison Chart for Autumn Production at Ten-mile Store Commune." He thought to himself: "I'm not in such great health, and if I ride in the rocket, I'm afraid my head would spin, but it's always bad luck to sit astride a tortoise." When it came time for him to report production, he didn't want to push his way to the top, or stay right down at the bottom, he just wanted to keep in line with the upper category within the middle group, most of whom were reporting an increase in total production of a 100,000 pounds, so he came home "riding the airplane."

At the news that Zhang Shuangxi had got on the "airplane," Tongzhong was furious: "Brother Shuangxi, so you've learned to talk big as well, have you? This 100,000 pounds of pancakes in the mirror, can the workers eat them?<sup>4</sup> Can the Liberation Army eat them? Party Central and Chairman Mao have told us to make real efforts, not to make hollow candy men.<sup>5</sup> This paradise that you're going on about, who's going to be living there?"

After Li Tongzhong had let off his "artillery barrage on Sangganyong Ridge,"<sup>6</sup> he rushed off to commune headquarters: "Cut our production figure down by 100,000 pounds, I'm willing to ride the tortoise." But this trip ended up taking more than ten days: there was a lock-up behind commune headquarters, and he was incarcerated there with cadres from other brigades who chose to ride the ox cart or the tortoise, condemned to spend ten days in the cell for the

4. "Pancakes in the mirror" refers to the local saying: "You can't ride a dappled horse [drawn] on a wall, and a pancake in a mirror can't satisfy hunger."

5. Making candy men is a local craft, in which the vendor makes a hollow human image out of sugar by inflating it, like blowing glass; the object is to make the largest possible figure with the least material.

6. Sangganyong Ridge was the site of a 1952 battle in the Korean War.

crime of Rightism. By the time he got back, Li Family Stockade had already overfulfilled the grain requisition quota by 100,000 pounds, under the direction of a commune work team charged with Opposing Misrepresentation of Production.

Now Zhang Zhuangxi was on the hot seat again; like a man possessed, he wept and cursed: "You stupid bastard, why did you have to take the airplane!"

### 5. Uncle Gang and his keys

How many calories are there in 9.3 ounces of meat?

Seven days after the grain ran out, Li Tongzhong accompanied Dr. Wang on a medical inspection of all the households in the village. He discovered that of the just over 490 inhabitants of Li Family Stockade, just over 490 were suffering from edema. Dr. Wang's face darkened; he rapped the ground with his cane and said to Tongzhong: "If there isn't anything to eat in the next two days, you'd better get a special group together to go and dig graves."

The last house that Li Tongzhong visited was that of Master of the Three Halls Uncle Gang. Four days earlier, after Uncle Gang had squatted weeping in the storehouse of the communal canteen, he had returned home and fallen ill. The canteen storehouse no longer had anything raw or cooked for him to concern himself with and would never again need him to be constantly opening the door, taking out raw ingredients, putting in cooked food, weighing amounts, and keeping accounts. His life had become empty and lonely, as the spiritual pillars that had supported his old bones had collapsed. He lay on the bed, feeling the weight of his bunch of keys on his hand and gazing at them intently: "Old companions, we're going to have to part. I can't take you with me. I won't need you where I'm going..."

Li Tongzhong and Dr. Wang arrived at Uncle Gang's home and couldn't help feeling sad when they saw the placard that hung over

the door, reading "Martyr's Family." Uncle Gang's only son had gone off in 1944 to fight with Commander Pi [Dingjun] and had died in the Huainai Campaign during the civil war, leaving only his parents at home. This was an old couple that deserved even more than their neighbors to live a few days without hunger!

As Li Tongzhong and Dr. Wang went into the family courtyard, they heard Uncle Gang shouting: "Hua's mother, . . . when a man dies it's like a lamp going out, why bother with funeral clothes? . . . If you really care for me, . . . just toss me a clump of cotton wadding, and let me gnaw on it . . . gnaw on it . . ."

Hearing Uncle Gang, Dr. Wang seemed to go weak and limp; he slumped down on the stone used for beating cloth beneath the heaven tree in the courtyard and said: "I can't bear to look at this patient, I can't bear it, it's too painful to watch. . . ."

Li Tongzhong went in alone. Aunt Gang was in the process of making funeral clothes for her husband out of cotton sacks. When she saw Tongzhong, she began to cry. She brought over a stool for him to sit on and said: "Uncle's not doing well just now. He says he's lived more than sixty years, and that's enough for him. There's nothing much I'd ask for. I just think that he grew crops all his life and was in charge of the canteen for one year, if he could just have a morsel of food to chew on before he passes on. . . ."

Uncle Gang heard this from the inner room and scolded his wife: "Did you ask Tongzhong if he'd had anything to eat? Tongzhong, don't listen to her nonsense, . . . come in, I'd like to see you one more time."

Li Tongzhong went into the inner room, sat down by the bed, and took Uncle Gang's hand: "Uncle, I've managed things badly. It's my fault that you're suffering this injustice. . . ."

"I don't blame you, my boy, I don't blame you." Uncle Gang looked fondly at Tongzhong. He took the bunch of keys from his waistband and held them out: "The Party branch . . . the masses put

their trust in me . . . and let me run the canteen for a year and seven months . . . and eight days. I've never been much use, I can only open the door, close the door . . . I can't do anything much . . . can't take any of the burden from you. In the future, when there's grain again, choose someone responsible . . . give him the keys." Uncle Gang's lip quivered, and his hand trembled, as he pressed the keys into Tongzhong's hand.

Tongzhong returned the keys to Uncle Gang: "Uncle, whatever you do, you've got to get yourself through the next few days. The Party branch has written a letter to Secretary Tian—he's the one that came to us as Commissar Tian during Land Reform—and Secretary Yang from the commune will be back soon from a meeting at county headquarters. I reckon they'll be sending us grain. I'm giving the keys back to you to look after."

Then Dr. Wang pushed in through the door with a bottle of cod-liver-oil pills in his hand, and said to Uncle Gang: "Brother, this is some Western medicine that my nephew brought back from Hubei; according to Western medical thinking this is, um, nutritional, if you take a few each day, it should do you a lot more good than chewing on a cotton pad." He solemnly took the stopper out of the bottle and shook out two pills, which he pushed into Uncle Gang's mouth, took a cup of water that Aunt Gang was holding out to him, and washed the pills down.

Someone shouted outside the door: "Tongzhong, Tongzhong, quickly, quickly . . ." Before the sound had died down, Cui Wen dashed into the room, panting: "Just had a call from Secretary Yang . . . wants you to go to the commune offices . . . the grain rations . . . he's found a solution!"

It was as if a sudden flash had lit up the dingy room. As Li Tongzhong strode out of the room, Uncle Gang was already being helped by his wife to a sitting position, and the bunch of keys was once more secured to his waistband.

Dr. Wang stopped tapping the ground with his cane, and drew a circle in the dirt with it instead: "This is better than any kind of medicine!" he said.

## 6. "That's Chemistry for you!"

Li Tongzhong hurried over and was received by Yang Wenxiu in a small west-facing room heated by a coal fire. Yang Wenxiu took a letter out of his notebook and glowered at Li Tongzhong. "Did you write this letter to Secretary Tian?" he asked.

"Yes." Li Tongzhong glanced at the letter and saw a line of large characters written on it in pencil: "IF SITUATION AS DESCRIBED, SHOULD RESOLVE ASAP."

"Is it true that Li Family Stockade has no grain?"

"How about this, Secretary? Li Tongzhong smiled wryly, "Go to Li Family Stockade and eat the food there, the turnip broth, just for three days, I wouldn't make you eat it any longer than that."

"No matter how great your problem may be, the commune will deal with it for you." Yang Wenxiu recalled that when Tian Zhen-shan had passed this letter on to him, he had eyed him quizzically, as if to say: Huh? So this is how you lead the way, eh, Hot-shot Yang? This had made him tense and irritated. Now he folded the letter and tucked it in his pocket. He said: "Even if you hadn't written the letter, the commune would have had to solve your problem; but you did write it, and it's up to the commune to deal with it just the same."

"We should solve the problem, Secretary?"

"Okay, tell me, does Li Family Stockade have corn husks and sweet-potato leaves?"

"What d'you mean?" Li Tongzhong was caught off guard.

"Sweet-potato leaves, corn husks—the layers of leaf from around the ears of corn."

Li Tongzhong thought for a moment: "Most of the corn husks

have been spread over the pig pens and mixed with manure for fertilizer, but we still have sweet-potato leaves.”

“Do you have lots of straw?”

“Straw?”

“Yes. Straw.”

“We’re not short of straw, enough for the animals to get by on until the wheat’s ripe.”

“That’s fine, then.” Yang Wenxiu looked relieved, and said to Li Tongzhong, “Come with me, I’ve got some things to show you.”

“What things are those?”

“Things to eat.”

Li Tongzhong went with Yang Wenxiu to the meeting room. There he saw the Party secretaries, the brigade leaders, and the captain chiefs from the Willow-tree Corners, Heaven-tree Flats, and Bamboo Garden brigades, all sitting around the conference table and smoking. The commune clerk, Little Tao, had taken the blinds down from the windows and pasted red paper in their place. Now she was just putting the finishing touches on the words “GOOD NEWS,” which she was writing in yellow paint with a broad brush. On the table was a row of a dozen or more white ceramic serving dishes, bearing black, brown, and dark red objects in square, oblong, or conical shapes.

Yang Wenxiu said to Li Tongzhong: “At the meeting we just had at the County Party Committee, they passed on an idea from the District Committee, calling on all communes and brigades that are short of grain to make a big push for grain substitutes. I came straight back before the meeting had ended to conduct some experiments. They’ve been highly successful, and they provide us with a way to resolve the grain shortage problem.” He pointed to the objects on the dishes and announced several foodstuffs never before seen in the world: One Bite Crisp, a cake made of flour ground from corn husks, Can’t Pull Apart noodles, made of flour ground from

sweet-potato shoots, General’s Helmet, a bun made of flour ground from straw, and others as well. He went through the substitute foods one by one, introducing the ingredients, characteristics, and merits of each, the agitations and irritations brought on by Li Tongzhong’s Emergency Report being banished from the universe by these important nutritional discoveries.

Li Tongzhong felt as if miracles were occurring before his eyes, but his Rightist ideology caused him to have some slight doubts about those miracles, so he asked: “Are these really made with sweet-potato leaves and corn husks?”

“You don’t believe me?” Yang Wenxiu picked up a One Bite Crisp, held it up to Li Tongzhong’s mouth, and said: “Let me invite you to a meal, no grain ration coupons required. The great thing about it is that no ration coupons are needed.”

Li Tongzhong broke off a piece and savored it carefully. His sense of smell told him that, though it was a bit sour, it didn’t taste that odd: his sense of touch told him that, though it was a bit on the brittle side, it should still be possible to swallow it; his sense of hearing told him that it crackled when you bit into it, but it was made of corn husks, after all, and you couldn’t expect it to be as good as standard-grade flour.<sup>7</sup> He felt annoyed with himself for chopping up the corn husks to put in the pig pens.

At Yang Wenxiu’s instruction, Li Tongzhong sampled each of the substitute foodstuffs. He felt that the taste of the Can’t Pull Apart noodles was close to ones made with real wheat, and he secretly congratulated the three brigades for keeping their sweet-potato leaves.

“Comrade Tongzhong,” Yang Wenxiu said sternly: “The only solution for Li Family Stockade is to go in for substitute foods in

7. Literally 8–5 flour, prepared by a process in which 100 pounds of grain produces 85 of flour, the remainder being chaff.



a big way. If you seize this opportunity, a losing chess game will be converted to a winning one." Noting that Li Tongzhong's face was still clouded with doubt, he added: "There's no mystery to it: boil up the corn husks or the sweet-potato leaves, mash them, soak them, evaporate the water off, bring about a chemical change and there you are." Finally his voice turned more serious still: "The spirit of the moment is still Opposing Rightism, and we must absolutely reject the kind of lazy and cowardly thinking that feels that there is nothing that can be done to deal with the problem of grain shortage and speedily set in motion a mass movement to produce lots of substitute foods. Tongzhong, facts prove that Opposing Rightism can produce grain! It can produce food! It's a marvel!"

Li Tongzhong didn't catch the profundity of this last remark, so captivated was he by these extraordinary substitute foods. He made a request: "The best thing would be for one of the advanced brigades to send someone to Li Family Stockade, so we can all get to eat this One Bite Crisp tomorrow."

Yang Wenxiu gestured to the Party secretary of Willow-tree Corners: "Shitou, I'll leave this to you."

Liu Shitou and Li Tongzhong were old friends. The previous fall, both of them had ridden the tortoise together and served time in the commune lock-up. Liu Shitou was all agreement: "No problem, I promise you'll be able to do it as soon as I teach you."

"So let's get down to details right now." Li Tongzhong led Liu Shitou out of the meeting room and into the Party secretary's office. He pulled out his notebook, twisted the top off his fountain pen, and said: "We've got lots of sweet-potato leaves in our brigade. Tell me how we can make noodles out of them."

Liu Shitou stared at him: "How'd you make noodles? You use a starch mixture."

"You can make a starch mix out of sweet-potato leaves?"

"Why not? Everyone's fooling everyone else these days. You

can't only make noodles out of sweet-potato leaves, you can make meatballs with pig's bristles as well. That's Chemistry for you!"

Li Tongzhong felt as though a ladle of cold water had been dumped on his head, but he hadn't lost hope completely. "How about the One Bite Crisp?" he asked.

"They mixed in cornstarch fifty-fifty."

"And the General's Helmet?"

"There's no nourishment in it at all. All you're doing is wasting animal feed."

All hope was gone in an instant, like a puff of smoke. Li Tongzhong came resentfully to a halt, feeling that he'd been made a fool of. Suddenly he thought back to the time when he'd collapsed on the road when he was fleeing the famines, and when he came round, someone was tickling his nose with a stalk of grass, making him sneeze three times. . . .

"Does Secretary Yang know about this?"

"Who'd dare to let him know?"

"Have you learned to deceive people too, Brother Shitou?"

"If we don't deceive him, he'll chew us out; deceive him a little and he stays happy. What else can we do?"

"Shitou, our Communist Party can't act so irresponsibly."

Liu Shitou looked up into Li Tongzhong's eyes: "Look at me, brother, look at me, do I look like the sort of person who would tell people lies? . . . But I was born in the year of the rat, and my mother tells me I've always been timid. When I was fifteen, my brother and sister had to hold me up before I would dare to look at a dead toad. Ever since you and I were in the commune lock-up last year, I've had palpitations, my heart goes thump-thump-thump every time I see Secretary Yang. It's like someone banging on a drum. Haven't you heard what they say: 'I can take hardship, exhaustion as well, but I'm just terrified of the commune cell.' I've been scared silly by Anti-rightism!"

Li Tongzhong pulled down the earflaps on his cap. He didn't want to hear any more of this. He felt like crying, but in the end he didn't cry.

From outside the gate of the commune came the clamor of *suona* reed pipes and gongs. Yang Wenxiu and the cadres from the Heaven-tree Flats and Bamboo Garden brigades, and some musicians from Ten-mile Store, were standing on a trailer pulled by a Soviet-made tractor, heading off to the County Committee offices with their miracle foods to give them the good news.

Suddenly Li Tongzhong grabbed Liu Shitou by the jacket, shoved him and said: "Chase after them, Brother Shitou, get hold of them, get down on the ground and kowtow to them, and say let's all change, I'll never tell lies again, and you never force me to tell lies again, I beg you, I beg you, for the sake of the venerable Chairman Mao, let's change, let's change!"

Liu Shitou stared in horror at Li Tongzhong, then suddenly he slumped down, held his face in his hands and wept.

### 7. Blood-red fingerprints

Was he just going to head home and take his despair to Li Family Stockade? Li Tongzhong prowled back and forth in the snow in front of the commune office gates like a furious but exhausted lion. He could see more than 400 pairs of eyes gone yellow with starvation, gazing fixedly at the road leading southeast to market, waiting for their peg-legged Party secretary to come along that road with food for them, and their peg-legged Party secretary would have to tell them: "Villagers, we just have to put up with the famine because I'm too stupid to understand Chemistry. . . ."

Li Tongzhong, after your commune members haven't had any grain at all for seven whole days, what are you going to do to save them from death? Can you make wheat seedlings grow overnight,

ripen in the morning, and bear grain before noon? Can you make the 100,000 pounds of grain that were taken away when they were Opposing Concealing Production grow legs and walk back to Li Family Stockade? Can you tell the commune members that the experience of the thirty-first year of the Republic [1942] proves that the sweet white soil of Trouser-crotch Gully on North Mountain can be used as flour to make food?<sup>8</sup> If not, you have to harden your heart and tell them, villagers, friends, pity me, on my one leg I'm not up to the job, I can't carry this burden, everyone take up your beggar's staff, and come up with a way to survive. Then you can put your disability certificate in a glass frame, hang it on a bamboo pole, and take your wife and child to the veterans' sanatorium to beg for a bowl of food.

No, you can't, you can't. If there was no cold and famine in the world, what need would there be for a Communist Party? Communist Party member Li Tongzhong, you crossed over the Yalu River to fight the enemy and came back with one leg missing. Surely that wasn't so you could turn tail and abandon your villagers just when they need you most? Party Secretary Li Tongzhong, how many chances like today's will you have in your life to examine your loyalty to the people, to test what kind of a Party member you are!

A fire blazed in Li Tongzhong's chest. There was only one road for him to take, and it would bring serious consequences for him. Could he make it through? He didn't know. But he swung himself around and strode off in the direction of the grain station at Hillside Inn at the foot of West Mountain.

At the grain station, a middle-aged man with one arm was up a ladder, a broom handle tucked under his arm, wielding the brush

8. The author explains that sweet white soil is a soil found in that region which is fine in texture, pale colored, and slightly sweet to the taste. In earlier famines people had tried to eat it, with fatal results.

with his one hand, sweeping the snow off the roof of the building. His movements were so adept that it looked as if sweeping had always been a one-handed job, for which only the left hand was required.

This was Li Tongzhong's former comrade-in-arms Zhu Laoqing, the person in charge of the granary. In the battle of Daesoodong in the Korean War, when they wiped out the 38th Battalion of the American Second Division, one of them lost an arm and the other a leg. The one who had lost a leg bound the wound of the one whose arm was gone, and the one with one arm carried the one with one leg on his back to the medical station. Later they had come back home together, gone into the veterans' sanatorium, and then, because neither of them could stand a life where they were clothed and fed and did no work, one had been demobilized to work in agriculture, and the other transferred to the grain station.

"Hello there, Quartermaster." Li Tongzhong stood at the bottom of the ladder and called up, using the military title.

From the top of the ladder, a sallow face covered with stubble turned to him: "Oh, it's you, Second Platoon Leader, what wind blows you here?"

"Reporting, Quartermaster, I've come to beg for food." Li Tongzhong's expression was serious, with no indication that he was making a joke.

"What's that you're saying?"

"I said I want to borrow some grain."

"What's the big deal? Go ahead and borrow some!" Zhu Laoqing shook his head and came down the ladder. He noticed that Li Tongzhong seemed to be deathly ill, except for the fact that his eyes were gleaming with the brightness of fire. "Tongzhong, your old brother Zhu is aware of how tight food is in the villages. Well, for better or for worse I'm still an army officer, with four pockets on my jacket, and I'm guaranteed twenty-nine pounds of grain a month even in floods and droughts. Let's share a cornmeal bun together.

What'd you say? Go on, borrow some!" Speaking slowly, he led Tongzhong into the room that served as his office and his home, walked slowly over to a cupboard by the coal fire, took out half a bag of flour, put it on the table, and in a voice that sounded like a command, said "Weigh it and take it away!"

Li Tongzhong pushed the bag away. "That's not enough. What I mean is, I want to borrow from the granary, 50,000 pounds."

Zhu Laoqing stood up with a jolt, as though he'd burned his backside, and stared in shock at Tongzhong. "What did you say?"

"Lend me 50,000 pounds of grain from your granary." Every word was like a grenade exploding.

Zhu Laoqing sat back down on the chair with a thump. He realized that there was nothing wrong with his ears. Making sure the door was closed, he said: "Tongzhong, are you completely crazy? We're not allowed to do that here!"

"I know." Li Tongzhong threw his hat down on the table. "Old Zhu, there are more than 490 people in Li Family Stockade, and they've had no grain for seven days. All that's keeping them alive is turnip gruel. The Party gave those 400-plus people to me to look after, and I can't just watch them all starve to death!"

"Oh! . . ." Zhu Laoqing gazed dumbstruck at Li Tongzhong.

"If the people of Li Family Stockade were all idlers who had let their land go uncultivated, then I would take them all, more than 490 of them, sit them on the ridge of West Mountain and tell them to open their mouths and eat the northwest wind, and it would serve them right! But the people of Li Family Stockade are the kind who can endure hardship and exhaustion; all of them have calluses on their hands the size of copper cash, and who is there that didn't get up early and work till dark in the Great Leap Forward? They cared for those crops the same way that mothers spoil their daughters. I'm not bragging when I say that from Land Reform to today, the villagers have been singleminded in their pursuit of socialism, pouring

out their sweat, every step they took leaving a deep imprint. They transformed a mountainous outpost into a food basket, and every year they drove great carts to deliver millions of pounds of grain to your granary. Even last year, when the harvest was poor, everyone still wanted to sell grain to the state, and all of it top-quality Bima Number One.<sup>9</sup> But someone got too greedy when they were Opposing Concealing Production and took away our subsistence food grain as well." Li Tongzhong stood up abruptly, pointed through the window to the granary, and said loudly: "Here it is, it's right there, Li Family Stockade's food grain is stored there!"

"Oh!" . . . Zhu Laoqing exclaimed softly, his eyes on the granary.

"When we were at war with the Japanese, then with Chiang [Kai-shek], then with the Americans in Korea, the villagers led poor lads like the two of us on horseback with flowers on our chests and gave us to the Party, to go off and fight the reactionaries, and we came back, but there were many fine comrades who couldn't come back. Now I see those men's parents lying on their beds, saying just bring me a wad of cotton so I can gnaw on it . . . gnaw on it . . ." Li Tongzhong made a choking sound he couldn't hold back, but he quickly took control of himself and fixed his eyes on Zhu Laoqing: "What do you say, Old Zhu, will you lend it to me?"

Zhu Laoqing replied expressionlessly: "No!" But somehow two tears coursed down the side his nose and hung from his beard. His voice remained without emotion: "This grain belongs to the state. Protecting it is like protecting my own life, and it is my duty"

"Old Zhu, give me a rope."

"What for?"

"I'm going to tie you up!"

9. Bima Number One was a strain of wheat developed in the 1950s by Chinese scientists.

The two old comrades-in-arms confronted each other, glowering menacingly. Flames, lethal flames, glinted and leaped in those black eyes. "Old Zhu, it's not grain I want, it's the Party's spirit of loving the people, it's the deep feelings of the Party and the people being like fish and water, it's the Party's traditions of being honest with the people and not telling them lies. The people who grew the crops think about these things, they talk about them, they're waiting for them, longing for them, so that their eyes are blood-shot from looking, but you . . ." Everything in front of Li Tongzhong went black, he felt as if the earth and heavens were spinning, and his erect figure toppled toward the ground. Zhu Laoqing hurried over to catch him, put his arm tightly round him, calling out "Second Platoon Commander!"

The one with only one arm helped the one with only one leg over to the bed. The one with one leg made a supreme effort to open his eyes, his lips trembled and he said weakly but insistently: "Lend it to me, I'll pay you back, I'll pay you back . . ."

Zhu Laoqing soaked some biscuit in boiled water and fed it to Li Tongzhong a spoonful at a time. His voice was hoarse: "Tongzhong, we'll let the authorities know how things stand, we'll go together, one short an arm, the other short a leg"

"I let them know, brother Zhu."

"What did they say?"

"The authorities say corn husks and sweet-potato leaves can turn into grain, and we should make people who have starved for seven days eat that . . . eat that Chemistry!"

Zhu Laoqing was at a loss for words. He pulled a long pipe with a jade bowl out of his pocket, sat down on his stool, and smoked one pipe after another. He felt that his heart had gone cold, and he trembled with the effort of talking. "Since I've managed this granary, there's never been the slightest thing go wrong. I've wiped out the rats the way we did with the Japs. Why? Because this is the sweat

and blood of the tillers, the lifeblood of the Party. . . . I took in the grain from you people at Li Family Stockade, millions of pounds of it, but I never knew that the people of Li Family Stockade were going hungry. . . ." Zhu Laoping wasn't particularly articulate, least of all when he was as distressed as this, and it was hard to work out what he had decided to do. "There's more than 100,000 pounds of grain in this granary, and if it hadn't been for the snow making it impossible to get through the mountains, it would all have been shipped out by now. In the West Granary there's 50,000 pounds of corn, best-quality Imperial Gold; we dried it before the snows came. This evening, when the moon has gone in, the back door to the granary will be left unlocked, and your old one-armed brother Zhu will be on duty." Suddenly he started to cough. "My lungs are no good, no good."

Li Tongzhong understood. The strength suddenly returned to his body, he rolled off the bed and said: "Brother Zhu, give me some paper, I'm going to write a Requisition Slip."

"No need to do that." Zhu Laoping shook his head, and pointed to his heart, "I'm here, I'll know"

Li Tongzhong found a piece of writing paper on the desk, took the cap off his pen, and pondered. He wanted to write about the difficulties facing Li Family Stockade, to write about his experiences all those times he had told the authorities how things were, to write about the more than a hundred people at death's door, all swollen up with edema, but there were so many things to be said he didn't know where to start. Finally, he just wrote a few lines:

*Spring shortages extremely serious, seven days without food. Commune members suffering cold and hunger. Borrowing food from grain station, matter of life and death. If breaking law, only one responsible. Relief corn to be returned next year.*

*Today borrowing exactly 50,000 lbs corn from Hillside Inn Grain Station.*

*Li Tongzhong Party Secretary, Li Family Stockade Brigade*

*Feb. 7, 1960.*

Zhu Laoping put on his reading glasses and looked at the Requisition Slip, then took his own pen out of his jacket pocket and added a stroke, changing the "one" in "only one responsible" to "two." Then underneath Li Tongzhong's signature, he added in large clear printing:

*Communist Party member Zhu Laoping, Hillside Inn Grain Station*

He thought for a moment, as if he had missed something, then solemnly opened his tin of chop ink, pressed his finger into the paste, and made a blood-red fingerprint on the page beneath his signature.

Li Tongzhong looked gratefully at his old comrade-in-arms, then without a word bit into his index finger.

"Tongzhong, what are you . . ."

"I'll . . . I'll use this."

Li Tongzhong made his imprint in his own blood with his index finger.

"See you at eleven o'clock tonight." Zhu Laoping pushed two packages of biscuit into the pocket of Li Tongzhong's overcoat.

## 8. "Daren't eat it!"

After dusk Li Tongzhong returned to Li Family Stockade. By the time he had notified each of the teams to ready the carts, and the manager of the mill to get ready to start grinding grain, lamps were lit in every house in the village. It was as if the good news had grown wings, getting round the village in an instant: "There's to be an allocation of grain!"

"Auntie! Auntie!" Li Tongzhong shouted, reaching over a broken-down section of courtyard wall and pressing two packages into

Aunt Gang's hand. He said: "Tell Uncle he can chew on these first, and he'll be able to eat a proper meal before too long." Before Aunt Gang had a chance to see what it was he had given her, Tongzhong had already turned round and was walking back toward brigade headquarters.

Either the biscuits or the news of a grain allocation pulled Uncle Gang back from death's door. "Don't cry," he told his wife, "I'm not done this time. I reckon us old folks have still got another ten years to go." He groped his way off the bed, and seeing the lantern of the brigade headquarters next door was lit, helped himself along with his cane, and, ignoring his wife's attempts to restrain him, took hold of the keys tied to his waistband. "I'm going to listen in on the meeting," he said. "As long as I am alive, I must do what I can to serve the commune members." With that, he hobbled out of the door.

A meeting was underway at brigade headquarters. Uncle Gang quietly sat himself down on the stump of a scholar tree outside the door, just in time to catch Tongzhong talking about the process by which he had "borrowed" grain. The brigade cadres were dumbfounded, and Uncle Gang outside was dumbfounded as well. When he thought about where the grain had come from, and when he thought how tough things had been for Li Tongzhong as Party secretary, his nose tingled and he couldn't stop himself from crying.

Cui Wen stuck his head around the partially open door and asked, "Who's there?"

"It's me." Uncle Gang told himself off for disturbing the Brigade Committee members. He gripped his cane and tried to stand up, but the energy he had felt when he came over was gone.

Cui Wen held him up and said: "Come inside. What's the point of suffering out here all by yourself?"

Uncle Gang wiped his tears and said: "I think that being human is always difficult."

People helped Uncle Laogang over to the cot by the phone

where Cui Wen usually slept. Then they all took their own places and fell silent.

Uncle Gang was the one to break the silence: "Tongzhong, even if it means starving to death, we mustn't eat that grain. . . . We've never done anything illegal here at Li Family Stockade. . . . Some of you are in the Party, some of you are in the Youth League. . . . and even those who aren't in the Party or the Youth League. . . . we're also the grassroots masses of the Communist Party. . . . even if we're starving to death we can't touch public stores." Uncle Gang looked at everyone and added: "In 'fifty-one, when Chairman Mao in Beijing caught sight of how thin our clothes were, he was afraid we were going to freeze. . . . so when winter came we were issued warm clothing. . . . I had these padded trousers given to me by Secretary Tian from the County Party Committee as he is now." He prodded his padded trousers with a finger and said: "These very ones, these very ones. . . . when I'm so hungry I'm going crazy, I look at these padded trousers and I think to myself. . . . Chairman Mao didn't let us freeze. . . . he won't let us starve. . . . maybe it's like when there was a gale a couple of years back and the phone line was cut off. . . . those above are cut off from those below. . . . but if we wait a couple of days, and a couple of days more. . . . until the lines are connected again. . . ."

In places where the lamplight didn't reach, there were people sobbing and others blowing their noses.

"So let's hold off for a couple of days." Li Huangnian, the leader of Team One, knocked his pipe against the sole of his shoe, and said: "We can't make Tongzhong take on this big a responsibility for us."

"Let me speak." The voice was that of Zhang Shangxi. For days he had felt ashamed to meet the other villagers, he had hidden away at home, and when there were meetings he would crouch in the shadows. But now he stood up in the corner, and said: "Uncle Gang, Brother Huangnian, let's go and bring the grain back while we've still got the strength to do it. If we wait a couple more days, I'm afraid we

might not be capable of carrying the grain back even if they said we could have it. If just one of the 490-odd people dies of hunger, that'll be a crime that we'll never atone for as long as we live. If something bad happens to Tongzhong, then I'll . . ." He raised his hand and paused for a moment, wheezing out a breath that smelt like he'd eaten raw onions, before continuing in a hoarse voice: "Then if it means being shut in a dark cell, going on trial, being sent to labor camp, or some hardship even greater than that, I, Zhang Shuangxi, will take his place!"

From outside the window came a shout: "Uncle Huangnian, our animals won't be any use, they're just lying there and they can't get up." The voice was the Team One carter, Erleng.

"Listen to that, Uncle Huangnian." The accountant Cui Wen had already decided on a course of action. "It's not just the people that can't wait, the animals can't wait either. I think we have to eat that grain, and if the sky falls, it's up to us in the Brigade Committee to take its weight."

The other members of the Brigade Committee stood up, and said: "That's how it is."

Finally, Li Tongzhong spoke up: "Uncle Gang, I admit my guilt, and ask you to forgive me for this crime. If we borrow some grain now, we'll save people and livestock. In the future we can contribute more grain to support the state, and maybe we can atone for my crime. Just concentrate on getting ready, we'll assemble in a while outside West Gate." After a moment's thought, he added: "It's okay if I'm the only one that goes from the brigade office; Brother Shuangxi, Brother Cui Wen, you stay in the village and look after things here."

The meeting dispersed. With feelings of nervousness mixed with those of relief, the people left the brigade office. In one of the houses, a silhouette appeared on the window paper, and a sobbing voice called: "Dad, wake up . . . wake up, the grain is coming, we'll be saved!"

## 9. In the feed barn

In the Team Three feed barn, Old Man Li Tao had already entrusted two mules and four additional draught animals to the carter. He was filled with joy as he announced to his faithful servants who were tied up by the trough: "The grain allocation is coming. You've made it through! You've made it!"

Tongzhong, Xiao Kuan, and the Team One carter Erleng pushed the cotton curtain aside and walked in. Xiao Kuan winked at Tongzhong and said: "Uncle Tao, Look! The commune members from Team One have come to learn the scriptures from you!"

Old Man Li Tao looked around from where he stood by the trough and said: "Huh! You're here to learn the scriptures when you haven't even had a decent meal yet?" He was more than a little distrustful of the recent rage for "learning scriptures."

Erleng said, "Over in Team One we've watched the way you've kept your animals strong and healthy in the famine, so you can still hitch them up to big carts, and we can't work out what kind of magic you're using. Our team's animals aren't in good shape. We can only put together a team to pull one cart. They all told me to ask you, Uncle Tao, what are you feeding your animals?"

"What am I feeding them?" Old man Li Tao's heart felt as happy as if he were being cooled by a fan in the heat of summer. "Livestock can't speak. They have to rely totally on man to worry about them." He looked at his son and Xiao Kuan: "To tell the truth, there's a secret I kept from you cadres. After autumn when I saw that there was a shortage of grain, I saved a few handfuls of feed each day." He lifted up a pile of straw to reveal a few cloth sacks. "Here it is . . . even though this group of animals hasn't had enough feed, they still haven't missed a meal. You want to know about the scriptures? There they are."

Xiao Kuan said, "Hm, so you've kept this secret from brother Tongzhong?"

Li Tao glanced at his son and said: "He was even willing to eat the livestock, you think he'd let me keep the feed without eating it?" As he thought of Spotted Leopard, and grieved that the animal had not made it to today, he began to feel sad again. "But I can't blame you. I'm the one who looks after the livestock, so I'm going to care about them more than you do. Socialism is a cart; it depends on mules and horses to pull it forward!"

Moved, Li Tongzhong looked at his father, remembering that, in the days when the canteen was still able to provide everyone with a ladleful of rice porridge, the old man would wait until the woman delivering the food had left and then tip his serving of porridge into the animals' trough.

Xiao Kuan saw his chance and wheedled: "Uncle Tao, we're just getting ready to go and fetch the grain, but Team One's livestock aren't in good shape. . . ."

Li Tao's heart sank: "You mean you want to use our animals?"

Xiao Kuan said flatteringly: "Uncle Tao, our commune members say that if they can't use the animals you've been looking after, there's no way we can even think of bringing the grain back."

Old Man Li Tao sat back down on the pile of straw and thought for the length of time it would take to smoke a pipe. Finally he spoke up: "Can I just stand by and watch you not being able to fetch the grain? My animals aren't in too bad shape, this Sichuan horse and the black mule should be able to manage to pull a cart. Since you cadres have already made the decision, can a simple stockman like me get in the way?"

Before Old Man Li Tao had even finished speaking, Erleng had gone over to the trough to unhitch the animals.

"Hold on." Old man Li Tao tapped Erleng on the nose with his pipe: "Those draft animals of yours may be stiff and slow-moving, but you're not to use the whip too hard on quicker animals like mine."

"Uncle, take a look at me!" Erleng pulled his jacket open and pointed to the ribs protruding from his scrawny chest. "Even if you told me to wave the whip, I wouldn't have the strength to do it!"

Li Tao looked soberly at Erleng's eighteen protruding ribs, nine on each side, and it really was two-nines-are-eighteen pieces of reliable evidence. He unfastened the ropes tethering the animals.

After Xiao Kuan and Erleng had led the draft animals away, Old Man Li Tao called his son back: "I hear there's quite a bit of grain, but you should remember to tell the commune members that it's better to be economical when the grain comes up to the top of the bin than when it's down to the bottom of the bin; they mustn't go crazy and lose their ability to endure." The old man sized up his son lovingly: "The last few days I've felt bad for you. When the grain's been fetched. . . ." he pointed at his son's artificial leg, "you should give that thing a good rest. Even with a stick you can't be on it all day."

"Okay, Dad, when the grain's here. . . ." Tongzhong thought of something, and his expression turned sad, "This thing and I will both get a rest."

"That's right. There'll still be lots of time for you to be running around in the service of the masses." As he spoke, the father walked over to the feed trough, his hands behind his back.

### 10. A voice outside the gates

A line of carts, large and small, had formed on the road outside the West Gate of the village. The members of the Grain Transport Team, composed of core members of the militia, had each eaten two bowls of boiled turnips and cabbage, and joined the line standing beneath the gate.

Li Tongzhong laid down three rules for everyone: Number One, maintain discipline—when we get to the grain station, we take



away what's ours and not a single grain that isn't ours; Number Two, don't ride on the carts—let the animals save their energy to pull the grain; Number Three, it's the middle of the night—don't disturb the neighbors.

The convoy set off on a mountain highway that glimmered in the snow.

"Climb up, there's no strength in that leg of yours," said a voice in Tongzhong's ear. It was Zhang Shuangxi.

"You shouldn't have come," said Li Tongzhong, a little annoyed.

"I'm going with you; even if you go to the end of the earth, I'll still be with you."

"The Brigade Committee . . . we're all going with you." The voice was Cui Wen's.

By the light of the stars, Li Tongzhong saw the figures of a dozen people, huddled together as they followed him. He sighed unhappily, turned away, and set off resolutely for the grain station.

"Don't go, don't go!" From within the village gates echoed the rasping voice of the weeping Uncle Gang. He staggered through the gate, and collapsed in a snowdrift by the road, but still he clambered and crawled, crying out: "Children, come back . . . even if it means starving to death, we mustn't touch public grain. . . ."

A gust of mountain air blew away the sound of Uncle Laogang's voice.

Li Tongzhong walked on, never looking back. He felt as if there were a small worm crawling out from the corner of his eye, a single Communist Party member's tear, which he would allow to flow only when nobody could see.

On the road there were no voices, only the clip-clop of the horses' hooves.

## 11. "Chairman Mao, I beg Your forgiveness . . ."

After several days of silence, the grindstones in the three mill sheds at Li Family Stockade could be heard rumbling as they ground corn. A long line of people formed outside the grain sheds. By the terms of the overnight household grain quota, every family would first receive one day's worth of cornmeal, so that everyone in the village could get a decent meal, and then they could pick up more as more was ground.

As the grindstones rumbled, Uncle Gang was moaning. After Xiao Kuan had carried him back from outside West Gate, he had been lying on his bed, caught in a contradiction he could not resolve. What could be done? Grain obtained illegally should not be eaten; but if they didn't eat the illegally obtained grain, there were people on the verge of death by starvation. You've lived sixty years, you're just about ready to be buried, and if you shut your mouth and refuse this illegal grain, you can become a blameless and law-abiding spirit. But must all the villagers, all four or five hundred of them, follow you and fill their mouths with dirt in their graves?

But in the minds of the great majority of tillers who had gone seven days without a morsel of grain, from the point of view of the essential functioning of their digestive systems and the extreme weakness of the bodies, there was no distinction at all between grain legally or illegally obtained; you could say that both were equally efficacious. Nutritionists will confirm that corn will have the same protein, starch, and caloric content no matter if it is legally or illegally obtained.

That was the reason why, in the long line that stretched in front of the village mill sheds, faces showed a smile of relief and eyes shone with the light of life. Even Uncle Gang's perennially obedient and submissive wife had taken her place at the head of the line as a member of a martyr's family, as if she were completely unaware of Gang's principles.

Illegal grain was still life-saving grain, and this divergence of the spiritual and the material caused Uncle Gang to become more and more confused. Then Cui Wen called him from outside the door: "Uncle Gang, there isn't enough space in the mill shed to pile up the grain. We need to use the canteen storeroom, the team storekeeper needs you to unlock it right away!"

Uncle Gang had to make up his mind then and there about this illegal grain. He cleared his throat, at a loss for how to reply.

"Uncle Gang, I'll be at Team One waiting for you." Without ever coming in, Cui Wen hurried off so fast his feet barely seemed to touch the ground.

What could he do? The contradiction between the spiritual and the material had left him with no way to go. He clambered down from his bed and stood up. Then he thought of something; he fumbled for a lamp and lit it, holding it up so that it shone on the portrait of Chairman Mao on the wall. Two streams of tears ran down and splattered on the square table that he had been given at the time of Land Reform. "Chairman Mao, I beg Your forgiveness this once. . . ." Through his sobs, he continued: "Our cadres at Li Family Stockade are honest farming people. They've never stolen or plundered. . . . I've watched Tongzhong grow up. He went off and fought in Korea. He's a child that has received years of instruction from You. . . . We've really got no choice but to eat this grain. . . ." Through a fog of tears, Uncle Gang looked up at Chairman Mao smiling kindly at him. He wiped away his tears and blew out the lamp.

In the darkness of the village lane, Uncle Gang tottered along on his cane, the words "forgive . . . forgive . . ." accompanied by the clinking of keys.

## 12. Three large cook pots

With the whole village imbued with a spirit of euphoria, Li Tongzhong and his leg slept soundly and sweetly, one on the bed and the other on the floor.

Not until the grain had been brought back without incident, the rumbling of grindstones had been heard in the mill sheds, and the commune members had started to measure out the golden cornmeal and bring it home, did Li Tongzhong suddenly feel weak and exhausted. The pain in the right side of his chest that had flared up the last few days and the sores that had developed from the chafing on the stump of his leg suddenly became unbearable. He felt that he would have to have a long sleep before he would have sufficient energy to get his artificial leg to carry him to the County Police Headquarters and turn himself in.

Cuiying was as ignorant as the other commune members of the secret behind this grain. She had cheerfully gone along with the older women and young wives to pick up her rations. She took her son Grain Bin over to the stock barn for his grandfather to take care of so that her husband could get a good sleep. In the stillness of his house, the only sound was Li Tongzhong mumbling in his sleep: "It was me. . . . I am Li Tongzhong. . . ."

It was after noon by the time Li Tongzhong woke up. The house was filled with white steam redolent with the fragrance of cornmeal buns. Cuiying was sitting in front of the stove wiping her eyes.

"Cuiying, are you . . . ?"

Cuiying set some buns and a big bowl of yellow cornmeal mush on the table by the bed: "Everyone in the village except you has eaten their fill," she said, her face turned away.

"Cuiying, are you crying?"

"Eat your food." Cuiying avoided his gaze. "The coal fire wasn't

working properly, so I added some kindling, and the smoke got in my eyes."

True enough, what would be the sense in crying for a village woman who'd only just got hold of some grain and hadn't even had the time to be happy? Tongzhong picked up a bun and chewed off a few large mouthfuls. "Delicious! Delicious!" he praised her. "You're such a good cook you can make husks taste good, and this is made of best-quality cornmeal!"

Cuiying looked at him sadly, then lowered her head and wrapped another two buns in a cloth, then scraped the bottom of the cook pot with a spoon, serving out half a bowl of cornmeal mush and heading for the door.

"Cuiying, are you only taking food to Dad now?"

"He's eaten already. So's Grain Bin."

"Then where are you taking that to?"

"Don't ask. Just eat your food in peace."

"Whose family's in trouble?" Tongzhong was reaching for his artificial leg.

Cuiying came to a halt, her eyes red-rimmed. "When I went out of the village to gather firewood, I met a famine refugee. . . ."

"Famine refugee?" Tongzhong's heart sank. He understood that his wife had herself come to Li Family Stockade in the flight from famine, and her father had died of starvation in the moat around the village. He knew the hardships of the refugee. He pushed his bowl away and said: "Go on, take the food to him."

As soon as Cuiying was out of the door, Tongzhong strapped on his artificial leg.

When Tongzhong arrived at West Gate, he saw an old man with a white beard holding a cane and resting against his bedding roll, slumped against the gate. Cuiying was feeding him, a mouthful at a time. A circle of commune members surrounded the old man, pressing freshly made cornmeal buns into his battered bamboo

basket. The old man recovered, straightened up, and said: "Thank you, thank you!"

Tongzhong asked: "Grandpa, where are you from?"

"Willow Corners."

This reminded Tongzhong of Liu Shitou and his "One-bite Crisp." He came to a decision: "Don't go, Grandpa, I'll scrape together some grain and give it to you to take home."

"Thank you so much." The old man pointed beyond the gate and said: "There's more than a hundred behind me. We can't all impose on you."

Tongzhong went outside the gate. He saw a silent throng moving slowly by the foot of North Mountain. Some carrying bedding rolls, some with baskets on their arms, they headed into the bone-chilling wind along the snow-covered mountain path, moving forward, moving painfully forward.

The man at the front of the line had a bedding roll over his shoulder and a small megaphone in his hand. From time to time he would turn back, put the megaphone to his mouth and yell: "Don't get out of line! Don't get out of line!"

"Shitou!" Tongzhong called out to the leader.

Liu Shitou pretended he hadn't heard. He bowed his head and didn't look at him.

Tongzhong went up to him and pulled him to the side of the road. "You're the Party secretary," he said. "Where are you taking these people?"

Shame-faced, Li Shitou responded: "Don't call me Party secretary, just call me beggar. The Party branch decided we should leave the village and beg for food, so the Party secretary has to take the lead." He glanced at Tongzhong, then pulled the hat from his head and held it out like a begging bowl and made a bow: "Do a good deed, comrade. Do a good deed, spare us a mouthful, just a mouthful. Leave something at the bottom of the bowl for us to lick. Let us

who grow grain take a lick . . . just a lick . . . ” As Liu Shitou recited these lines, his eyes involuntarily went red.

Li Tongzhong seized the hat and rammed it back on his head: “Let’s talk seriously! You come in and shelter from the wind, and Li Family Stockade will give each of you two bowls of cornmeal mush.”

“*Ai, ai*, we daren’t eat your food!”

“Why?”

“I’ll scare us to death if we eat it!” Shitou took another glance at Tongzhong: “Your accountant’s wife is a girl from our village. She came over this morning with a couple of cornmeal buns wrapped in a cloth, and she said . . . ” Liu Shitou poked Tongzhong with his elbow: “Brother, you’ve been to war, you have courage!”

Tongzhong said: “Whatever you say, I insist on your eating the two bowls of mush!”

Shitou said: “Heaven-tree Flats and Bamboo Garden also have a hundred or two hundred people begging for food. They’ll be here in a while. Can you afford to look after us all? You may not know this, but right now, while all the commune cadres are off at a meeting in County headquarters, several thousand people from Ten-mile Store Commune alone are heading for Sleeping Dragon Ridge to hitch a ride on a train.”

Li Tongzhong’s mind was in turmoil. He thought to himself:

“The people of Li Family Stockade aren’t going to starve, but how many Willow Corners and Heaven-tree Flats can there be?”

They got back to the village gate. Li Tongzhong grasped Liu Shitou’s megaphone and announced to the famine refugees of Willow Corners: “Aunts and Uncles, you have come by our village of Li Family Stockade, and we don’t have anything much to give you, but you can shelter from the wind by our village gate, and we’ll make some pots of cornmeal mush for you to drink before you move on.” He handed the megaphone back to Liu Shitou and hobbled into the village as quickly as he could manage.

In the village lanes, farmers who had barely eaten were conferring: “Everyone can save two ounces of cornmeal, and we can give that to our neighbors who are fleeing famine!”

So three great vats were set up at the West Gate of Li Family Stockade. In the vats they cooked cornmeal porridge so thick that you couldn’t stir it with a spoon and you could pick it up with chopsticks, two big bowls per person, to send the refugee commune members of Willow Corners, Heaven-tree Flats, and Bamboo Gardens on their way.

Night fell. The cold wind that blew in fiercely through the pass blew down the snow that had accumulated on the branches, and the sky was as black as an inverted dye vat. The snow had started to fall again at some stage, huge snowflakes obscuring the mass of famine refugees.

The weather forecast on the public address loudspeaker predicted gale force north winds, with lows of minus fifteen. As he thought of the refugees converging on the little railway station, Li Tongzhong’s heart turned to ice.

### 13. How the Criminal Ringleader was apprehended

The sky was pitch black by the time Li Tongzhong returned to the village.

He had barely entered West Gate when the accountant Cui Wen rushed up to him in a state of panic and tried to push him back out of the village: “Run! Run! The police are here!”

Li Tongzhong asked calmly: “Has the cornmeal all been shared out?”

Cui Wen stuffed a small package of money and grain coupons into Li Tongzhong’s coat pocket and kept pushing him: “Don’t worry about that. Just run! I’ll go to court for you . . . ”

With some difficulty, Li Tongzhong extricated himself from Cui Wen’s grasp and hobbled on with large strides into the village.

There was a sound of footsteps, and three figures came running over.

Li Tongzhong went up to them and asked: "Comrades, are you looking for Li Tongzhong?"

"Where is he?"

"Here," Li Tongzhong pointed to himself. "He's here."

The three men were caught by surprise. They were comrades from the Crime Squad of the Public Security Bureau. They hadn't expected that this "Criminal Ringleader, inciting the plunder of state grain" would give himself up to the law so peaceably, even cordially.

In the beam of the flashlight trained on Li Tongzhong, they saw a haggard but honest face and narrowed eyes that shone with an expression of calm and amiability.

A piece of paper, like a white face devoid of expression, flashed in front of Li Tongzhong: "Here's the warrant for your arrest."

"Hands!"

Li Tongzhong dutifully held out his hands. As the hard icy metal clamped over his wrists, he said to the brigade accountant slumped limply against the village wall: "Remember to tell Brother Shuangxi to keep enough for seed grain..."

From the village lane came the sound of raised voices. Li Tongzhong frowned slightly, then gestured toward West Gate with his chin, saying to the policemen: "We can go out this way. The road is clear." He led the way to the gate.

"Don't arrest him! Don't arrest him!" Zhang Shuangxi ran up like a madman, shouting: "Take me instead! Take me instead!"

Commune members thronged out of the village lanes, forming a human tide, surging like floodwater, accompanied by the sounds of cries of alarm and tears of grief.

"We have to protect him! We have to protect him!"

"Li Family Stockade can't do without him!"

The police comrades paused in alarm, but quickly recovered

their composure and blocked the entrance to the gate. The head of the police squad shouted: "Comrade commune members, we're here under orders to make an arrest. If you want to make a protest, go to the court and report it there. Don't get out of hand! Be on your guard for bad people making trouble!"

The human flood surged on toward the gate. Grain Bin clamored onto Xiao Kuan's shoulders and shouted: "Dad! Dad!"

Li Tongzhong turned back and walked toward the crowd. The people suddenly fell silent.

"Neighbors, go home." The criminal Li Tongzhong gave his farewell speech as if he were just having a normal conversation. "Go home, all of you. It's snowing, and it's pretty cold. The comrades from Public Security are making a legal arrest. We have to respect regulations, and we don't want to make trouble for these comrades, do we? Party and Youth League members have to take the lead, members of the Brigade Committee have to take the lead, help the elderly to get home, look after yourselves, and make sure not to delay the spring plowing. I'm going to report to the authorities. Maybe I'll be back soon, maybe I'll be back for harvest in the autumn..."

People stood obediently by the gate, motionless. Tears streamed down gaunt faces.

Li Tongzhong saw his wife Cuiying staring dumbly at him, Cuiying pushed forward by the crush of people, suddenly closed her eyes and collapsed against the shoulder of Fourth Aunt Li.

"*Al, ai, ai, ai!*" Uncle Gang was sobbing, banging his head against the village wall. "God in heaven, how can this be happening? How?"

Snowflakes danced wildly in the north wind. The snow-covered roadway echoed with the *ker-chunk, ker-chunk* of a man walking on an artificial leg. Looking into the blackness where the wind was coming from, Li Tongzhong thought of the station at Sleeping Dragon Ridge, and the coldness in his heart sank to below freezing.

#### 14. The accomplice and the Party secretary

Even before Li Tongzhong turned himself in, things had started to happen.

That afternoon, when the County Grain Commission ordered the transfer of 100,000 pounds of grain from the Hillside Inn Grain Station, Zhu Laoping had loaded 50,000 pounds onto trucks and handed the Requisition Slip for the borrowed 50,000 to the director of the County Grain Commission. After that, he shaved and dressed in his faded army uniform, with the jacket buttoned up to the collar, the cap pulled down to within an inch of his eyebrows, and the end of the empty sleeve tucked into his pocket, as if he were preparing to attend an important occasion.

The Requisition Slip with its two blood-red thumbprints had been delivered into the hands of County Party Secretary Tian Zhenshan. Tian Zhenshan simply could not believe his eyes. He stared at Li Tongzhong's name, recalling the militia chief who had been among the first to join the army; recalling how, after demobilization, he had limped over to County Committee headquarters on that artificial leg to see him, and then how the news had come from Li Family Stockade of Li Tongzhong leading the way to start an agricultural cooperative and to cut through the mountains and bring water to the village. In the last couple of years, not only had he not seen Li Tongzhong, he had actually had very little to do with cadres below the commune level. What could he do? There are only 360 days in a year, and last year he had spent 294 days at meetings, and that didn't include little half-day meetings. What could he do? Party secretaries had to be in command of every aspect of work! He smiled wryly when people called him the "secretary of meetings"; it was true what they said: "Taxes under the Nationalists, meetings under the Communists." What could he do? Whenever he did manage to set aside the time for a trip down to the villages, he found himself having to

"head down in a pretty straight line, stay on highways for most of the time, look through windshields to take in the view, have your lunch at the commune HQ." Never could he have guessed that when he hadn't seen Li Tongzhong for so long, Li Tongzhong's Requisition Slip would suddenly appear before him. His mind was a blank, and in the storehouse of his memory there was only the thought that there must be some connection between the Emergency Report Li Tongzhong had sent him and this Requisition Slip. But only the day before, Yang Wenxiu had come to the County headquarters specially to report to him that the grain shortage issue in Li Family Stockade had been resolved in a satisfactory and timely fashion. He had even declined the quota set aside for "Ten-mile Store Commune from County emergency relief supplies, expressing his desire to promote the communist spirit and help those communes and brigades that were in difficulty.

"Can they really have been so lawless?" Tian Zhenshan asked the director of the County Grain Administration, waving the Requisition Slip in front of him.

"Whatever happened, the Grain Station is empty."

"Who's this Zhu Laoping? How's he behave usually?"

"Disabled veteran, left an arm behind in Korea, been in charge of the Grain Station six years, usual behavior . . . how can I describe it? . . . let me put it this way, he does a better job than people with two arms."

"Eh?"

Zhu Laoping was brought before the secretary of the County Party Committee. "Farmer in military uniform" was how Tian Zhenshan summarized his first impression of this accomplice in crime. The accomplice was standing uncomfortably before him, stiffly to attention, saluting with his left hand.

Tian Zhenshan told him to sit down, showed him the Requisition Slip and asked: "Did you and Li Tongzhong do this together?"

"People are iron and food is steel, Chief, everyone has to eat. . . ." Zhu Laoping remained stiffly at attention. "Li Family Stockade had been out of grain for seven days, Chief, that's the truth, out of grain for seven days."

"Out of grain for seven days? Is that possible?"

"Li Tongzhong wouldn't fool you, Chief. If you said to him: 'Second Platoon Leader Comrade Li Tongzhong, go over and capture Hill 250, and take control of the commanding elevation,' he'd say, 'Yesir! If you said to him: 'Second Platoon Leader Comrade Li Tongzhong, tell me a lie,' he'd say: 'Reporting, my father never taught me how.'"

Tian Zhenshan looked searchingly and admiringly at this accomplice in crime, told him again to sit down, and asked: "So you and Li Tongzhong go back a long way?"

"A long way, a long way?" Zhu Laoping continued, "Went to war together, got wounded together, came home together, wrote that slip together, Chief!"

"You're the manager of the grain station. You realize this is a criminal action?"

"Yes, Chief, I understand, but people are iron, and food is steel, . . ." Zhu Laoping was planning to offer some more profound philosophical insights, but in the end he couldn't come up with them.

The secretary of the County Committee stood up, and said, not without distress: "For a Party branch secretary and the manager of a grain store to . . . he chose a relatively restrained way to express it, . . . for them to act without authority to appropriate state grain, and in horrifyingly large quantities, this is a very grave matter! The tribunal decides that they should be arrested in accordance with the law!"

"Right, Chief, right!" Zhu Laoping stood ramrod straight and nodded his head, to show his complete agreement. When he was about to be led away, he did not forget to stand to attention and salute with his left hand.

### 15. Li Tongzhong's confession

Following a directive of the County Committee, the County Court decided to carry out the first interrogation of the Inciter to Plunder State Grain Supplies that very night. As the secretary of the County Committee himself wished to attend the interrogation, this added considerably to the gravity and confidential nature of the case.

A row of chairs was added to the interrogation room. Tian Zhenshan, the head of the Court, the presiding judge, and other judicial officers had already taken their seats. Yang Wenxiu, the major figure in the ongoing meeting of cadres at the County and Commune levels, had cut short his concluding speech on "Experience with the Pilot Project on Substitute Foodstuffs" to come and sit in on this interrogation. This case that had suddenly arisen had destroyed his feeling of infatuation with himself as the victor announcing his triumphs to his audience; he sat on a chair in a corner by the wall, in a state of bafflement and alarm.

"You saw Li Tongzhong yesterday afternoon?" Tian Zhenshan continued his conversation with Yang Wenxiu.

"Yes. He's a master of pretense; he expressed himself very satisfied, very enthusiastic, about the substitute foods. I didn't see any indication that he was planning a crime."

"What a strange man! What a strange thing for him to do!" Tian Zhenshan sighed over and over.

The interrogation was about to begin. The criminal had been brought directly from Li Family Stockade. Although the officers of the Crime Squad escorting the prisoner had shown concern for him with his artificial leg and had managed to get hold of a tractor for him to ride on for the journey across the commune, he was still utterly exhausted by the time he arrived at the court. Well before he reached the interrogation room, the sound of his slow and heavy

footsteps echoed *ker-chunk ker-chunk* on the cement floor of the long corridor.

The door of the interrogation room suddenly swung open. The criminal, erect and gaunt, his face covered in black stubble, appeared before the judges. He leaned his shoulder against the doorway, panting, his weary eyes looking around the interrogation room and lighting on the solitary chair placed before the judges' bench. Realizing that this was his place, he walked laboriously over to it; then, when he got to within a couple of feet of it, he reached out his hand and leaned on the back of the chair as he dragged his artificial leg over, shuffled his feet into position and straightened up, ready to take his seat. At that moment he caught sight of the County Committee Secretary Tian Zhenshan; surprised, he murmured "Commissar Tian?" using his title from the Land Reform era. His eyes glinting with astonishment and delight, he suddenly reached out with large hands that were manacled together and pleaded: "Commissar Tian, save the peasants!" Then his upright but emaciated body collapsed with a crash in front of the judges' bench.

The judges were taken aback by this unexpected turn of events. With a crunching of tables and chairs, the interrogator ran over to the interrogated, Tian Zhenshan's heart pounding wildly as he held the criminal close to him, bellowing: "Tongzhong! Tongzhong!"

Li Tongzhong opened his bloodshot eyes wide, and his cracked lips moved: "Commissar, go quickly . . . Sleeping Dragon Ridge railway station . . . hurry, hurry . . ." Then, as if he had completed some sacred duty, Li Tongzhong sank into a peaceful sleep.

A cold wind rattled the windows of the interrogation room, snowflakes the size of feathers swirling silently.

## 16. Sleeping Dragon Ridge station

What was happening at Sleeping Dragon Ridge? Not one of the county or commune cadres currently engaged in "foodstuff chemistry" research could explain. The County Committee decided to suspend this innovative scientific investigation for the time being. With Tian Zhenshan in front, they drove straight over to Sleeping Dragon Ridge.

Tian Zhenzhan was the first to jump out of the car when they arrived at the small station with its two waiting rooms. There he saw famine refugees crowded into the dimly lit waiting rooms, in the food stalls and the tea huts where no fires were lit, on the open platforms where the wind howled, and on either side of the tracks piled a foot high with snow, all of them waiting to hitch a ride on the train. Wrapped in quilts or covered with sheets, they huddled motionlessly as if frozen to the spot by the bitter cold, only the lamplight and the snow piled on them revealing the outline of their bodies.

Tian Zhenshan came to a halt by one of the food stalls and asked: "Neighbors, where are you going?"

They were silent, pondering, "Where *are* we going? Who knows! We'll go wherever there's something to eat, and we'll find out where that is when we're on the train."

Tian Zhenshan went over to the door of the waiting room and asked: "Neighbors, what commune are you from?"

All were silent, thinking to themselves, "If we're fleeing famine and begging for food, how can we fly the flag for our commune? It's humiliating, humiliating!"

Tian Zhenshan stood under the lamplight at the entrance to the station and shouted: "Commune member comrades, wake up! We're cadres from the county and the communes; we've come here to see you . . ."

The silent crowd began to come to life. At the door of a small



food stall, Liu Shitou was sitting on an overturned basket, and he poked his head out of his quilt. When he recognized the person standing at the entrance to the station as County Committee Secretary Tian Zhenshan, he hastily pulled his neck back and wrapped himself tightly in his quilt again. But somebody pulled the quilt down a little and asked softly: "Aren't you Liu Shitou?" Liu Shitou uncovered an eye, looked out, and was shocked to see that it was Yang Wenxiu. The hand that held the corner of the quilt involuntarily lost its grip, and the quilt fell to the ground, revealing him without any cover. He hurriedly stood up and said: "Yes, Secretary Yang, it's me." Yang Wenxiu glanced at him nervously and angrily, then suddenly pushed him back down onto the basket and covered him with the quilt. "Oh, hell! How's he going to punish me now?" thought Liu Shitou to himself as he huddled motionless under the quilt, his heart pounding. He heard the crunch of footsteps coming over to him and felt more and more nervous.

"Who's this?" That was Tian Zhenshan's voice.

Yang Wenxiu cleared his throat: "I don't know him."

But just as Yang Wenxiu was speaking, Liu Shitou sprang up again like a jack-in-the-box and stood before Tian Zhenshan like an animated flour sack. From inside the quilt wrapped around him came his timid voice: "I'm Liu Shitou."

"What?" Tian Zhenshan asked Yang Wenxiu. "Liu Shitou? Liu Shitou from Willow Corners?"

Before Yang Wenxiu had a chance to respond, Liu Shitou answered: "That's me! That's me!" Feeling both nervous and proud that the County Committee secretary actually knew his illustrious surname, his esteemed given name, and his place of domicile, Liu Shitou struck his head out of the quilt and said: "Secretary Tian, I'm not trying to damage the reputation of the county, it's just that with food grain being a bit short, we've had to bring some people out so that the ones left behind can have something to eat. If we'd all stayed at home,

it would have been like two people trying to get under one quilt. If this one's covered, the other one won't be. Anyhow, we'll be back when the wheat ripens, and there'll be no delay of the summer work."

Tian Zhenshan had already thought of a painful question, but he still wanted to make sure. "Comrade Liu Shitou, weren't you having a lot of success with the substitute foods?"

"I have a confession, Secretary Tian." Liu Shitou spoke nervously, thinking that Secretary Tian was aware of the truth about the substitute foods: "I've lived to the age of forty, and I've only ever told this one lie. I know that lies can't fill your stomach, but I was scared that because we couldn't make those substitute foods I'd be guilty of Rightism again!"

Tian Zhenshan was silent in his grief, and the county and commune cadres all grieved silently with him. Only this afternoon at the conference, they had made a detailed accounting and come up with a most encouraging figure: the sweet-potato leaves and corn husks in the whole county were the equivalent of 30 million pounds of grain!

The sound of the train whistle echoed in the distance. Tian Zhenshan felt the earth shake, and he felt the foundations on which he had based all his decisions over the past two years and more shaking as well. Those figures for production increases that were precise to the third figure beyond the decimal point, those pieces of good news delivered almost daily and the deafening banging of drums and gongs in celebration, those Situation Reports that compared successes and shortcomings as "nine parts of the one and one part of the other," all of them burst like soap bubbles when subjected to the implacable test of the little station crowded with commune members fleeing from famine.

Tian Zhenshan took the small megaphone that was hanging around Liu Shitou's neck, stood on the overturned basket, and shouted: "Comrade commune members, I'm County Party Secretary Tian Zhenshan. . . . You can blame me for poor leadership, blame me for

being too remote from you, for making you come to this place to flee from famine carrying your baskets on poles through the wind and snow. . . .” Tian Zhenshan’s voice became husky. He jumped down from the basket, took a begging bowl from the hands of an old man with a white beard, and held it aloft. He went on: “Now, I ask you all to go back home. I’ll take this begging bowl back with me, I’ll hang it in the courtyard of the County Committee offices, so that we can all take a look at it, and think about how we’re going to get through to the harvest, how we’re going to get grain to feed the people who grow it.”

People stiff with cold and hunger began to move. Soft voices, sporadic but filled with hope, brought the station back to life. The old man with the white beard held on to his cane and stood up in the snow, murmuring to himself through his tears: “All right then, I’ll go, I’ll go back home. . . .”

Yang Wenxiu was squatting in the snow behind the food stall. His cigarette lit up a face full of despair and terror, twitching convulsively. He was thinking: “Two years of work, all wasted, and it’s all because of that hothead Li Tongzhong and that troublemaker Liu Shitou! . . .”

### 17. In the emergency room

In the emergency room of the county clinic, Li Tongzhong had been sleeping peacefully for three days.

On the orders of the County Committee, the county clinic was doing all it could to save the life of Li Tongzhong. Because there was no longer any concern about improper conduct on the part of the comatose criminal, the cold hard handcuffs had been removed from his wrists. But all of this was carried out on the basis of “release due to infirmity”; from a legal point of view, Li Tongzhong was still a prisoner in shackles.

Li Tongzhong, do you know what has happened in the last three days? All twenty-nine grain stations across the county have

been opened, and the grain that had not been shipped out because the mountain roads were cut off in the blizzard has been distributed to the cold and starving mountain villages. Cooking smoke is rising, and spring is on its way. But who could have foreseen this? Tian Zhenshan was dismissed from his post this afternoon and summoned to the District Committee offices for investigation and criticism. His offenses were listed in an emergency dispatch: “Contra-vening Party Discipline and State Law, Raising County Grain Distribution Quotas without Authority, Appropriating Grain Reserves, and Disrupting Purchase and Allocation.” Tian Zhenshan felt distressed and regretful, not because of the dispatch, but because he no longer had the power to alter the fates of Li Tongzhong and Zhu Laoping.

Before going to District Headquarters, Tian Zhenshan stopped by the county clinic to say his farewells to Li Tongzhong. As he came up to the bed, he saw that Li Tongzhong was sleeping soundly; perhaps he was immersed in some dream or another, because his dark eyebrows were frowning slightly, but there was still the trace of a smile around the corners of his mouth. Tian Zhenshan held one of those large hands, which was icy but firm, and called to him softly: “Tongzhong! . . .” Then he paused—what was there to say to him?

A doctor whispered to him: “He’s in a coma. He can’t hear you.”

“No, doctor!” This was from the choking voice of a young woman.

Tian Zhenshan looked over into a corner of the room and saw Cuiying and a boy sitting on a bench. He recognized her as Tongzhong’s wife and the head of a *yangge* dance troupe at the time of Land Reform. The boy was a stranger to him, but he knew those dark and stubborn eyes.

“He’s been waiting for you for three days, and calling for you.” Cuiying sobbed. He didn’t want his father or mother, he wanted you,

Commissar Tian. Say something to him, he can hear you, I know he can!"

Tian Zhenshan's heart trembled fiercely, and it was a long, long time before he could bring himself out of his grief. He said to the man who could not hear his voice: "Tongzhong, I've made you wait too long. But you have to wait longer, wait longer, the Party will certainly correct its mistakes, just wait. . . ." Tian Zhenshan suddenly felt something. He shook that icy hand and called out: "Tongzhong, Tongzhong. . ."

"Tongzhong, Tongzhong!" Shuangxi, Cui Wen, and other commune members from Li Family Stockade shouted as they burst in to the room.

The head of the clinic pushed his way through and handed Tian Zhenshan a death certificate on which was written: "Malnutrition and exhaustion leading to edema and jaundice."

Li Tongzhong had left them, left them so suddenly. He was only thirty-one, born in the year of the dragon.

The ward was filled with the wailing of the farming people. Uncle Gang beat his head against the side of the bed and berated the heavens in anguish and incomprehension: "God in Heaven, why? Why?"

Tian Zhenshan stood by Li Tongzhong's body for a long while, tears in his eyes, paying silent tribute. When he saw the child holding the artificial leg, tears pouring down onto the leg, he thought to himself: "Those of us who have both our legs, shouldn't we be walking the road a little better than we are?"

### 18. People, remember

As the jeep sped along the mountain roads, Tian Zhenshan's mind surged like floodwater:

History is a Yellow River, washing its way east. But the Yellow

River is muddy, it contains massive quantities of silt, it needs a long time to come clear. Would nineteen years be enough?

Tian Zhenshan remembered that shortly after Li Tongzhong's death—maybe it was Uncle Gang who told him—the phone line that had been cut off by the storm was restored, so that the Party Central Committee found out about this terrible famine and took forceful measures to remedy it. The District Committee halted the investigation into Tian Zhenshan and sent him off to be manager of a state farm. But the conclusion to the investigation still read: "Raising county grain distribution quotas without authority and using state grain reserves without receiving approval remains an organizational error." Tian Zhenshan had no misgivings about that. But what did sadden him was that he had heard that when people had called for the rehabilitation of Li Tongzhong, his case had been set aside, because it was a legal issue, and because Li Tongzhong was now a "person from the past." The other accused in the case, Zhu Laoping, had been released, but as to whether that was an acquittal, or merely release because he had been forced into complicity, the court declined to say. Probably because it was no longer appropriate for him to be entrusted with looking after a state granary, he was seen with his empty sleeve flapping and his long pipe with its jade mouthpiece, busy delivering food to the cadres in the County Grain Commission. As for Yang Wenxiu, he was said to be suffering from schizophrenia and sent to a sanatorium at Cockscomb Mountain to recover. Tian Zhenshan sent him a copy of the book, *How to be a Good Communist*,<sup>10</sup> as a way of offering encouragement, but to his regret he never heard back from him.

Now Li Tongzhong and Zhu Laoping had both been rehabilitated. Did that offer Tian Zhenshan some consolation? He pon-

10. A manual for thinking and behavior written by Liu Shaoyi, the Chinese head of state from 1949 until 1966, when he was condemned in the Cultural Revolution. Liu died in prison in 1969, but was posthumously rehabilitated just before *Li Tongzhong* was written.

dered the wording of the rehabilitation decision again and again: "Notwithstanding that the methods employed by the two comrades Li Tongzhong and Zhu Laoping were detrimental to the enforcement of the law, however . . ." However, however! Tian Zhongshan believed fervently that another kind of law should be created, aimed at those who boast, or who force others to exaggerate, those who set high quotas or impose high requisitions, or who by other means violate the interests of the peasants and refuse to mend their ways; they too should be punished according to their offences. Yes, he thought bitterly, there should be that kind of a law!

The jeep roared on, jolting as it went through the pass in the mountains to Li Family Stockade, that place so dear to him, but yet so unfamiliar, lying peacefully in that mountain valley. A flow of people converged in streams from all sides on a spot at the foot of West Mountain slope. The ceremony of rehabilitation was about to begin. Tian Zhenshan's eyes lighted on a grave mound at the bottom of West Mountain, a grave mound set off by tall straight evergreens, pines and cypresses. His eyes misted when he saw the offerings of food and the pure white wreaths that the farming people were laying in front of the grave.

"Remember the lesson of history!" Tian Zhenshan murmured to himself. "Overcoming the enemy requires a price in blood, and overcoming our own mistakes often requires a price in blood as well. Those who live should strive to gain greater wisdom at a lesser cost!"

*Translated by John Sirook, Carmen So, and Aaron Ward, with Richard King*

## GLOSSARY

**Big-character posters.** Hand-written expressions of opinion, usually posted in areas designated by the authorities, often expressing dissatisfaction with officials or policies. During the Cultural Revolution, big-character posters were used to denounce leaders at the national or local level, often in campaigns orchestrated by other leaders. This form of expression was banned in the early 1980s.

**Blooming and Contending.** The Hundred Flowers campaign was launched by the Communist Party in 1957 with the slogan "Let a Hundred Flowers Bloom. Let a Hundred Schools of Thought Contend" in an apparent invitation to air divergent opinions. Many of those who expressed views critical of the Party were subsequently denounced as Rightists, removed from their positions, and barred from public life. The Hundred Flowers and Anti-rightist campaigns were principally directed towards urban intellectuals, but they had an effect in the villages as well: Blooming and Contending meetings in rural areas were designed to encourage activism for state policies; those condemned as Rightists