



The Making of a Peasant Doctor

Yang Hsiao

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CONTENTS

Chapter 1		
THE OLD STONEMASON FALLS ILL		1
Chapter 2		
AT THE COUNTY HOSPITAL		10
Chapter 3		
WHO'S TO BE THE BAREFOOT DOCTOR?		23
Chapter 4		
THE STORY OF A GINSENG ROOT		38
Chapter 5		
"ENEMIES TRAVEL A NARROW ROAD"		52
Chapter 6		
THE SEND-OFF		63
Chapter 7		
THE FIRST LESSON		79
Chapter 8		
"I'LL TAKE DR. NORMAN BETHUNE AS MY MODEL"		90
Chapter 9		
THE "STUCK" NEEDLE		100
Chapter 10		
TWO PRESCRIPTIONS		113
Chapter 11		
FU-KUEI GOES TO THE COUNTY TOWN ON AN ERRAND		126
Chapter 12		
WE TRUST OUR BAREFOOT DOCTOR		138

Chapter 13		
	THE NUB OF THE PROBLEM	151
Chapter 14		
	TREASURED PRESCRIPTIONS	157
Chapter 15		
	GATHERING MEDICINAL HERBS	165
Chapter 16		
	THE INVESTIGATION	172
Chapter 17		
	ON THE WILD HORSE RIVER	184
Chapter 18		
	GOING ON FROM THERE	193

CHAPTER I

The Old Stonemason Falls Ill

SPRING. The Five-Dragon Mountains have taken on a new appearance. High above in the clear blue sky wild geese are on the wing, heading northward and honking noisily as they fly in formation. In the broad valley below the ice has melted into streams that glitter like silver as they flow. Tender green shoots have burgeoned from crevices in the earth on the mountain slopes, while clusters of tiny buds are showing on the peach, apricot, pear and crab-apple trees. Everywhere, as far as the eye can see, red flags flutter in the breeze. The commune members are at work in the terraced fields. They are ploughing, levelling the land, or applying fertilizer, their picks and spades flying, ploughshares gleaming in the sunshine, whips cracking over the draught animals' ears. From the distance comes the sound of blasting. It is from a water conservancy work site where the mountains are being tunnelled through to make way for an irrigation canal.

On the sunny side of the slope five giant characters formed of bright pebbles attract special attention even from miles away. They say: **"In agriculture, learn from Tachai."**

Indeed, the people's communes throughout the country are two big bags of dynamite bought at the commune co-op for

learning from Tachai.* Here, as elsewhere, the countryside seethes with activity as men and women, old and young, grasp revolution and promote production. An invigorating revolutionary atmosphere prevails.

Our story takes place exactly in such a time as this.

It was late in the afternoon and the winding mountain road was bathed by the setting sun. A rubber-tyred donkey cart was going along the road towards the village. The carters were two young boys. One, in his mid-teens, wore a cotton jacket buttoned in the front and an old padded cap of the same cloth. He was ruddy-faced, with large black eyes and heavy eyebrows. A smile played round the corners of his mouth. He was always smiling, in fact, because many things made him happy. A glance was enough to give one the impression of intelligence and alertness. The other boy was twelve or thirteen, rosy and sturdy, with a round face, bright eyes and full lips. He must have walked a long distance, for to cool off he had taken off his old blue cloth padded cap, and he now held it in his hand. As he walked, he kept kicking playfully at the pebbles that came under his feet.

Both boys were members of Date Tree Slope Brigade of Redstone Valley People's Commune. The older boy's name was Hung-yu, and the younger was called Little Shun.

Swinging his whip, Hung-yu was urging the donkey on, while the animal was switching its tail and doing its best. The cart creaked and rattled over the rough road.

On the cart were loaded several spades, picks, chisels and

* A production brigade in Shansi Province. Self-reliant and hard-working, the former poor and lower-middle peasants there turned rocky hills into fertile land and have ensured bumper harvests every year. The "Tachai spirit" is spreading throughout China's countryside.

use at the water conservancy construction site. The digging of the irrigation canal had been going on for some time, more than half of the channel that would skirt the mountain midway having been finished during the winter. With the commune members working day and night with such enthusiasm it was estimated that the whole project would be completed before another autumn. Once the sluice gate in the main channel north of the village was opened and the water from Redstone Ridge Reservoir flowed down the winding channel into the terraced fields of Date Tree Slope's eastern hill, what fertile land it would make those terraced fields!

Hung-yu and Little Shun were also doing their share towards the building of this irrigation canal. From the very beginning Hung-yu had been working like a little apprentice under "Grandpa Stonemason," as they called him. Throughout the winter Hung-yu had worked from early morning till evening, cutting quite a number of stone slabs with a small hammer and a chisel. The commune members were pleased and, thinking of him as a good successor to Grandpa Stonemason, fondly called him the "junior master stonemason." Hung-yu took these as words of encouragement, and worked even harder than before. He was glad to be Grandpa Stonemason's apprentice, but how could he be called "junior master stonemason"? Certainly, only such a person as Grandpa Stonemason deserved the title "master." Grandpa was over sixty and suffered from chronic bronchitis, yet he did his work like a healthy young man. His deft hands could cut a rock into any shape and chisel the most intricate designs into it. The old stonemason was the "engineer-in-chief" and the "commander-in-chief" of the irrigation project, without whom the work would not have been done so quickly or so well. As for Little Shun, he was too young to qualify as an

apprentice and, also, he had to go to school. So it was only on Sundays and after school on weekdays that he could join Hung-yu, bringing with him some of the Little Red Guards of whom he was the squad leader. The little boys would carry rock in baskets or do whatever jobs they could. They went about their work with such enthusiasm and delight that the commune members agreed that the Little Red Guards definitely did their share in building the irrigation canal.

It was Sunday. The Party branch secretary asked Hung-yu to go to the commune co-op to transport a few things needed at the construction site. As Little Shun did not have to go to school, he went with Hung-yu, his very good friend, with the donkey cart. In their load would be explosives, no child's play to transport! Though the Party branch secretary had entrusted the job to Hung-yu, Little Shun's father, who was the brigade leader, was a bit upset about it. Could the boys get the load safely back? But events proved his worry unwarranted, for the boys were very conscientious and had determined to do the job well so as to put the brigade leader's mind at ease.

Besides picking up the things from the co-op, the boys had to call at the commune clinic to collect a prescription for the old stonemason, who had overworked and fallen ill. The Party secretary and the brigade leader had wanted to send him to the county hospital or at least the commune clinic, but the old man refused to go. "This is a rush job. How can I leave it?" he had said. And so Hung-yu was on no account to forget about the medicine. Now that both jobs were done, the boys felt very happy and there was no end to their chatter as they drove the cart home to deliver the things.

"Brother Hung-yu," said Little Shun, craning his neck to peer at the distant mountains, "do you think those two big bags of dynamite are enough to bring down that peak which

looks like a cock's comb?"

"No doubt about it," replied Hung-yu, swinging his whip. Those two bags of dynamite will blow that Cock's Comb Peak sky high!"

"Well," rejoined Little Shun, his eyes flashing, "if they do, we'll use the rock to build our stone bridge. Do you think it'll be enough?"

"More than enough," replied Hung-yu cracking his whip so that the donkey went faster.

"Brother Hung-yu," Little Shun continued as he ran a few steps to catch up with the cart, "do you think we can finish the canal ahead of time?"

"No doubt about it. At least two months ahead." Another crack of the whip seemed to indicate Hung-yu's confidence that the project would be finished sooner than planned. What with the personal direction of Grandpa Stonemason and the drive of the commune members, it would indeed be surprising if the project was not finished much sooner.

But Little Shun had another question: "Brother Hung-yu, do you think if our terraced fields on the eastern hill get enough water, we'll get a thousand *jin* to the *mu**?"

"No doubt about it," answered Hung-yu with the same assured phrase. "With plenty of fertilizer, enough water and good management, why, we'll get more than a thousand *jin*."

"Wonderful!" exclaimed Little Shun. "Then our brigade will have piles and piles of grain!"

The two boys talked on and on, the donkey pulling the cart along behind, till soon they came to the edge of the village.

"Hey, Hung-yu! Little Shun! Where are you going with that donkey cart?" came a voice hailing them from a distance.

The boys looked up and saw beneath an old elm tree by

* One *jin* = 0.5 kg. or 1.1 lbs.; one *mu* = 1/15 hectare or 1/6 acre.

the roadside a man known as Lame Sun, the third son of Big-Head Sun, a landlord and local tyrant who had been executed during the land reform for his many crimes against the people. Before liberation Big-Head Sun owned some eight hectares of land and exploited the labour of dozens of farm hands. He was also the proprietor of the traditional medicine shop in Redstone Valley Town fifteen *li** from Date Tree Slope Village, a position Lame Sun had taken over. This man was about fifty years old, lanky, humpbacked, waxen-faced, with pale eyes and wisps of moustache sticking out. While his two elder brothers were designated as landlords, Lame Sun had not been, since he was mainly concerned with the business side of the pharmacy, although he too had committed crimes against the people.

While Lame Sun was managing the medicine shop, he learned a bit about medicine and could, after a fashion, write prescriptions, apply needles and also give some advice to the sick. Date Tree Slope being an outlying place with scarcely a doctor around, people often consulted him. Now Lame Sun was by no means a doctor, but rather a quack who was only interested in the fees and gifts he got from his patients. In fact, a lot of his doctoring was witchcraft, pure and simple. When he was caught by Hung-yu and a few others during the past winter using sorcery on a patient, he was severely reprimanded at a mass meeting. After that the neighbouring villages all knew what kind of a "doctor" he was and very few people went to him for treatment.

Hung-yu and Little Shun heartily disliked Lame Sun and found him terribly annoying. Now, when he called out to them, they pretended not to hear, and went on their way.

Lame Sun yelled again, and again the boys paid no at-

* One *li* = 1/2 km. or 1/3 mile.

tention, Hung-yu cracking his whip to urge the donkey on while Little Shun kicked at the pebbles in his way as if they were so many *Lame Suns*.

"Hung-yu! Little Shun! Wait a minute. Give me a hand!"

The cart had already reached the man, who put out his hand to stop it. The boys could no longer pretend, so Hung-yu reined in and the cart drew to a stop.

"What do you want?" demanded Hung-yu, very irritated.

"It's . . . it's this," stuttered the man forcing a smile which bared his ugly teeth. "Help me carry this home." He pointed at a large bundle of firewood under the elm tree.

Only then did Hung-yu and Little Shun notice the bundle. They also noticed the chopper stuck in the man's belt. *Lame Sun* had been cutting branches from the trees on the hills.

Hung-yu and Little Shun would have been only too glad to help any other commune member to load the bundle onto the cart and deliver it to his door. But it was a different matter with *Lame Sun*.

"Nothing doing!" blurted out Little Shun without waiting for Hung-yu to answer.

But *Lame Sun* was brazen enough to try to wheedle the boys into taking his firewood home. "Why not? Help me out, won't you?" he pleaded.

"We mean what we say," Hung-yu replied. "It's too big a load for the little donkey."

"Ridiculous!" chided *Lame Sun*, grinning villainously. "Your load can't be more than two hundred *jin*. My bundle won't make it more than three hundred. Why, that donkey of yours is good for at least five hundred *jin*!"

Hung-yu eyed *Sun* meaningfully. "My cart is for the use of the collective, not to carry firewood for you. For the collective it'll stand a thousand *jin* if need be, but for you it

won't take an extra ounce!"

"That's right. Even if the cart can stand the extra load it won't do it for you," Little Shun emphasized.

Before Lame Sun could reply to that, Hung-yu suddenly demanded, "Why aren't you working at the construction site?"

"Oh, you still don't know?" said Sun rolling his pale, yellowish eyes. "The work's stopped."

"What? Stopped?" the boys said in surprise.

"That's it." A fleeting expression of satisfaction came over the man's face. Then quickly he put on a pretence of extreme concern for the welfare of the collective. "Yes, work stopped at noon today. We're all very worried."

"Why did the work stop?" asked Hung-yu.

"The old stonemason is sick, very sick. Isn't it too bad!" And Lame Sun sighed.

"Grandpa Stonemason is sick?" repeated Hung-yu and Little Shun in alarm.

"That's it. And just at a critical time in our construction work too. It's a shame!" Lame Sun knew very well how attached Hung-yu and Little Shun were to the old stonemason. He knew also how concerned they were for the irrigation project. So he thought that by expressing deep solicitude for the stonemason he might make the two boys change their minds about taking the firewood home for him.

But he miscalculated, for the boys saw through his scheme. Hung-yu cracked his whip and, giving Sun a sharp look, said, "Grandpa Stonemason will soon be well and our construction work will start up again. No one should take it easy because of other people's misfortunes!"

Lame Sun knew the remark was meant for him. But, brazening it out, he kept on pretending. "Right you are," he said. "How I hope the old stonemason gets well soon! Then we can go on building the canal right away. The brigade

leader asked me to go to see him, and I really wanted to do my best to cure him. But can you imagine? He was so stubborn as to refuse to let me see him. . . .”

“Of course he wouldn’t let you see him,” put in Little Shun.

“But where can you find another doctor around here? There’s only me,” said Lame Sun, looking very pleased at the idea.

“We can go farther away to get one,” came back Hung-yu with an angry look. “Anyway, we don’t need a witch doctor like you!”

“Now, Hung-yu, don’t keep rubbing it in,” said Lame Sun, for the first time looking genuinely ill at ease. “I know that was wrong. But since that big meeting when you severely criticized me I’ve mended my ways. Isn’t that so?”

“Brother Hung-yu, let’s get going and not waste our time talking to him,” said Little Shun impatiently.

“Right!” answered Hung-yu. And, cracking his whip again, he started the cart and they were on their way, leaving the charlatan who kept begging for help behind. For, if Grandpa Stonemason was very sick, how could they afford to waste their breath on a person like Lame Sun!

Another crack of the whip and the boys with the donkey cart were soon out of sight. Lame Sun sat down on a rock and, taking a cigarette and lighter from his pocket, started to smoke. “Hm!” said he to himself, “you kids needn’t be so cock-sure. The old stonemason’s really sick and sooner or later you’ll have to ask me to see him. Just you wait!” Lame Sun gave a mocking laugh as he drew hard at his cigarette.

A crow alighted on a withered twig and cawed. Lame Sun gazed at the bird, seeming to have found a sympathizer. Thrilled at the thought, he took another long draw at his cigarette, puffed out the smoke and gave a heehaw.

At the County Hospital

HUNG-YU and Little Shun hurried home with the cart. At the edge of the village they met Chun-hung, the brigade's accountant and secretary of the Communist Youth League branch. "What made you so late getting back?" she asked.

"The man in charge of the co-op stores was out and we couldn't get the dynamite. We waited for hours," explained Hung-yu. "But is Grandpa Stonemason sick again? Very sick?"

"I'm afraid so. Have you got his medicine?"

"Yes, here," said Little Shun.

"Good. Give it to me, quick! We've been waiting for it. Our brigade leader asked Lame Sun to see Grandpa Stonemason, but grandpa refused to be seen by that quack."

Hung-yu handed the medicine to Chun-hung, who said, "Our Party branch secretary is out and our brigade leader is very worried about grandpa. He's asked me to take money from the accounting office to send him to the county hospital." With that Chun-hung took the medicine and left.

Hung-yu and Little Shun went with the cart to the brigade storeroom where they unloaded it. Two commune members were twisting hemp cord on a hand-wheel and discussing Grandpa Stonemason's illness.

"A few days ago," one of them said, "when he wasn't feel-

ing well, our Party secretary and the brigade leader wanted him to see a doctor. But the old man wouldn't listen."

"Of course not," the other rejoined. "His whole mind is on the irrigation project."

"That's just it."

"It was already very late when they knocked off yesterday, but after everybody else had turned in he went back to the construction site and worked on the night shift too. No wonder he's sick again."

"There's no stopping him. . . ."

After Hung-yu and Little Shun had finished unloading and had taken the donkey to the stall to be fed, they went straight to see the old stonemason without even going home first.

They had only to enter the courtyard to hear grandpa coughing and wheezing. Hurrying into his room they found him wrapped in one quilt and propped up against a pile of others. Racked with a bad cough, he was suffering from an attack of bronchitis that made breathing very hard.

Many people were there tending him. Chun-hung held a bowl of water for him to drink, but after taking a few mouthfuls a fit of coughing brought it all up again.

The brigade leader, Uncle Huai, was pacing the floor, extremely worried.

"Has he taken the medicine?" asked Hung-yu of Chun-hung as soon as he was inside the room.

"Yes, he took it, but he couldn't keep it down."

When the old stonemason saw Hung-yu and Little Shun, he was pleased and tried to speak. "The dynamite . . ." he managed to say before being seized again by a fit of coughing.

Hung-yu knew what was worrying Grandpa Stonemason, so he said, "We've brought back the dynamite, as much as we asked for. We've put it in the storeroom."

The old stonemason nodded.