

The Story of Little Black Horse

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1. *Abandoned!*

"Little Black Horse" was the nickname of a boy.

Now, of course he is already grown up. If you go to visit his farm, you will probably see him heading a tractor team, driving a new type of tractor and turning the earth on the broad fields; perhaps you will find him holding a conference with the director of the farm, making plans and arguing on some problems, or maybe you will find him on the playground taking part in a hotly-contested basketball match. That means to say, he is already grown up now and is an active and energetic builder of socialism. People may call him Comrade Ma Chang-sheng or Captain Ma; very rarely is he ever called "Little Black Horse." But at the time of liberation, he was really a Little Black Horse, a poor child of the streets, in reality, a little beggar. He had a master who taught him the technique of his trade; he had sworn brothers; and he was a master of many tricks to help him beg and solicit money.

It was 1950, the year after the liberation of the whole country. One autumn morning, Little Black Horse and his two sworn brothers were loitering on a main street in Tientsin, turning their heads to the right and left of them and looking around as they walked along the

pavement. Their appearance was pitiful, all three of them being in rags and barefooted. What a sight they were with their patched and ragged clothing! The oldest of the boys was nicknamed Big-eyed Monkey. He looked somewhat like a monkey with a little flat nose and hollow sunken eyes, also his movements and actions were quick like those of a monkey. He elbowed Little Black Horse and winked at him, saying in a low voice, "It's pretty hard these days. We must be a bit careful. If you see a man with a belt around his waist, you'd better hide yourself and always be prepared to run away in case anyone tries to catch you."

Little Black Horse snorted, "Don't you worry. I am all right. They'll never catch me!" He pulled his cap down a little and adjusted the straw cord around his waist, blew his running nose and spoke with great confidence.

The other child, Niu Niu, who came from the country, asked, "Brother Monkey, why do they want to catch us? We don't bother anybody. There's no harm in letting us alone."

"What a fool you are! You don't know anything," replied Big-eyed Monkey. "Didn't our master say that they would send us to the barracks once they have rounded us up. They'll make soldiers out of us and make us fight for them. I was a messenger boy in a Kuomintang military camp once. Oh! It's hell! I have suffered enough. I would rather die than go back there."



"Nobody wants to go," the other two boys answered at the same time.

When they came to a crossroad, Big-eyed Monkey made a signal to Little Black Horse with his mouth while he and Niu Niu turned to the east. Little Black Horse also made a signal to them with his eyes, which meant, "See you again in the evening!" Then he headed westward.

Little Black Horse came to a grocery shop and stood at the door. He looked around and seeing no policeman, he took out his bamboo pieces* and began to ply his street corner trade. Very eloquently, he began to sing, "As my bamboo pieces strike against each other, I come to salute the manager and at the same time to ask him for something. . . ."

With a frown, the manager of the shop came out and waved with his hand, "Go away, you little beggar. Say, don't you know, it's liberation now!"

Paying no attention to what he said, Little Black Horse went on with his usual routine.

"Hey! Why do you scold me? I only ask you to give me a little money. It needn't be much. You can certainly spare me a little. If you want to be thrifty and save money, you have to do it in a big way—so that

* Small pieces made of bamboo about 3 inches long and 2 inches wide put together loosely by threading them on a string. They are swung and clicked together in various rhythms, the manipulator singing or saying his composed monologue to the amusement of his listeners. In the old days, this was one of the commonest ways in which the loafers tried to make a living at the street corners.

you can buy thousands of *mou* of land. If you want to calculate, you must do that in a big way, too—so that you'll have hundreds of thousands of dollars. I also calculated, but only in a small way. Now I have become a beggar! A man has his descendants, a grass its roots. A man has his old age protected by his descendants; the grass will grow up again next spring from its root. If a man doesn't have descendants, who will visit his grave during the tomb-sweeping festival after his death?"

At last, annoyed by the nuisance the boy created, the manager threw some small change at him with a curse and then went inside the shop.

Little Black Horse picked up the money and moved along after fixing his belt a bit. As he lifted his head, he found himself in front of a shop which sold coffins. Immediately he started his singing again to the accompaniment of the rhythm he made with his bamboo pieces:

"As I play the bamboo pieces and walk along, I come to a coffin shop. High is the building of the coffin shop; the coffins are piled up to the middle of the wall. . . ."

"Bang"—Little Black Horse was hit on his head when he was in the middle of his well-memorized recitation. When he lifted his hands to protect his head, he received another bang on his hand. As he looked up, he saw that a big fat man, evidently the manager, was going to give him a third knock on the head with the metal

end of his long pipe. The manager started to curse him: "You son of a gun. You're looking for trouble! If you don't run off, I'll give you another. . . ." As he said this, he gave Little Black Horse a push, trying to send him away, but the boy refused to move. He went on reciting.

"Hey, if you beat me, I'll refuse to go. I will keep on begging until you treat me to supper. Then you'll have to treat me to eggs, noodles, onions and meat dumplings. . . . We'll see who will win in the end!"

A stalemate ensued since neither one was willing to give way. The manager tried hard to push Little Black Horse away and the latter tried with all his might to stick to the door. Just at this moment, Little Black Horse felt a big hand fall upon his shoulders. He turned and saw it was a man wearing a belt around his waist, one of the people's policemen.

"Boy, don't make trouble here. Follow me!" the policeman said to him in a kindly voice.

"Where to?" Little Black Horse asked with a wink at the policeman.

"The Children's Home," the policeman answered him again kindly. "The People's Government has prepared a good place for you lads where you will have work to do, food to eat and a place to sleep. It's much better than loafing around the streets. Come on. Let's go!"

Little Black Horse looked at the club in the policeman's hand, sniffed and fixed his belt a bit in a very nonchalant way.

"All right, let's go!"

Noticing that the boy was prompt in answering him, the policeman was glad and together they started off for the Children's Home. On their way, they had to go along a main street. When they came to a cinema house, it just happened to be the end of a matinée and the crowds were pouring out on to the street. Little Black Horse saw that the crowds offered him good means of escape and he started to run off, the policeman hot in pursuit.

He really was a little black horse. Small and short, he elbowed his way in and out of the crowd and in a short time disappeared among the people.

Little Black Horse spent the whole day on the streets, wandering from one place to another, hungry, cold and weary.

"What shall I do?" The thought of his master brought fear to his heart. "I have earned very little money today," Little Black Horse said to himself as he recalled what kind of man his master was. "I'll likely get three slaps in the face or probably a good beating."

The surname of Little Black Horse's master was Li, but everyone used his nickname of Li San Ma Tse (San means three because he was the third son in the family; Ma Tse means pockmarked face) or Smallpox Li. He was the ringleader of a group of beggars. When he demanded money from a shop, if the shop refused to comply with his demand, he would commit a nuisance at the door or even pretend to lie dead at the entrance.

He would resort to all kinds of tricks so that the shop owner would find it better to send him away by giving him some money. This was the way he made a living. Therefore, the shop owners were afraid of him. After he took in several homeless children and made them his apprentices by teaching them some of the techniques of his trade, he seldom went out himself. They all lived in a dilapidated house which belonged to a small restaurant. Their room was built in a narrow space under the stairway. The roof was sloping and the room was low and small. The master himself slept on a wooden bed. He let the children sleep on the ground crowded together on one old worn-out mattress. The ground was covered with straw; it was dirty and had a bad odour. It was really like a kennel. Two children shared a ragged cotton-padded coat as a quilt at night. They ate the leftovers from the tables in the Moslem restaurant next door, an arrangement made by their master with the management. The children were sent out daily to beg or to steal things. Whatever they got, they were forced to turn over to Smallpox Li, who told them that this was right because he provided them with everything. Every winter, Smallpox Li regularly picked out the smallest boy, usually Sun Hsiao-pao or Little Black Horse to whom he gave a drink of kaoliang wine. Then he told the boy to lie on the snow in one of the main streets almost naked. With tears all over his face and shivering on the pavement, the child certainly presented a pitiful sight to the

passers-by, some of whom were greatly moved and dropped some money into his hand, or even brought him some old clothing. The child was frozen and nearly dead when the "show" was over. Everything he got on the street, he turned over to the master. For any attempts he made to deceive the master in the collection of money or for concealing a portion of the things the passers-by gave him, he would get a good beating. This was only one of the wicked things Small-pox Li used to do.

The moon was high up in the sky, which indicated to Little Black Horse that it was about 9 o'clock. Wandering on the streets for a whole day, Little Black Horse now had to go back to the small room which was supposed to be his home. When he arrived the thing that surprised him was the fact that most of the other children were not back yet. Big-eyed Monkey and Niu Niu were among those who had not returned. Those who were there already were sound asleep. The master was sitting on his bed in his usual manner with a bottle of strong liquor. Under the light of an oil lamp, the master's face looked very red with the pock-marks showing clearly. To Little Black Horse's great surprise his master was especially kind and polite this evening. He did not resort to beating, nor did he swear at the boy. He didn't even use his favourite expressions, such as "you son of the bitch," "damn you," etc., but instead, he said in a low voice, "Your meal is in the barrel. Go on, eat now!"

Like a hungry wolf, Little Black Horse literally swallowed the meal in one bite although it was as cold as ice. As he was eating, the master said to him in an intimate way.

"Little Black Horse, there are no good prospects for our work in the future. Let's do some business together."

Little Black Horse could not make out what his master really meant. Before he tried to make a reply, his master stood up. He was like a bear standing on its hind legs, big and towering, his head nearly touching the ceiling. He suddenly demanded:

"Little Black Horse, take out the money you have saved and let's do our business together."

Little Black Horse dared not look at his master's face, but he could tell how he looked from the way he spoke. He said in his heart, "What a devil he is! How can he possibly know about that big banknote which I picked up on the street and hid inside the patch on my coat?"

Little Black Horse did not know the answer to his own question, but he automatically put his two little hands over the patch in front of his chest.

"You little fool," Smallpox Li said with a forced smile, "you are a partner in the business now. When the time comes, you shall also have a share of the profit."

Of course, Master Li had no difficulty in taking the money away from Little Black Horse.

As a rule, Little Black Horse shared a cotton-padded coat with Niu Niu. That night, Niu Niu did not come

back, and therefore he had the privilege of using the coat all to himself. But the master took away the coat after a while and he was told to share one with another boy, Erh Hsiao-tse. Erh Hsiao-tse was a big boy who found the coat not big enough even for himself. Little Black Horse struggled hard to get under a corner of it as he lay down to sleep. He thought to himself, "Big-eyed Monkey and Niu Niu have not come back yet. Is it possible that they have been rounded up and taken away to be soldiers . . . ?"

Not long after he lay down on the straw mattress, he fell asleep. He did not have much time to think any more.

To Little Black Horse, this sleep was both sound and sweet. He did not wake up till long after daybreak the next morning when Erh Hsiao-tse called out loudly, waking him up. Before he was completely awakened, he heard Erh Hsiao-tse weeping as he said: "You damn fools. You still go on sleeping. The master has run away. He has run away with my pocket watch. . . ."

Sure enough, all that was left on the master's bed was two wooden boards and nothing more.

2. *A New Home*

Little Black Horse wandered on the streets the next morning with an empty stomach. The rumbling

sounds that kept coming from it reminded him that he was terribly hungry.

As he walked along the street, all kinds of delicious smells kept wafting past his nose from the food-stalls—baked sesame bread, stewed sweet potatoes, meat dumplings, and what not. Little Black Horse was angry. He blew his running nose and tightened his belt, murmuring to himself, "I'd better not look at these things."

But he was automatically attracted to a food-stall selling sweet potatoes, which as they were cooking, sent up clouds of steam into the air as well as a sweet odour. He thought to himself, "What fine soft sweet potatoes, they are as red as dates!" As he stood there, he lifted his head and saw a man wearing a belt around his waist coming along the street. With him were some other poor children. Needless to say, he thought the man was coming to catch him. So Little Black Horse started to take to his heels, hearing someone calling after him, "Little Black Horse. Don't run away, Little Black Horse. You don't have to run away!"

Little Black Horse stopped and as he turned his head was surprised to see Niu Niu running after him.

"Niu Niu, what's it all about?" He was anxious to find out.

Niu Niu did not answer him immediately, but he nodded to the man wearing a belt around his waist, who was a soldier of the People's Liberation Army, and said something like this:

"Uncle, you'd better go along first. I will come along in a few minutes."

With a brown tanned face, and a pleasant smile, the "uncle" took some children along with him, and they were all smiling as they walked away. Little Black Horse noticed, then, that the soldier was a cripple, and that he limped as he walked along the pavement.

Strange! How did Niu Niu come to have such a relative? How was it that Niu Niu had never mentioned anything about this crippled man? But before Little Black Horse could speak, Niu Niu asked him first, "Little Black Horse, are you hungry? Here is a piece of cake."

He handed over to Little Black Horse a big piece of rice-cake. Little Black Horse was really very hungry. Not waiting to stand on ceremony nor making any false pretence and refusing the offer, he took the cake and put it straight into his mouth. The two boys talked as they walked along on the pavement together.

"Niu Niu, you and Big-eyed Monkey didn't come back last night. What happened?"

"Big-eyed Monkey was putting his hand into somebody's pocket and he was caught and arrested. I followed him to the Home for the Homeless."

"Oh, you mean that they are going to put you into the army?"

"No, don't talk nonsense! We are too small to join the People's Liberation Army. Even if you wanted to, you wouldn't pass the physical examination."

"Is the 'Home' good?"

"You ask me if it's good. Well, did you see those lads with me a minute ago? They all came with me. You'd better come along too, hadn't you?"

Little Black Horse hesitated a moment, thinking what to say in reply. "All right. I'll go there for a try. If it doesn't suit me, I can run away."

The two boys went along and soon arrived at the "Home."

Formerly the place had been a pawnshop, but at the time of liberation, the manager had run away. The premises consisted of several courtyards with many rooms all of which were full of homeless and jobless people, men and women, young and old. When Niu Niu went in with Little Black Horse, one courtyard was full of teen-agers. The crippled soldier, Little Black Horse had seen on the street, sat at a table reading a book. With a smile, he nodded to the boys and said:

"Come here. Let's put your name down. What is your name?"

Little Black Horse felt very uneasy as he stood there with his two barefeet. He did not know where to put them. He was wondering to himself why it was necessary to have his name put down. Without thinking, he replied, "I have no name."

"What! You don't know your surname?"

"Ma is my surname."

Niu Niu interrupted by saying, "His nickname is Little Black Horse. Don't you see he is small and black, just like a little black horse?"

The children who stood around all laughed. Little Black Horse winked at them and raised one arm to wipe his nose on his sleeve.

The crippled soldier went on to ask:

"What did your mother call you when you were just a kid?"

As Little Black Horse was not sure he was going to like the Home, he was not willing to tell them his real name, which was Ma Chang-sheng. He saw a bottle of ink on the table so he just said, "I am called Ma Ping-erh."*

"How old are you?"



* The Chinese characters for the word "bottle" are pronounced *ping erh*.