Little Star

Little Star

and Other Stories

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EDITOR'S NOTE

This booklet consists of four stories and a sketch published in Chinese literary periodicals. They have been included in *Selected Children's Literature for 1956* edited by the Union of Chinese Writers.

"Mangpa's Dreams" is the story of a boy of Yao nationality who had no education. He aspired to be a hunter, a soldier in the Chinese People's Liberation Army and a painter. He finally became a student in an agricultural school as he decided that his greatest contribution would be to reform the backward production methods of his home village.

"A Lesson Out of School" describes the life of country children. Their thinking and the changes in their ideas after agricultural co-operation came to the countryside are clearly portrayed.

The other two are stories written around the pre-liberation struggles of the Chinese people. "Little Star" is an account of a little girl, working in the underground, who showed supreme courage and intelligence in the blowing up of a bridge in the southward sweep of the liberation armies in 1948. "I Wanted a Gun" describes how a group of village children, during the bitter struggle against the Japanese fascists and their puppets in the period of the Anti-Japanese War, realized the significance and value of the collective spirit.

"My Childhood Pets" tells of the affection of children for their pets and the urge of animals for freedom. The historical background recalls the hardship and suffering of the country people before liberation.

Each of the five items selected reflects certain aspects of the life of Chinese children, past and present. We dedicate

them to little friends of different countries in the hope that, through them, may grow a better and deeper understanding of the children of China.

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MANGPA'S DREAMS

Chi Kang

When I first met Mangpa, he was a child of thirteen. A blue cloth enwrapped his head, and his trousers of white coarse cloth were torn in the legs.

He had jumped out of a cleft in the track on an approach to the village which was our destination, blocking our way.

"Where do you come from? Have you a pass?" he demanded loudly.

"What? A pass?"

My companion, Lao Chen, a painter from Peking, and I looked at each other, momentarily thrown off-balance by the boy's shout.

"What are you doing here?" the little fellow continued questioning, touching a dagger on his waist with a threatening air.

The painter nudged me gently. "Do you think we have here a little bandit?" he asked me jokingly.

"Hey! Answer quickly! Have you come from the other side of the river? If you don't answer, I'll release the dogs."

Over the boy's shoulder, we could see the outlines of the village clearly. We had arrived at our destination. But now we were in trouble. My artist companion and I took a breath. How should we answer this boy of Yao nationality — seemingly a grown-up, actually still a child, speaking the Han language rather fluently but pronouncing it not so well?

"Wu . . . wu!" The boy's signal to the dogs was answered by a burst of barking: "Whow, whow, whow. . . ."

Dogs came from all directions — from the woods and from the little village not far off — a number of the short-legged, short-tailed and sharp-toothed dogs of the frontier mountains. They began barking at us as they approached.

"We are going to your White Cliff Village to look for an acquaintance of ours." I spoke hurriedly in the Yunnan dialect.

"We have come from Peking," the painter added as a kind of corroboration, adjusting his black-rimmed spectacles.

"Peking?" the boy gaped, and thought for a while, his head inclining to one side.

The dogs had no thought of manners. They rushed towards us. With feet digging into the earth, they encircled us and it looked as if they were going to attack us. I bent down and picked up some stones, ready for battle. Lao Chen was so frightened he dropped his painting equipment. The noise took the dogs by surprise and two big black dogs which had approached us whirled around and retreated to one side. Before they had run back very far, they were halted by a small brown dog which barked fiercely to show its hostility. The two big dogs, encouraged, renewed their attack, barking more furiously than before.

"Then you are cadres. You are not deceiving me, are you?" The boy looked at the revolver on my waist and shouted his question, half-believing, half-suspecting.

"Yes, cadres, cadres!" the painter cried, still in terror of the barking dogs. Picking up his painting equipment, he called to the boy: "Get the dogs away!"

The boy had a good look at my old army uniform. Then he took a twig with which he struck at the dogs. The big black dogs and the small brown one were apparently used to their master's temperament. They rushed off at top speed, leaving the other dogs complaining to one another, while some, a little slow to realize the changed atmosphere, had to be whipped before they would leave. But in a minute, all were gone.

"You are cadres," said the boy, "therefore you should know that you should have gone to the district to obtain a pass. If you had explained clearly, I would not have stopped you. You know the situation here is quite complicated."

He became more conciliatory. "Just a while ago," he continued with a smile, "I suspected you had come from that side, entering illegally from across the border."

"Is the other side beyond the border?" The painter was surprised. He glanced in the direction the boy was pointing.

"Yes. Why? Didn't you know?" he seemed astonished and shocked at our lack of knowledge.

"The map shows that the border is twenty *li* away. I've never thought we could see it from here, and very clearly too."

The painter still showed his amazement. He paid no attention to the boy, only nervously wiping his glasses and standing on tiptoe looking into the distance.

I leaned against a tree, equally excited at being near the country's border, but the blister on the sole of my foot compelled me to sit on my cloth-bundle. I was exhausted.

"Are you in the army? Why don't you wear your cap badge and identification tag?" the boy questioned us again, searchingly, like a grown-up.

I took my identification tag from my pocket. "Here! Isn't this one?" In the same breath I asked: "Say, young fellow, what's your name?"

"My name is Mangpa. I belong to the children's corps."

He looked at my identification tag, then spoke to me in a tone as if he were giving me a lesson: "Why haven't you sewn it on? Come now. Come to our village for a rest and we'll find a woman to sew it on for you."

I smiled at his authoritative tone. Only now did I notice that the boy before me had extraordinarily beautiful big eyes and a child's lips which betrayed gentleness, yet at the same time, stubbornness and resolution. I, a member of the Liberation Army, felt a little ashamed at having paid so little atten-

tion to my appearance, now to be criticized by a boy of a brother nationality?

"We'll go to the village for a rest. Tomorrow we'll find Old Dad Sangta to take us to see the border," the painter said enthusiastically as he nudged me.

"Old Dad Sangta?" Mangpa opened his eyes wide. "The deputy?"

"Yes, Old Dad Sangta, the deputy of your village. He has just returned from a conference in the district." I explained, "Do you know him? We're going to stay in his house."

"Do I know him!" Mangpa leaped with joy. "He's my Dad. Did you see him in the district? Come, I'll carry the bundles for you. Dad will be glad to have cadres as guests."

Mangpa's big black dogs and small brown dog had returned and were sitting on a rock not far away. Mangpa's whistle brought them near us. Lao Chen again was frightened, almost dropping his painting equipment. But this time they only got close to their master and acted as if they knew how to behave. They licked Mangpa's hands, rubbing against his torn trousers and standing on their hind legs. They took no notice of us but accompanied us to the village, now covered by smoke from cooking fires.

That night, we slept on the guest beds provided by Old Dad Sangta, a people's deputy of Yao nationality. The painter who was used to living in a comfortable school dormitory, did not bring his own bedding. He had to sleep on the borrowed straw mats and blanket. He was disturbed by fleas. At last he could stand it no longer. "When the time comes for this mountain village to exterminate these bloodsuckers, socialism will not be far off," he exclaimed.

I comforted him and explained to him as best I could. "The prerequisite must be the improvement of living. When the peasants live better, who will want to be in the company of fleas and lice?"

"This is not only a question of improving living conditions."

The painter sat up, his attitude prejudiced, I'm afraid, because of his discomfort.

"Didn't you hear what the old deputy said? Every year now they have enough to eat and spend. Even their houses are newly built. The fundamental question is that they are not educated, and the worse of it is that they don't feel it themselves. They have no desire for education. Take Mangpa for example. If he were in an interior province, he would probably be in a junior middle school. But here, besides work, he only plays with dogs. When I was in the county inquiring about the condition of education, I learned from the teachers in the schools for the children of different nationalities that it was rather difficult to change the idea of the mountain people who, for purely economic reasons, make their children work from childhood. Sometimes you may succeed in convincing the parents to send their children to school. But the children run away from classes when they feel the lessons too hard for them, saying that the writing brush or pen is heavier than the plow. Well, do you think that they will accept such things as hygiene and disease-prevention, if they have no educational background? As I see it, the question is not so simple. Improving living conditions! Pah!"

"Hush!" Afraid that his loud tones might wake up our host in the next room, I made him speak in whispers.

We argued some more in quieter tones, then fatigue forced us to sleep.

Daylight was hardly visible in the house when Sangta's whole family were out of bed. Thumps of footsteps, cracking of firewood, crying of Sangta's little girl, Sosang, and noises of cocks, dogs, pigs and horses, all mixed together, woke us up.

"What? Already up?" Sangta inquired. Buttoning his coat with a round button made of a silver coin. "We peasants get up early as we have to go to work," he said apologetically, as if he had done something wrong. "You'd better rest a little

longer. You must be very tired from walking fifty *li* of mountain road yesterday."

"No, we are not tired," I hastened to reply, "we hope to go to the field with you today."

"That's right!" the painter added. "Isn't your land close to the border? We'll help you in your work."

"Work!" The old man was surprised at hearing that a man who could read and wore spectacles wanted to work on a farm. He rubbed his jaw and explained earnestly: "The land is very far. The road is slippery. You can't walk there."

"Ahmo!" Mangpa's mother who was putting firewood into the stove exclaimed. In Yao language she spoke at great length to Sangta who shook his head, indicating disapproval, while absent-mindedly buttoning and unbuttoning the silver coin.

"No, no, Comrades Cadres," said he. "I know the nature of your work. But you have come from far away. You are not like the army men who live on the mountains nor like the comrades working in the district. They are used to doing farm work or helping us poor people do farm work. Here on the frontier, the mountains are high and the paths steep, stony and thorny. Wild shrubs grow thick as hair; they cut your hands, feet, heads and faces. As a deputy, I am responsible to Chairman Mao should anything happen to you."

It was only after the painter had argued and argued with him that he finally withdrew his objection.

He addressed his wife: "Mangpa's Ma, prepare lots of rice wrapped in palm leaves for the comrades to bring along."

Mangpa's Ma replied with a sweet girlish "Ai!"

She unwrapped the palm leaves and put in more rice and two large peppers. Carrying notebooks, painting equipment, baskets and sticks, we four started on our way to the border along the mountain path in the morning fog. As we passed through the central part of the village, we waved goodbye to small groups of young Yao people heading for their farms.

While I was walking, I thought of something we should have brought with us: "Why haven't we taken the hoes?"

"They are kept in the woods. It isn't worth the trouble to bring them and take them home every day. It's too far."

"Where is Mangpa? I haven't seen him since this morning."

"He has gone to the hilltop to cut fodder for the horses. He'll catch us up when he finishes his job. Little sister Sosang is still at home."

The path was certainly steep and slippery. I let the old deputy and Mangpa's Ma walk ahead so that they would not worry that I might fall. The painter was already far behind, his spectacles almost slipping down his nose.

Wild growth, waist-deep, covered the path. Crystal dewdrops slipped off our trousers. The fog was getting thick. Small stones kicked by our feet rolled down the slopes into the fog-covered groves in the valley hundreds of feet below.

"Dangerous!" the painter called to me, almost out of breath, wiping perspiration from his forehead.

The old deputy stopped, full of anxiety. "Yes, it is. Walk slowly and watch your steps!"

His wife kept walking ahead with complete ease into the white fog, her blue cloth apron over her large trousers — the Yao women's favourite — fluttering right and left.

Old Sangta stretched his hands to hold ours and led us slipping downhill. Down the slope, we walked a short distance on level ground. Then we ascended a ridge by a winding path into the white clouds again. To ascend should have been easier than to descend. But this mountain was so steep that our noses could almost touch it. It was barren, not a tree we could hold on to. The painter found a block of stone on which he sat for a rest, sighing and blinking.

After sitting absent-mindedly for a while, he opened his canvas bag of painting equipment. One glance and he shouted in great agitation: "My water-colour box — where is it?"

I knew he intended that day to paint his chief work: A Farm on the Frontier. Now I was worried for him.

The old deputy inquired anxiously when he heard us talking: "What have you lost? Banknotes?"

"No! No!" the painter was almost in tears. He bent down to feel round him. "It's more valuable than banknotes. I can't buy it here. My water-colour box. It's that large."

"Don't worry, don't worry!" Sangta appeared relieved. "If the article is so large, Little Mangpa will pick it up for you. He is always alert. Look, here he is coming!"

Against the grayish shade of the rocks in the dawn half-light was visible a small, dim figure. It soon moved out of the fog and came near. It was Mangpa, carrying a big bundle which turned out to be little sister Sosang sleeping on her brother's shoulder, head reclining and saliva flowing from her mouth.

"Have you lost something?" Mangpa asked, pleased at himself for what he had done, half-closing his eyes under eyelashes wet by the morning fog. Though carrying his sister, he still jumped as he walked. In a few light steps, he reached the slope without much effort.

"That's right. I've lost something."

The artist was now relieved of anxiety. He was already recovering his sense of humour. He spoke to our little friend: "My little hero, you have done a great thing!"

Under the praise Mangpa became bashful. "This is nothing. Here, take it. See if anything is missing."

"Nothing missing. . . ."

The old deputy interposed: "That's good! That's good! The slope is steep here. If anything should roll down," he added jokingly, "I would have to bring along three days' food to look for it."

"Comrades," he continued, "the sun is coming out. Production is all important. I won't be able to look after you. Let Mangpa guide you. Take a rest and walk slowly. I'm going to catch up Mangpa's Ma."

Excusing himself, he hurried away.

Breathing heavily, our eyes on our feet, we managed to move forward, always afraid of falling. Mangpa did not seem to be bothered at all by the difficult mountain path. With Sosang on his back, the colour of his face never changed nor did his breathing quicken. Smiling at us, he took out of his jacket a bunch of rose-coloured berries and thrust them into our hands, saying: "To Comrades Cadres! I picked them specially for you while I was gathering fodder."

Then he bounded off springing upward along the track.

The painter tasted two of the fruit and found them so sour that he screwed up his face. He envied Mangpa, with his bare, healthy tanned legs walking steadily ahead.

The fog was crossing our way like a dragon crawling. No sooner would the sun appear than it would be covered by the dense mist.

In a little while we again dropped far behind Mangpa, whose young voice called us from a distance: "Hello, Comrades Cadres! This way!"

"Wait for us! Wait!" the painter and I shouted in reply.

"Hello, comrades! Turn to the right! Come this way!"

This time his voice seemed to have come from below, out of the fog. The winding path had again turned downward!

"Really ingenious, this boy is!" the painter could not help commenting while wiping mist off his spectacles. "You were right when you said yesterday that he was stronger than we. He can still walk fast carrying a child when he is but a child himself."

"Paint a picture," I urged, "make the title Child Treading the Clouds."

"No," the painter answered definitely. "That would be meaningless since it does not explain anything."

While we were talking, Mangpa sprang a surprise at us by appearing right before us. He had turned on his tracks and come back to us.

"Mangpa, where are your dogs?" I asked.

"You ask for Dermu? Hoo-oo!" He put two fingers into his mouth and whistled. From a distance barking was immediately heard. Then two dogs, male and female, brown and black, came running, playfully biting each other. They rushed towards us, stopped, raised their heads and breathed heavily as if waiting for orders from their little master.

"For you, Dermu!" Mangpa threw a little piece of stone down the hill. The two dogs dashed fiercely towards it, barking and slipping all the way down the valley.

"They think they are catching a wild sparrow," Mangpa looked over a large rock on the side of the path. "See, they've got it. They can do things. Ha, Dermu!"

But we two could see nothing except the fog. The dogs came up, one with the little stone in its mouth, wagging their tails to please their master.

"We'll take a rest here; we're really tired from walking!" The exhausted painter looked at the dogs and their master.

"All right. We'll take a rest. I've awakened Sosang!"

Mangpa, who was nursing his sister, kept bouncing her on his knees to quieten her. With a delightful and shining expression, he sat observing us. "People say that the body and limbs of a scholar are soft and weak. I'm afraid the rest of the climb may be too much for you."

"Do you walk so far every day when you go to do farm work?" I asked, as I sat down on a piece of rock.

"It depends on whether the land nearby is good or not. Sometimes when we open up a new plot, we find that after a year's corn crop, the soil fertility is exhausted and won't produce any more. So Dad and Ma have to look for a new lot to plough and leave the old lot fallow. Year in year out, they keep looking for and opening up new land. Farther and farther they go — a tiresome job indeed. The cotton field we are going to today is not the farthest lot. To the farthest lot, it takes more than a day for a round trip."

"What do you do then?" asked the painter who had a strong sense of time. "Wouldn't all your time be wasted on the road?"

"What can we do? We have to spend the night in a shed on the field. Ma sends food to Dad."

"Hasn't the government thought of a way to end this primitive production method?" I forgot I was talking to a boy when I used big words as if I were introducing a topic for discussion.

"Primitive?" Mangpa did not understand. Blinking, he replied: "The government forbids the use of fire to clear the mountains. It says the forests must be protected to prevent drought and other calamities. Dad was the first to respond to this call. Last year two spies who had come to set fire were caught."

"Haven't you ever heard the government discussing farming methods?" I interrupted him.

"That?" Mangpa answered intelligently. "Yes, indeed. Some representatives of the local militia who had attended meetings in the county came back to say that in future persons with education would come to teach us. They're called 'production instructors' — something like that. They would teach us to grow corn as tall and big as sugar-cane and cotton with pods as big as fists. By the way, aren't you two the educated men who have come to teach us farming? Aren't you the instructors?"

We told him we were not the production instructors, who would certainly come later.

Mangpa, somewhat disappointed, did not speak any more. We each stared into the distance in different directions, sunk deeply in thought. Sosang was again sound asleep.

The milky morning fog still clothed the mountains, the distant forest peeping through it. At the foot of the mountain the waters of the boundary river were murmuring dreamily.

Mangpa suddenly became unreasonably angry and shouted at the two dogs which were running round. "Go home, Dermu, go home!"

Dermu went away dejectedly. The boy's innocent eyes now

appeared troubled. My heart ached. It was sad that man in these conditions could not conquer nature but had to bow to it!

Isn't this a demonstration of man's pent-up desire for education, knowledge, and escape from backwardness?

This boy Mangpa could do many spectacular feats. Walking on the road, he would suddenly disappear. When finally we discovered him we would see him on a palm tree picking wild sweet palm for us. Loitering around a farm shed, he would slip away without our noticing. When we tracked him down, he would be found hiding in the grass where he would find eggs of ground-nesting birds. Sometimes he would make a pipe out of a papaya twig and blow a tune pleasant to listen to. Sometimes he would dig with his fingers into a hole discovered in the cotton field and pull up a wild-growing potato as thick as a rice-bowl, which he would present to us and would shout with great delight: "I've found it! I've found it! I guessed right!"

In this wilderness he was like a magician, playing all kinds of magic to entertain us. His little sister was his opposite. Sosang would sit quietly the whole morning or even the whole day under the farm shed and smile when Mangpa gave her a whistle made of bamboo leaves. Mangpa had plenty of spare time besides cooking rice and looking after little Sosang, and he spent his entire spare time rendering us service.

"Don't raise the hoe too high; it will be a waste of your strength," he coached us. "Don't hold it too tight or you'll get blisters." "The handle is getting loose. I'll fix it for you." "There are too many stones in that plot. Leave it to me!" and so on.

Running between the painter and me, he gave lessons enthusiastically. He went through the motions to correct our clumsy way of hoeing. Finally he climbed a tree from which he gave his directions.

The old deputy Sangta and his wife were working on the other end of the cotton field, on a slope about three hundred