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# The Call of the Fledgling

and Other Children's Stories



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of the Fledgling  
and Other Children's Stories

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## The Chirruping Grasshopper

ERH-WANG was eating breakfast when suddenly he heard a long-horned grasshopper chirruping outside.

“Guo-guo-guo,” how merrily it sang!

He cocked his head to listen carefully. The more he listened the more he was attracted to it, and finally he put down his rice bowl and started for the door.

“Come Erh-wang,” said his father. “Finish your meal before you leave.”

“Put on your shirt before you go out,” added his mother.

Erh-wang heard neither his father nor his mother. He skipped out of the door, like a lamb that had been locked in the fold all night.

But where was the grasshopper?

Erh-wang searched up and down the trellis holding up the gourd vines. But it wasn't there. Then he bent over the fence all covered with climbing beans. Still no grasshopper. He stopped,

listened carefully again for a while, then bounded out of the gate in the direction of the chirruping. He looked up and, sure enough, that's where it was.

The house opposite was where Kuei-kuei lived. Outside the doorway stood a small locust tree. On it hung an insect cage made of sorghum stalks. Inside was a big-bellied grasshopper, dark green and chirruping gaily.

Just as Erh-wang was reaching for the cage, Kuei-kuei, who was sitting in the doorway, shouted, "Stop, it's mine!" Erh-wang quickly drew back his hand. He went up to Kuei-kuei, smiled and said, "Let's both play with it."

"No," declared Kuei-kuei.

"Then can I play with it for just a little while?" Erh-wang pleaded.

"No, not for a second," Kuei-kuei said. "It's all your brother's fault. The other day we were catching grasshoppers in the bean field, and not interfering with him one bit. But he saw us and said we'd trampled the beans. And he told the team leader on us. If not for him we'd have caught some more. Your brother likes to stick his nose into things that aren't any of his business."

Erh-wang didn't like to hear people say bad things about his brother. He wanted to speak up for him. But he was afraid that if he did Kuei-kuei wouldn't even let him look at the fat grass-

hopper. So he didn't open his mouth. Instead, he just hovered over the cage. Erh-wang really yearned for that insect. If only he could have one in a cage for himself!

Last year he did have a grasshopper, brought from the bean field by his father. It was a really fine one, with a big belly and long legs. It had a mouth like a pair of pincers, big wings that glistened in the sun like glass, and a grand pair of whiskers. "Guo-guo-guo" — its song rang so loud it used to make his ears tingle. It chirruped day and night, but especially when it was in the sun. Erh-wang's father made a cage for it, shaped like the belly of a big crab. But unfortunately, when winter came, the grasshopper died. Erh-wang wept. And he had never had another since, much as he wanted to.

Thinking of all this, Erh-wang kept his eyes fixed on the fine grasshopper. His hands stretched out again involuntarily for the cage.

Kuei-kuei rushed over angrily and pushed him aside. "Go away!" he cried. "I won't let you play with it, so there!"

Erh-wang lost his balance and plumped down on the ground.

Just then someone called from over the low wall: "Stop fighting! Stop it right now!"

It was Ta-wang, Erh-wang's elder brother. He was in the third year of primary school and had received his red scarf as a Little Red Guard. He was shouting as he ran up, a pitchfork on his shoulder and a sickle in his hand. Jumping over the wall as easily as a goat, he put down his farm tools, helped Erh-wang to his feet and beat the dust from his clothes. Then he asked Erh-wang if he was hurt, and what the fuss was about.

"I just wanted a look at the grasshopper, and he pushed me," Erh-wang wailed.

"I wouldn't have pushed you if you hadn't touched my cage," Kuei-kuei came back at him.

"You're bigger than Erh-wang, Kuei-kuei," Ta-wang said. "You shouldn't have pushed him like that. Suppose you'd hurt him."

"I wouldn't care," retorted Kuei-kuei. "Why did you tell the team leader on us?"

"You trampled the brigade's beans, and then you blame me for telling on you?"

"Nosey! Managing everything. You're not a cadre anyway."

"Every commune member can have a say in managing things."

"Well, you can't manage me! I'll go after grasshoppers there again. What can you do about it?" Kuei-kuei challenged.



"Like to see you try!" Ta-wang fumed. "If teacher didn't say we mustn't hit people, I'd slap your face!"

Braver because his brother was there, Erh-wang clenched his fist and threatened to hit Kuei-kuei. But Ta-wang stopped him.

"No fighting," he said. "Good kids don't fight each other." Then, picking up his sickle and pitchfork, he led Erh-wang away.

But as they went off, Erh-wang could not help looking back at the grasshopper in its cage. And, when they got back home, he kept nagging at his father to catch one for him.

"I've no time for your games, son. I've got to go harvesting."

Ta-wang handed his father the sickle and said: "Dad, your sickle was blunt, so I sharpened it."

Erh-wang then got after his mother to catch him a grasshopper.

"I'm busy threshing, child, and I've no time to amuse you," she said.

Ta-wang handed his mother a pitchfork, saying: "Ma, your pitchfork was broken so I fixed it."

Father and Mother were both pleased and praised Ta-wang for being a boy who understood things.

With their sharpened sickle and repaired pitchfork, they started off to work. But Erh-wang spread out his arms and blocked the door.

"Be good, let Father and Mother go to work," said Ta-wang to his little brother.

"I just want a grasshopper," said Erh-wang.

"I'll catch one for you, a great big one," promised Ta-wang.

"I want a cage too," Erh-wang pressed.

"I'll make you one, the best kind."

Only then did Erh-wang let his father and mother go off to work.

It was a Sunday. Ta-wang had figured on going harvesting with his father, or threshing with his mother, or to help the carter bring in the beans. But also he was fond of his little brother and wanted to do all he could to make him happy. So he decided that he would first take Erh-wang out to catch a big-bellied grasshopper and make a cage for it.

The two boys were scarcely out of the gate when they heard a bang. It was the pig pushing its long snout against the door of the sty. Ta-wang remembered that the pig hadn't eaten yet. Their mother used to come back from the threshing ground during work breaks to feed it. This must be very tiring for her, Ta-wang thought.

So he said to Erh-wang, "Come on. Let's help Mama by feeding the pig before we play." With that he took a bucket of swill to the pigsty.

Erh-wang tagged along, calling out at each step, "Let's go, let's go and catch grasshoppers."

After feeding the pig, they had just come out of the gate when suddenly a button popped off Ta-wang's shirt. As he bent to pick it up he noticed their cabbage patch was so dry, the earth had begun to crack. Yes, it needed watering. However, Father, who did not want to hamper collective production, had said that morning, "It wouldn't be right to take time out from working for the team to attend to our private plot, so I'll do it after work in the evening." But that would make Father too tired, thought Ta-wang.

So he said to Erh-wang, "Let's help Dad by watering the cabbage and then go out to play." He went back into the yard for a small pail to take to the well for water. Hanging behind his brother, Erh-wang nagged again, "Let's go, let's go and catch grasshoppers."

After watering the cabbage patch, Ta-wang wiped the sweat from his forehead. He looked around the courtyard. Lots of work still needed to be done — beans to be picked, the yard to be cleaned. But when he saw how upset his little brother was he decided to go with him first.

They headed for the hillside on the north, because Ta-wang didn't want to go hunting for a grasshopper in the fields and trample the crop.

As they came out of the lane they heard the team leader calling out in the distance, "Hey, a storm is forecast! Everybody out to help with the threshing!"

At this call, even the old folks got out with pitchforks to protect the grain from the coming storm.

Ta-wang, leading his brother, ran over too.

They found many people already there. Corn cobs and millet ears stood in neat ricks lined up on either side. Commune members were spreading bean stalks on the ground. Ta-wang's teacher, Comrade Chen, was also there with the pupils carrying the stalks.

Ta-wang went up and asked her, "Teacher, what are we spreading those bean stalks for now? Isn't there a storm on the way?"

"Yes, but the forecast says it's three days away," explained Teacher Chen. "We must get the beans hulled today while it's fine, then bring out the other stalks that are still in the fields. Otherwise the beans will sprout under the rain and spoil."

Ta-wang thought what a big waste it would be of all those fine beans the team had already

harvested. "Erh-wang," he said, "let's give a hand with this work first, then go hunting grasshoppers. Right?"

Erh-wang, hanging on to Ta-wang's sleeve, said pouting, "No. You promised you'd get me a big grasshopper. Didn't you mean it?"

Ta-wang replied, "And you said last night you want to be a good commune member when you grow up. Didn't you mean that?"

"Who didn't mean what?" Erh-wang asked resentfully.

"If you don't take care of the collective's beans when they're threatened by rain, you'll never make a good commune member."

Erh-wang had no answer to this, so he just blinked. Then Ta-wang asked him to keep the chickens off the ground while he got a pitchfork and started working on a big stack of bean stalks.

The stack was very high. It was quite a job getting the tangled stalks down from the top.

The team leader said someone should go up there. He was starting off to get a ladder when a voice came from overhead: "Team Leader, we don't need a ladder."

Everyone looked up. It was Ta-wang in the poplar tree.

Seeing that the stack was so high, and the tree so convenient to clamber up, Ta-wang had put down his pitchfork and climbed the tree.

"I'll throw the stalks down," he said. "You spread them on the ground."

Ta-wang got out on a branch overhanging the stack. Then he swung from it like a professional athlete and landed smack on top of the stack.

Everyone had a laugh at that, the team leader passed up a pitchfork, Ta-wang began throwing down the stalks. It was not long before the huge stack was gone and the threshing ground was covered with the bean stalks. When Ta-wang had time to look for his little brother again, it was almost noon.

Ta-wang shouted out his name, but no answer came. Erh-wang was nowhere near the threshing floor.

Ta-wang went home. But there was nobody there either. Then he went to the team office and the stock farm. But still no Erh-wang. Ta-wang was so worried, the sweat ran down his face.

He ran outside the village to look for his little brother.

The sun was like a ball of fire overhead, and the people were having their noon break. Sorghum and bean stalks lay drying in the fields.

Ta-wang was really disturbed. Little Erh-wang must be very upset and crying somewhere, he thought. And soon he did hear a sound like someone crying, and a voice that was like Erh-wang's. But when he came up, he was surprised to find Erh-wang laughing and not crying at all.

"There he is! Let him go wherever he can!" Ta-wang shouted joyfully.

Erh-wang was racing over the fields, jumping all over the piles of bean stalks, chasing after grasshoppers. After Ta-wang had started to work, he had shouted for him a while. He watched the chickens by the threshing floor to pass the time. Then he got tired of that and called to his brother again. But Ta-wang was so busy he didn't even hear. Finally Erh-wang became thirsty and started for home to get a drink, passing Kuei-kuei's place on the way. Kuei-kuei's grasshopper was chirruping, but it had been taken inside where Erh-wang could not catch sight of it.

Kuei-kuei had caught his grasshopper in a bean field, Erh-wang remembered. At this thought, he forgot all about being thirsty and dashed off to the bean field.

The sound of grasshoppers shrilling came from all over the field. But they were all in hiding and not a one could Erh-wang see. Wherever he went they would suddenly fall silent. As soon as he was

gone they would start up again. Wherever the chirruping was, there Erh-wang would turn over the bean stalks, pile after pile, but never a grasshopper did he find. He was still at it, very excited, throwing himself onto the heaps of bean stalk piles and combing through each.

Ta-wang's joy at finding his lost brother changed to anger when he saw what Erh-wang was doing. Dashing up he yelled, "Who told you to come here?"

Erh-wang was startled by this sudden shout from behind. "Look, Brother! Grasshoppers. . ." he stammered, beaming.

"Don't talk rubbish!" Ta-wang planted his hands on his hips and roared. "Look at the beans you've trampled and thrown around. You. . . you. . . ."

"I'm catching grasshoppers," Erh-wang said, still puzzled. "I'm not doing anything to the beans."

The crumpled bean stalks crackled as Ta-wang turned them over. Pointing at the beans on the ground, he snapped, "Look here! Haven't you trampled the beans? What a bad boy you are!"

Erh-wang looked down. Sure enough there were a lot of beans under the stalks. His brother's face was red as fire, eyes glaring with rage.

Erh-wang burst into tears.



Usually, when Erh-wang began to cry, Ta-wang's heart would soften. But today he was too furious to console him. He was thinking what he ought to do. Should he go back and report on what had happened? Finally he decided that, before going back to the village, he must pick up the scattered beans.

But what could he put them in? He had no basket or bag. So he took off his shirt and tied up the sleeves with straw. Moving the stalks carefully he began picking up the beans and putting them into his shirt sleeves.

After finishing several rows he looked for his little brother. There he was, bent over a heap of stalks and picking up beans too!

Erh-wang had not understood at first why Ta-wang had bawled him out. Indeed, he had felt it was most unfair. But when he saw his big brother picking up the beans so carefully under the blazing sun, he realized what he had done wrong. This made him stop crying and feel ashamed. No use crying any more, he thought. Better do what Ta-wang is doing and put things right again. So he started picking the beans up too. He had no basket or bag, and wasn't even wearing a shirt. Should he take off his pants? But he was due to go to school next year and thought he was too big to run around with a bare behind. So he took off