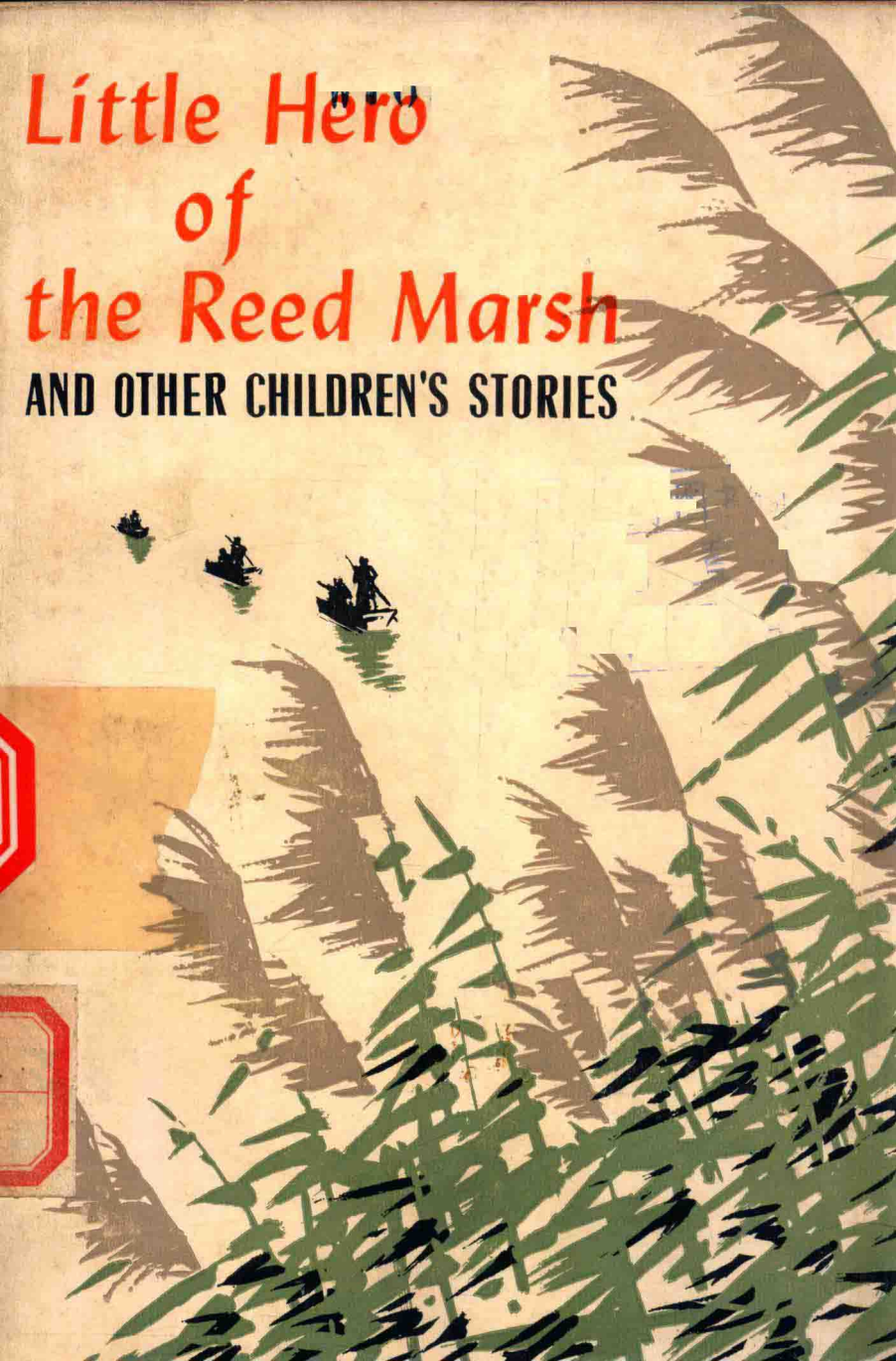


**Little Hero
of
the Reed Marsh**
AND OTHER CHILDREN'S STORIES



Little Hero
of the Reed Marsh

and Other Children's Stories

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A Story of Two Peacocks

An Ting

IN front of Lunghsiu Village on the bank of Nanwan River stood a big green tree from which hung many roots. These roots grew longer and longer till they reached the ground and themselves put out new branches and leaves. Through the generations the branches of this big tree had become so entangled that no one any longer knew which was the main trunk. The tree was now a large green leafy canopy supported on countless root pillars.

Usually there was a lot of activity under the tree, for this was the place where village affairs were discussed. Just now, however, while the commune members were still at work, only two children were about, and they were sitting in its branches craning their small necks. They were looking expectantly in the direction of Mengla Mountain.

The boy perched higher up in the tree was Yenla. He was twelve years old and the leader of a Little Red Guards squad at school. The border militia each carried a gun, and Yenla, who admired the militia very much, had fashioned a spearhead for himself out of bamboo and carried it at his waist. How brave he looked with his spearhead, its red tassel waving!

The boy with the dimpled round face riding a tree branch was Yenla's little brother, Hsiaopang. Hsiaopang was an active, sturdy boy, reminding one a bit of a restless calf. The two brothers had in fact been climbing into the big tree and looking towards Mengla Mountain like this every day after school.

Half way up the mountain where the flowering vines grew in great profusion was a slogan formed of stones, each character as tall as a man. The slogan read: "Today's Foolish Old Men have high aspirations; we are cleaving the mountain to lead in water and build a hydroelectric station." Beneath the slogan, People's Liberation Army uncles of the "Support Agriculture" Group sent by a cavalry company were helping the commune members to dig a canal. It would lead in spring water from the mountaintop to generate electricity in the "Army and People Unity" Hydropower Station now under construction. This was the seventh major project undertaken by Lunghsiu Production

Team since the beginning of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. How the children looked forward to the day when the power station was completed! For Platoon Leader Li of the group had told them that from that day lights would shine, loudspeakers sound, pumps would draw water and rice huskers turn. All you had to do was to throw a switch!

As for Platoon Leader Li, there was not one Little Red Guard but thought the world of him. He had saved Hsiaopang's life once. Little Hsiaopang was very ill with appendicitis, and Platoon Leader Li carried him on his bay horse to the army hospital. It was at night, and raining. The doctors said that a half-hour's delay might have been fatal. After Hsiaopang was well and returned home, he often told his playmates how the uncle's horse had galloped swifter than lightning. Actually, Hsiaopang was so ill at the time that he knew nothing at all of his ride to the hospital.

From their perches in the big green tree the boys could make out some fighters drilling blast holes in a cliff. Yenla, with his sharp eyes, recognized Platoon Leader Li suspended by a rope working in mid-air. What a brave uncle, thought Yenla, way up there, flying in the sunset-tinged clouds!

While the boys were watching, they suddenly heard the jingle of ox-cart bells and saw Grandad Yenkan driving along with a cartload of grass.

"Where are you going, Grandad?" Yenla called out.

"To help the People's Liberation Army comrades build worksheds," replied Grandad, stroking his beard and smiling.

Yenla said to Hsiaopang, "We Little Red Guards should also do something for the PLA uncles." His dark eyebrows suddenly drew together as he thought how their squad of Little Red Guards had wanted to wash the clothes the uncles left at the edge of the field but how some older girls had snatched them away first.

"When the uncles were building a shed for the horses and the team sent bamboo, I wanted to carry a pole but the team leader wouldn't let me," said Hsiaopang regretfully. "He said I was too little and should go and play somewhere else. Aren't we children allowed to support the PLA?"

At Hsiaopang's mention of the PLA and their horses, Yenla's eyes widened and he got an idea. "Let's go and cut some grass by the riverside at the foot of the mountain. It grows the best there. We can give it to the PLA uncles for their horses. After the horses have had their fill of fresh grass, won't

they be able to run faster when the PLA uncles go on patrol?"

"Good idea!" agreed Hsiaopang. The two boys climbed down out of the tree, laughing, and went skipping and running to the river bank under clouds that were tinged rosy by the setting sun.

The sun's slanting rays reflected in Nanwan River looked like a skyful of golden stars twinkling on the water. The grass was beautifully green and fresh on the river bank, and the wind blowing through it set it in motion so that it was like emerald waves playing tag with the boys.

Yenla took a sickle from the basket at his back and said to Hsiaopang, "We must do as Uncle Lei Feng* did and not tell anyone about our good deed. The PLA uncles must not know who sent the grass for their horses!"

Hsiaopang nodded in agreement. "Right! The good things the PLA uncles do for our Tai nationality are as many as the stars in the sky — you can

* Lei Feng (1940-62) was a model soldier of the Chinese People's Liberation Army. Diligent and earnest in studying Chairman Mao's works, he had a clear-cut class stand on what to love and what to hate, the revolutionary style of action matching words and the communist spirit of devotion to the collective without thought of self. These qualities identified him as Chairman Mao's good soldier. He died while on duty. Chairman Mao wrote an inscription calling on the whole nation: **"Learn from Comrade Lei Feng."**

see them but you can't count them. We're doing such a little thing for them, how can we talk about it?"

Fledglings fly high after a good meal of grass seed, and the two boys' good deed made them feel exuberant too. Yenla's sickle went through the grass so quickly that there was a "swish" and a gleam of the blade, and he had a big handful of lush grass. Hsiaopang wanted to catch up and cut wherever the grass was the thickest, landing in the midst of the meadow in no time.

When the sun set behind the mountain in the west, Yenla's basket was brimming full. He stood up. Hsiaopang was calling out. Yenla ran through the grass to his little brother and saw two eggs lying there. They were twice the size of ordinary duck eggs. Yenla bent over and picked the eggs up as carefully as he would the greatest treasure in the world. Probably even Grandad Yenkan hadn't seen such huge duck eggs!

Hsiaopang couldn't stop laughing for joy. He tugged at his brother's sleeve and said, "Mother makes delicious egg soup. Let's take these two enormous eggs home and ask her to make some for the PLA uncles!"

Yenla cocked his head, thought a moment and then said definitely, "No. Our black hen is brooding. Let's take the eggs home and put them under her. Then, when the ducklings grow up, they'll lay eggs too. When the hydroelectric station is completed we'll take a big basketful of eggs to the PLA uncles to thank them. Even the grown-ups will think that's a fine idea."

Hsiaopang jumped up and down and clapped his hands in delight. "Good! Good!" he shouted.

The two boys were in high spirits as they carried the eggs home. But, when they passed the water-turned rice husker surrounded by clumps of cactus, they saw an unpleasant-looking character with a black umbrella. He was grinding his teeth as he stared at the power station worksite, and appeared so absorbed that he did not even notice that the rice was spilling out of the vat. Known as "Cobra," this bailiff to the tribal chieftain before liberation was like the most venomous viper to the poor — one bite with his poison fangs and they were ruined. That was how he got his name. Last winter in a heavy fog he stole a plough-ox from the brigade and was making for the border with it when the PLA cavalry patrol discovered him and brought him back. Grandad often told the children not to be put off guard by his toothy grin, that his

heart was like a scorched banana tree which only looks dead.

Seeing Cobra standing transfixed like that, Yenla shouted, "Hey, what are you gawking at? Aren't you afraid the pestle will bash your head in?"

Cobra shuddered, then tried to calm himself. When he noticed the two big eggs the boys were carrying, however, he screwed up his beady eyes, wrinkled his snub nose and was all politeness. "My goodness," he said, "you sure struck it lucky today, young Yenla. Such big duck eggs!" Cobra stared at the eggs, then suddenly stretched his scrawny neck in surprise. Why, those were no ordinary duck eggs, they were. . . . He stuck the black umbrella which he always carried with him under his arm and got out his purse. "Where did you find those eggs? Sell them to me. All right? I'll pay you a good price for them."

"Pi! Who wants your filthy money!" It was Yenla, who in waving the money away knocked Cobra's umbrella handle. It gave a strange sound. Yenla glanced at the umbrella, and Cobra took a few hasty steps back.

Hsiaopang said angrily, "We're going to hatch ducklings. The ducks will lay eggs for the PLA uncles. If you think you're going to have them, then you're dreaming!"

Frustrated, Cobra had to step aside and watch the boys carry the eggs away. Fuming with anger and hatred, he opened his purse, took out a red bean and put it into a hole in the hollow handle of the umbrella, growling: "Just you wait. We'll settle scores later!" He stood there, his stained yellow teeth exposed, plotting.

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From then on the two boys went to the brooding hen's nest several times each day, anxiously waiting for the ducklings to hatch. Hsiaopang was so happy that even when he looked up at the white clouds floating overhead as he walked along, he would call out, "Look! Just like ducklings skimming on the water!"

The black hen's chicks hatched out twenty days later, but the two big eggs remained eggs. The mother hen left the nest and, clucking merrily, took her chicks out pecking for food. Hsiaopang was irritated at this and criticized the black hen for thinking only of her own family. "That's not the proper spirit," he reproached.

Yenla was a thoughtful child and inspected the eggs by holding them up in the sunshine. Each egg showed a dark shadow inside. Quickly, he put them inside his jacket for warmth and said very seriously

to Hsiaopang, "These duck eggs are extra big. They take more than the ordinary time to hatch."

Hsiaopang chewed on his thumb as he pondered this. "I'm going next door to Yuna's house and ask to borrow her speckled hen to sit on them. We must get our ducklings hatched," he said firmly.

Now, Yuna was a Little Red Guard in Yenla's class at school. She was a generous girl, and offered her hen at once on hearing Hsiaopang's story. The speckled hen, which was just ready to brood, spread its wings over the two big eggs and did not stir.

The three children were very concerned for the eggs. Every day after school the first thing they did was to visit the speckled hen, feed her and give her water to drink. Then they would inspect the eggs for any change. This afternoon when they went as usual to the nest they found the eggshells broken, and under the wings of the speckled hen two little ducklings, still wet and tender green! The children looked at the tiny creatures closely, their three heads so close together over the nest that they almost touched.

"Strange!" the children wondered. "Are there any ducks in the world with such sharp beaks and green feathers?"

Their wondering was interrupted by a rasp from behind: "Heavens, why, that's awful!" It

was Cobra, who had stuck his bullet head up over the bamboo fence. All that the children could see of him were his two eyes gazing skyward in a pitiful pose. "The PLA likely cut the dragon's claw when they dug into the earth to build the power station. The Mountain Fairy's angry, and that's why such freaks appear." Cobra pointed to the two "ducklings" and went on ominously, "Those two birds will only bring disaster on our heads. Better kill them before they infect all the village poultry." He started climbing over the fence with his black umbrella.

Hsiaopang looked up at the sky. The sun was shining brightly. Where was there any "Mountain Fairy"? He looked at Yenla, who jumped up and, pointing at Cobra's nose, said sternly, "You can't scare anybody with your 'Mountain Fairy.' And we're going to blast out your 'dragon's claw' and let the spring water flow in and give us electricity too."

Yuna made a fist and declared in her clear, high-pitched voice, "Whoever tries to break the unity between the army and the people will only break his own neck!"

"Right!" exclaimed Hsiaopang glaring at Cobra.

Cobra had never imagined that the three Little Red Guards had so much spunk. He had just got

midway of the fence and was so put out by the children's rebuff that he was at a loss whether he should get up or down. In his bewilderment, he slipped and fell, feet in the air, to the ground. He rose with difficulty and was about to try putting another scare into the children when he saw Grandad Yenkan coming up the road. Dusting off the seat of his pants, he picked up his black umbrella and slipped away along the fence.

As Grandad Yenkan entered the courtyard, the children rushed up to him to show him their two "ducklings." Grandad put his spectacles on his nose and was so delighted by what he saw that his beard turned right up. "Why, my children," he said, "do you know what these birds are? They're the most precious birds of our Tai nationality — they're peacocks!"

"Peacocks!" The three children laughed till their faces looked like three pink lotus blooms, and they shouted all at once, "Peacocks! Peacocks! Two little peacocks!"

"But Cobra says the birds will bring us bad luck," said Hsiaopang, not forgetting to report this to Grandad in his rapture.

Yenla, the keen-eyed and meticulous one, recalled when Platoon Leader Li had ferreted out a spy from over the border, the clue being the wrapper from a pack of foreign cigarettes. He pulled

Grandad by the hem of his jacket as he said, "I saw Cobra take something from his breast pocket and put it into the umbrella handle as soon as he had turned his back. Isn't that a funny thing to do?"

"You're really Chairman Mao's vigilant Little Red Guard. Your eyes get brighter all the time." Grandad patted Yenla on the shoulder and went on, "It's one of the socialist new things for the army and the people to join in building the hydroelectric station, and of course the class enemies hate it heartily and try by all means to sabotage it. Your information is very important. We'll discuss it at tonight's joint security meeting."

Grandad Yenkan sat down under a big papaya tree in the yard. As he stroked the two little peacocks' green feathers he thought of many things. It was as if a stream were flowing from the bottom of his heart. He hugged the children and said with great feeling, "First let me sing you the Tai people's favourite song." As Grandad Yenkan plucked his beloved lute, the low tones of his voice flowed as gentle and deep as the limpid waters of Nanwan River through the mountain green with bamboo.

*On the mountaintop where the sun rises
Dwell the golden peacocks.*