



Classics of Modern Chinese Literature

A Ye Shengtao Reader

Translated by Zhang Baojun



CHINA INTERCONTINENTAL PRESS



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图书在版编目 (CIP) 数据

叶圣陶；英文 / 叶圣陶著；

张宝钧译. —北京：五洲传播出版社，2013.6

(中国儿童名著精选译丛)

ISBN 978-7-5085-2531-0

I. ①叶… II. ①叶… ②张… III. ①儿童文学—作品综合集—中国—现代—英文 IV. ①I286

中国版本图书馆CIP数据核字(2013)第101027号

出 版 人：荆孝敏

作 者：叶圣陶

译 者：张宝钧

插图作者：李 里

责任编辑：张美景

装帧设计：缪 惟

出版发行：五洲传播出版社

社 址：北京市海淀区北三环中路31号生产力大楼B座7层

邮政编码：100088

发行电话：010-82005927, 010-82007837

网 址：www.cicc.org.cn

制版单位：北京锦绣圣艺文化发展有限公司

印 刷：北京天颖印刷有限公司

开 本：889mmx1094mm 1/32

印 张：5.125

版 次：2013年9月第1版 2013年9月第1次印刷

书 号：ISBN 978-7-5085-2531-0


定 价：89.00元

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Chapter One The Little White Boat



A brook was the home of many lovely things. The little red flower stood there, smiling and sometimes dancing beautifully. The green grass was dotted with dewdrops dazzling like decorating pearls on the wearing of a fairy. On the brook floated green duckweed, out of which yellow flowers stood erect, like tropical water lily... or as it were, water lily in Lilliput. To and fro swam schools of little fish, who were as thin as an embroidery needle, but with two big glittering eyes. The Frog always goggled at something, and nobody knew what he was doing there; maybe he was expecting his good friends.

From the surface of water came very slight sound. That was the music played by the fish, wonderful music played in its own special way, "hoot... hoot...", very pleasant to the ear. They invited the little red flower to join their dance,



and in order to show off their beautiful dresses the duckweeds also followed up. The water lily in Lilliput was so happy that she couldn't help joggling gently, and the frog, so absorbed in the show, started singing without his knowing it.

Everything on the brook was getting more lovable and entertaining.

On the right bank of the brook was moored a small boat, a lovely small boat... white hull and sail, white helm and oar... in the shape of a shuttle, narrow and long. Big guys did not fit the boat, because they would fall off into the water once they got on board. Nor did the elderly, for against the beautiful whiteness they would feel too ashamed of their swarthy face and wrinkled forehead. Only lovely and vivacious kids matched the boat.

Two kids were walking towards the brook. One of them was a boy in white with an apple-like pinky face; the other was a girl in light sky-blue clothes, her face the same pinky color, but more fair and delicate. Hand in hand, they breezed through the woods, came to the brook and got on board the small boat. The boat accommodated them steadily. Its slight sway was just a demonstration of their pride.



"Let's sit here for a while," said the boy.

"Ok, let's have a look at the fish," replied the girl, leaning against the side.

The little fish were still playing their music, the frog singing his songs. The boy picked a duckweed flower, sticking it in her pigtailed. "You look like a bride," said he, laughing.

The girl didn't seem to hear him. "Let's sing the Song of Fish, and let's sing it together." She tugged at his sleeve and said.

Then they began to sing the song:

*Come on, fish, come on,
We have no net, we have no hook,
We sing nice songs,
We like to play with you.
Come on, fish, come on,
We have no net, we have no hook,
We pick nice flowers,
We like to play with you.
Come on, fish, come on,
We have no net, we have no hook,
We have all happiness,
We'd like to play with you.*

Hardly had they finished their song when a

strong wind got up. Flowers and grass on both sides of the brook swayed back and forth like dancing at a quicker beat, and ripples started on the surface of water. The boy put up the sail and forged ahead under a favorable wind, while the girl steered the boat, her hands holding the tiller as did an experienced boatman. The small white boat flew ahead, like a flying fish, with the landscape on both sides speeding by.

The wind got so strong that the view on both sides became blurred. Dark shadows were seen flitting backwards, and the howling of waves under the boat drowned all the other sound out. Filled with wind now, the sail distended like the belly of Maitreya Buddha, driving the small white boat to an unknown place. The two kids got into panic, for they had no idea where they were now after sailing so long. They wanted to stop the flying boat, but couldn't.

The girl cried. She thought of her dear mom, her small bed and yellow kitty, fearing that she might not be able to see them again. She was loath to part with them, although she was together with a dear friend.

The boy fixed her hair tangled by the blowing



wind, and wiped her tears away with a hand. "Don't cry, dear sister. A tear is as precious as a drop of dew, so you should treasure it. The wind will stop sooner or later, just like the surge will get calm at one time or another," said the boy.

The girl leaned herself on his shoulder and kept crying like a sad fairy.

The boy tried to stop the boat. He asked the girl to lean close against the side. He stood up, held on to the slipknot of the sailing wire with his left hand and held the oar with his right hand. In no time he undid the slipknot, and then pushed the oar hard against the shore. The sail came down, bringing a halt to the flying boat. There, they found themselves facing a stretch of wilderness.

The wind was blowing crazily, exhausting the big trees rocking in it. The two kids went ashore, and when the girl looked around and found no sign of people or residence, her tears welled out like a spring again. "There are no house around, but we have the little white boat; there are no people with us, but we are together. We can have happy time, can't we? Let's go playing." The boy comforted her.

The girl followed him and went ahead. The cold

wind brought them closely together, their arms round each other's waists. After about hundreds of steps, they saw a persimmon tree loaded with countless agate-like ripe fruits, some of which even fell on the ground. The girl picked one up and broke it apart. It tasted really sweet, so she asked the boy to try it.

There they sat down on the ground, eating the



persimmon and forgetting all their grievances. Suddenly, out of the undergrowth ran a white rabbit who came up and crouched still in front of them. The girl lifted him up in her arms and touched his soft hair. "Now that we have got another company, we'll feel less lonely," said the boy smilingly, breaking a persimmon apart to feed him, the red pulp smeared on his face.

Then they saw a man in the distance running towards them. He was tall and looked terribly fierce. When he found the white rabbit sitting beside them, he hardened his face, asserting that they had stolen his rabbit.

"No, he came here himself. We love him. We love all the lovely things," explained the boy in a hurry.

"In this case, I won't blame you. Just return my white rabbit to me," said the man, nodding his head.

The girl hated to tear herself away from the rabbit, so she held him more firmly, her cheek on him, almost crying out. But the man turned a blind eye to her. He reached out and wrested the rabbit from her hands.

At this point, the wind became mild. The boy thought to himself that since they had met this



man, why not ask him the way back home? So he asked him how far the place was from their home and which river they should go along. "Your home is over 10 kilometers away. With the river so circuitous, you will surely not make your way home. But I can send you back," said the man.

Hearing the words, the girl was more than happy, thinking that the man, who looked so horrid, was in fact very kind-hearted. So she pleaded, "Let's get on the boat now. Mom and Yellow Kitty must be waiting for us now!"

"Wait a minute. I'll send you back, but how will you thank me?" asked the man.

"I will give you a beautiful picture," said the boy.

"I will give you a bunch of coreopsis, white and red, really beautiful," said the girl. The man shook his head, "I want nothing. I have only got three questions for you. If you answer them correctly, I will send you back; if not, I will go with the rabbit and leave you here. Deal?"

"Deal," they replied in one voice. Then the man asked, "Ok, the first question, why do birds sing?"

"They want to sing to those who love them," the girl answered hastily.

The man nodded. "Not a bad answer. The second question, why are flowers fragrant?"

"Fragrance means kindness, so flower is the symbol of kindness," answered the boy.

"Interesting. The third question, why do you get on board a white boat?" asked the man, clapping his hands.

The girl put up her right hand, like she was answering the teacher's question. "Because we are innocent and only the little white boat matches us."

"Alright, I will send you back home," said the man, laughing.

The two kids were so excited that they hugged and kissed each other. They went back to the little white boat, the girl steering the helm, while the boy and the man paddling an oar each. The world now became a wonderland for the girl, with the red trees, thatched cottages and fields, especially the little white rabbit, who had been with her, right at her feet at the moment. She picked a polygonum to let him bite, playing with him.

"Without the strong wind, we would not have had so much happiness," said the boy. "If we hadn't answered his questions correctly, could we still be

as happy as we are now?" asked the girl.

The man rowed the oar and watched them, smiling and saying nothing.

When the little white boat came back where it was originally anchored, the little red flowers and the green leaves had already ceased dancing.

