

BALZAC

and the

LITTLE CHINESE SEAMSTRESS



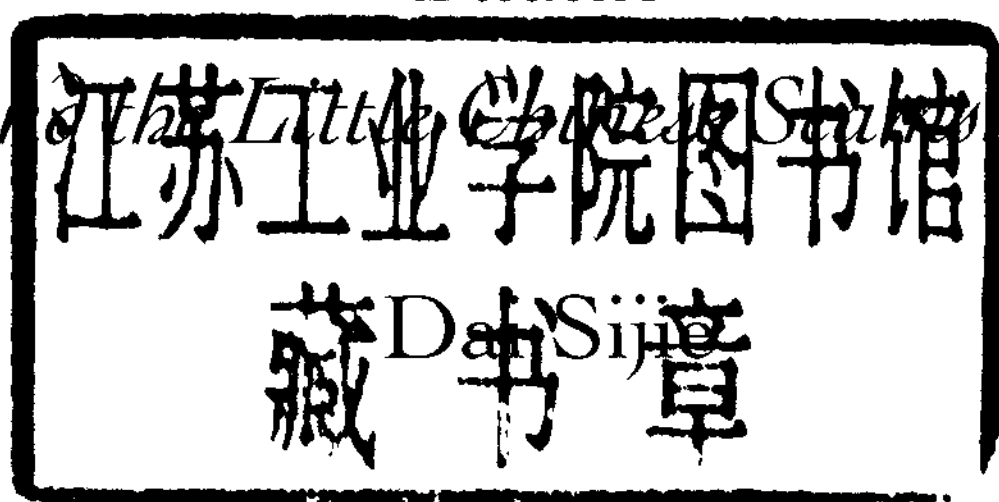
DAI SIJIE

a novel



Balzac

and the Little Chinese Studentress



Translated from the French by Ina Rilke

Alfred A. Knopf



New York 2002

PART I

The village headman, a man of about fifty, sat cross-legged in the centre of the room, close to the coals burning in a hearth that was hollowed out of the floor; he was inspecting my violin. Among the possessions brought to this mountain village by the two "city youths"—which was how they saw Luo and me—it was the sole item that exuded an air of foreignness, of civilisation, and therefore aroused suspicion.

One of the peasants came forward with an oil lamp to facilitate identification of the strange object. The headman held the violin upright and peered into the black interior of the body, like an officious customs officer searching for drugs. I noticed three blood spots in his left eye, one large and two small, all the same shade of bright red.

Raising the violin to eye level, he shook it, as though convinced something would drop out of the sound holes. His investigation was so enthusiastic I was afraid the strings would break.

Just about everyone in the village had come to the house on stilts way up on the mountain to witness the arrival of the city youths. Men, women and chil-

dren swarmed inside the cramped room, clung to the windows, jostled each other by the door. When nothing fell out of my violin, the headman held his nose over the sound holes and sniffed long and hard. Several bristly hairs protruding from his left nostril vibrated gently.

Still no clues.

He ran his calloused fingertips over one string, then another . . . The strange resonance froze the crowd, as if the sound had won some sort of respect.

"It's a toy," said the headman solemnly.

This verdict left us speechless. Luo and I exchanged furtive, anxious glances. Things were not looking good.

One peasant took the "toy" from the headman's hands, drummed with his fists on its back, then passed it to the next man. For a while my violin circulated through the crowd and we—two frail, skinny, exhausted and risible city youths—were ignored. We had been tramping across the mountains all day, and our clothes, faces and hair were streaked with mud. We looked like pathetic little reactionary soldiers from a propaganda film after their capture by a horde of Communist farm workers.

"A stupid toy," a woman commented hoarsely.

"No," the village headman corrected her, "a bourgeois toy."

I felt chilled to the bone despite the fire blazing in the centre of the room.

"A toy from the city," the headman continued, "go on, burn it!"

His command galvanised the crowd. Everyone started talking at once, shouting and reaching out to grab the toy for the privilege of throwing it on the coals.

"Comrade, it's a musical instrument," Luo said as casually as he could, "and my friend here's a fine musician. Truly."

The headman called for the violin and looked it over once more. Then he held it out to me.

"Forgive me, comrade," I said, embarrassed, "but I'm not that good."

I saw Luo giving me a surreptitious wink. Puzzled, I took my violin and set about tuning it.

"What you are about to hear, comrade, is a Mozart sonata," Luo announced, as coolly as before.

I was dumbfounded. Had he gone mad? All music by Mozart or indeed by any other Western composer had been banned years ago. In my sodden shoes my feet turned to ice. I shivered as the cold tightened its grip on me.

"What's a sonata?" the headman asked warily.

"I don't know," I faltered. "It's Western."

"Is it a song?"

"More or less," I replied evasively.

At that instant the glint of the vigilant Communist reappeared in the headman's eyes, and his voice turned hostile.

"What's the name of this song of yours?"

"Well, it's like a song, but actually it's a sonata."

"I'm asking you what it's called!" he snapped, fixing me with his gaze.

Again I was alarmed by the three spots of blood in his left eye.

"*Mozart . . .*," I muttered.

"*Mozart* what?"

"*Mozart Is Thinking of Chairman Mao*," Luo broke in.

The audacity! But it worked: as if he had heard something miraculous, the headman's menacing look softened. He crinkled up his eyes in a wide, beatific smile.

"Mozart thinks of Mao all the time," he said.

"Indeed, all the time," agreed Luo.

As soon as I had tightened my bow there was a burst of applause, but I was still nervous. However, as I ran my swollen fingers over the strings, Mozart's phrases came flooding back to me like so many faithful friends. The peasants' faces, so grim a moment before, softened under the influence of Mozart's limpid music like parched earth under a shower, and then, in the dancing light of the oil lamp, they blurred into one.

I played for some time. Luo lit a cigarette and smoked quietly, like a man.

This was our first taste of re-education. Luo was eighteen years old, I was seventeen.



A FEW WORDS ABOUT re-education: towards the end of 1968, the Great Helmsman of China's Revolution, Chairman Mao, launched a campaign that would leave the country profoundly altered. The

universities were closed and all the “young intellectuals,” meaning boys and girls who had graduated from high school, were sent to the countryside to be “re-educated by the poor peasants.” (Some years later this unprecedented idea inspired another revolutionary leader in Asia, Cambodian this time, to undertake an even more ambitious and radical plan: he banished the entire population of the capital, old and young alike, “to the countryside.”)

The real reason behind Mao Zedong’s decision was unclear. Was it a ploy to get rid of the Red Guards, who were slipping out of his grasp? Or was it the fantasy of a great revolutionary dreamer, wishing to create a new generation? No one ever discovered his true motive. At the time, Luo and I often discussed it in secret, like a pair of conspirators. We decided that it all came down to Mao’s hatred of intellectuals.

We were not the first to be used as guinea pigs in this grand human experiment, nor would we be the last. It was in early 1971 that we arrived at that village in a lost corner of the mountains, and that I played the violin for the headman. Compared with others we were not too badly off. Millions of young people had gone before us, and millions would follow. But there was a certain irony about our situation, as neither Luo nor I were high school graduates. We had not enjoyed the privilege of studying at an institution for advanced education. When we were sent off to the mountains as young intellectuals we had only had the statutory three years of lower middle school.

It was hard to see how the two of us could possibly qualify as intellectuals, given that the knowledge we had acquired at middle school was precisely nil. Between the ages of twelve and fourteen we had been obliged to wait for the Cultural Revolution to calm down before the school reopened. And when we were finally able to enroll we were in for a bitter disappointment: mathematics had been scrapped from the curriculum, as had physics and chemistry. From then on our lessons were restricted to the basics of industry and agriculture. Decorating the cover of our textbooks would be a picture of a worker with arms as thick as Sylvester Stallone's, wearing a cap and brandishing a huge hammer. Flanking him would be a peasant woman, or rather a Communist in the guise of a peasant woman, wearing a red headscarf (according to the vulgar joke that circulated among us schoolkids she had tied a sanitary towel round her head). For several years it was these textbooks and Mao's "Little Red Book" that constituted our only source of intellectual knowledge. All other books were forbidden.

First we were refused admission to high school, then the role of young intellectuals was foisted on us on account of our parents being labelled "enemies in the people."

My parents were doctors. My father was a lung specialist, and my mother a consultant in parasitic diseases. Both of them worked at the hospital in Chengdu, a city of four million inhabitants. Their crime was that they were "stinking scientific authori-

ties" who enjoyed a modest reputation on a provincial scale, Chengdu being the capital of Szechuan, a province with a population of one hundred million. Far away from Beijing but very close to Tibet.

Compared with my parents, Luo's father, a famous dentist whose name was known all over China, was a real celebrity. One day—this was before the Cultural Revolution—he mentioned to his students that he had fixed Mao Zedong's teeth as well as those of Madame Mao and Jiang Jieshi, who had been president of the Republic prior to the Communist takeover. There were those who, having contemplated Mao's portrait every day for years, had indeed noted that his teeth looked remarkably stained, not to say yellow, but no one said so out loud. And yet here was an eminent dentist stating publicly that the Great Helmsman of the Revolution had been fitted with new teeth, just like that. It was beyond belief, an unpardonable, insane crime, worse than revealing a secret of national security. His crime was all the more grave because he dared to mention the names of Mao and his consort in the same breath as that of the worst scum of the earth: Jiang Jieshi.

For many years Luo's family lived in the apartment next to ours, on the third and top floor of a brick building. He was the fifth son of his father, and the only child of his mother.

I am not exaggerating when I say that Luo was the best friend I ever had. We grew up together, we shared all sorts of experiences, often tough ones. We very rarely quarrelled.

I will never forget the one time we came to blows, or rather the time he hit me. It was in the summer of 1968. He was about fifteen, I had just turned fourteen. That afternoon a big political meeting was being held on the sports ground of the hospital where our parents worked. Both of us were aware that the butt of the rally would be Luo's father, that yet another public humiliation awaited him. When it was nearly five o'clock and no one had yet returned, Luo asked me to accompany him to the hospital.

"We'll note down everyone who denounces my father, or beats him," he said. "That way we can take our revenge when we're older."

The sports ground was a bobbing sea of dark heads. It was a very hot day. Loudspeakers blared. Luo's father was on his hands and knees in front of a grandstand. A great slab of cement hung round his neck from a wire so deeply embedded in the skin as to be invisible. Written on the slab were his name and his crime: REACTIONARY.

Even from where I was standing, thirty metres away, I could make out a dark stain on the ground made by the sweat dripping from his brow.

A man's voice roared through the loudspeaker. "Admit that you slept with the nurse!"

Luo's father hung his head, so low that his face seemed buried in the cement slab. A microphone was shoved under his mouth and a faint, tremulous "yes" was heard.

"Tell us what happened!" the inquisitor's voice barked from the loudspeaker. "Who started it?"

"I did."

"And then?"

A few seconds of silence ensued. Then the whole crowd screamed in unison: "And then?"

This cry, raised by two thousand voices, was like the rumble of thunder breaking over our heads.

"I started it . . . , " Luo's father confessed.

"Go on! The details!"

"But as soon as I touched her, I fell . . . into mist and clouds."

We left as the crowd of fanatics resumed their mass inquisition. On the way home I suddenly felt tears running down my cheeks, and I realised how fond I was of the dentist.

At that moment, without saying a word, Luo punched me. I was so taken aback that I nearly lost my balance.

In 1971 there was little to distinguish us two—one the son of a pulmonary specialist, the other the son of a notorious class enemy who had enjoyed the privilege of touching Mao's teeth—from the other hundred-odd "young intellectuals" who were banished to the mountain known as the Phoenix of the Sky. The name was a poetic way of suggesting its terrifying altitude; the poor sparrows and common birds of the plain could never soar to its peak, for that was the reserve of winged creatures allied to the sky: mighty, mythical and profoundly solitary.

There was no road to the mountain, only a narrow pathway threading steeply through great walls of craggy rock. For a glimpse of a car, the sound of a horn, a whiff of restaurant food, indeed for any sign of civilisation, you had to tramp across rugged mountain terrain for two days. A hundred kilometres later you would reach the banks of the River Ya and the small town of Yong Jing. The only Westerner ever to have set foot here was a French missionary, Father Michel, who tried to find a new route to Tibet in the 1940s.

"The district of Yong Jing is not lacking in interest," the Jesuit commented in his notebook. "One of the mountains, locally known as 'the Phoenix of the Sky,' is especially noteworthy. Famed for its copper, employed by the ancients for minting coins, the mountain is said to have been offered by an emperor of the Han dynasty as a gift to his favourite, who was one of the chief eunuchs in his palace. Looking up at the vertiginous slopes all around me, I could just make out a footpath rising from the shadowy fissures in the cliff towards the sky, where it seemed to melt into the misty air. I noted a small band of coolies making their way down this path, laden like beasts of burden with great panniers of copper tied to their backs. I am told that the production of copper has been in decline for many years, primarily due to the difficulty of transport. At present, the peculiar geographic conditions of the mountain have led the local population to grow opium. I have been advised against climbing it, as all the opium growers are armed. After harvesting their crop, they spend their time attacking anyone who happens to pass by. So I content myself with observing from afar this wild and lonely place, so thickly screened by giant trees, tangled creepers and lush vegetation as to make one expect to see a bandit leaping from the shadows at any moment."

The Phoenix of the Sky comprised some twenty villages scattered along the single serpentine footpath or hidden in the depths of gloomy valleys. Usually each village took in five or six young people from

the city. But our village, perched on the summit and the poorest of them all, could only afford two: Luo and me. We were assigned quarters in the very house on stilts where the village headman had inspected my violin. This building was village property, and had not been constructed with habitation in mind. Underneath, in the space between the wooden props supporting the floor, was a pigsty occupied by a large, plump sow—likewise common property. The structure itself was made of rough wooden planks, the walls were unpainted and the beams exposed; it was more like a barn for the storage of maize, rice and tools in need of repair. It was also a perfect trysting place for adulterous lovers.

Throughout the years of our re-education the house on stilts remained almost entirely unfurnished. There was not even a table or chair, just two makeshift beds pushed against the wall in a small windowless alcove.

Nonetheless, our home soon became the focal point of the village, thanks to another phoenix, a smaller version, miniature almost, and rather more earthbound, whose master was my friend Luo.



ACTUALLY, IT WASN'T REALLY a phoenix but a proud rooster with peacock-like feathers of shimmering green with flashes of deep blue. Under the somewhat dusty glass cover of Luo's alarm clock it could be seen pecking an invisible floor with its

sharp ebony beak, while the second hand crept slowly round the clock face. Then it would raise its head, open its beak wide and shake its plumage, visibly gratified, sated with imaginary grains of rice.

It was a tiny clock, and it was no doubt thanks to its size that it had escaped the notice of the village headman when we arrived. It fitted in the palm of your hand, and tinkled prettily when the alarm went off.

Before our arrival, there had never been an alarm clock in the village; indeed there had been no clocks or watches at all. The people had timed their days by sunrise and sundown.

We were surprised to see how the alarm clock seized the imagination of the peasants. It became an object of veneration, almost. Everyone came to consult the clock, as though our house on stilts were a temple. Every morning saw the same ritual: the village headman would pace to and fro, smoking his bamboo pipe, which was as long as an old-fashioned rifle, all the while keeping a watchful eye on the clock. At nine o'clock sharp he would give a long piercing whistle to summon the villagers to work in the fields.

"It's time! Do you hear?" he would shout, dead on cue, at the surrounding houses. "Time to get off your backsides, you lazy louts, you spawn of bullocks' balls! What are you waiting for?"

Neither Luo nor I could muster any enthusiasm for the work we were forced to do on this mountain with its tortuous paths rising ever higher until they