



AN ORDINARY LABOURER

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Party Membership Dues

It is the same with me every month when I pay my Party membership dues and see our group leader enter the amount under my name: I feel a glow in my heart and the memories of the events in the autumn of 1934 flood back into my mind.

That year meant for us the beginning of a very difficult struggle in the border region between the three provinces: Fukien, Kwangtung and Kiangsi. Part of our Red Army's main forces had left there and joined the advance guard that was moving north in order to resist Japan's aggression; the rest had left in April to join the Central Red Army for the Long March. Our small body of troops left behind to continue the struggle in the enemy's rear was attacked by the Kuomintang bandits in one of their frantic "encirclement and annihilation" campaigns. To preserve our strength for persistent struggle, we were forced to take to the hills.

But even in the hills our troops continued to give central leadership to local underground struggles. Wei Chieh, the political commissar of our detachment, was the secretary of the county Party committee. We made surprise attacks on the enemy, leading the struggle by keeping in touch with local Party organizations underground through many invisible lines of communication. When the Whites realized they could not beat us to our knees, they resorted to what was called "amalgam-

mation of villages and removal of their inhabitants," a measure by which they compelled masses of people to move from mountain hamlets and villages in the foothills to larger communities on level ground. This was indeed a dastardly plan. It cut us off from the masses and broke up our local organizations. To continue the struggle we had to reorganize.

Before our withdrawal into the hills I had been a scout, used to roving about for days among those who would exterminate us. Wherever I had gone, I could always be sure that the people would gladly give me food and lodging. Thus we could often seize our chance and give the enemy an unexpected blow or wipe out a platoon of his public security forces. However, life held no such thrills when the people were moved away. We did not feel so badly about the hardships of finding our living as having to go without the comradeship that days of struggle together had forged. We felt we had plenty of energy but no chance to use it.

Things were well-nigh intolerable when Comrade Wei Chieh sent for me and asked me to do liaison by getting into touch with local Party organizations outside the hilly area.

I was heartily pleased with this assignment. To be sure, it wasn't exactly the same as my former scout duty. Now I was to pick up in secret the threads between underground Party organizations that had been cut by the "amalgamation of villages" campaign, and to provide a link for the guerrilla forces between the county Party committee and the Party branch organizations in the different villages, in order to co-ordinate future operations. The place I was ordered to was Eight-Corner Hollow, a big village not too far away from the hills

into which recently the inhabitants of three or four villages had been forced to move. The person I was to contact was a woman in her middle twenties by the name of Huang Hsin, who had joined the Party in 1931. She had been among the first to let her husband — and a husband of her own choosing at that — enlist when the Red Army was recruiting new members in 1932. Her husband followed Chairman Mao on the Long March while she stayed behind with her child, a little girl barely five years old. During the “amalgamation of villages” her whole village had been razed to the ground, so she had come with the rest to live at Eight-Corner Hollow. We knew that she had continued to take an active part in organizing Party activities and that she was loyal and trustworthy. That was why I was sent to her with instructions for future underground activity from the county Party committee.

All this I learned from Comrade Wei Chieh, our political commissar. I had only a sketchy idea of the lay of the land around Eight-Corner Hollow and I had not come across Comrade Huang Hsin at all in my earlier work. So that I wouldn't have any difficulty in recognizing her, Comrade Wei Chieh told me that she had a dark mole on one ear-lobe.

And so I packed my bundle, changed from uniform into plain clothes and left the hills under the cover of darkness.

Eight-Corner Hollow was over ten miles away. What with the distance and the winding footpaths I had to take, I got there only well into the night. When I had been to this village which was within our base area before, the people in so big a place would have been busy with meetings and studies at night school after their

day's work in the field; there would be songs accompanied by drums and gongs, as lively a scene as one could wish for. But now there wasn't a stir, nor even a single light. In the pitch dark the place was like a burial ground. The only sound was the shouting of some lonely White sentries asking the password. They probably were thinking that they had really subdued the people in our base areas by their "amalgamation" policy. Yet I knew that in this apparently lifeless village glowing embers were still buried here and there; sooner or later they would burst into flame again and spread into a conflagration.

I stole into the village, counting the huts as our political commissar had instructed me, from the east end of the village up to the seventeenth. I tiptoed up to the door. How strange that at this time of night there should still be a light burning! Apparently it was shaded, because one could see it only from quite close. Someone inside was humming — a woman's voice, humming ever so softly. The tune did not take me long to recognize as one that had become popular when our Red Army was admitting new recruits.

My man is off with the Red Army.

You be the first in an attack!

And if you fall for the revolution,

I'll carry on for our cause.

My man is off with the Red Army.

Keep my farewell bright in your heart!

It's good to think of you with our Red Army

While I'm working in the village fields.

How long since I had heard this song! To hear it again at this moment was like a balm. It was as I had thought:

The people's hearts had remained Red, they were still thinking of their Red Army, and the days when the red banner of the revolution was flying high were still uppermost in their minds despite all the hardships they were undergoing. Perhaps it was Comrade Huang Hsin herself humming. Else, why was she breaking off once every so often, as if her heart was not in it and she was thinking of her man on the Long March? I did not want to interrupt a Red fighter's wife in her thoughts of the Red Army and her husband. But I had to; the night-time was too precious for my task. So I quickly pressed close to one side of the door and, according to the pre-arranged signals, rapped on the door.

Silence fell in the house at once. I repeated the signals; then I heard footsteps and the door opened to me.

But when I crossed the threshold, I gave a start. There were three people in the little house, two women and an old man. They were huddled together round a big basketful of cabbages, busily plucking the leaves without ever raising their eyes. They seemed as unconcerned as if they had not even been aware of my presence. I was in a fix. Which one was Huang Hsin? In such circumstances, a single wrong move and my life might not be worth anything; and, what's more, it might bring harm to our whole organization. After a moment I felt I had to say something. "Is this perhaps the wrong house?"

That did the trick. They all lifted their heads and looked at me. I took in everyone with a quick glance and saw the dark mole on the ear-lobe of the woman sitting on the floor. Overjoyed, I addressed her. "Don't you know me any more, Sister Huang? I'm bringing you another letter from your husband, Brother Lu!" This bit

had also been agreed upon, for she had said all along since the White Terror of the Kuomintang had started that her husband was working somewhere else for the owner of an incense shop.

No need to look upon her as a mere housewife — she was alert enough to size up the situation. She beamed at me as she greeted me like an old friend and pulled up a stool for me to sit on. Then she said to the two other people in the room: "You'd better each take a part of the cabbages with you. The salt for pickling them we'll share out when we get it."

They all gave me a happy smile as they left in silence, each with an armful of cabbages.

She followed them out of the house, probably for a good look round. Like the old scout that I was, I took that time to examine the home of a Red Army fighter's wife who was a member of our Party's underground. The hut was built of bamboo lattice plastered over with mud. Along one of the walls a little girl lay fast asleep under a ragged quilt on a pallet of rice-stalks, her nostrils quivering ever so slightly under her regular breathing. This must be Huang Hsin's child. In a corner of the room on three bricks stood a sooty earthen vessel for cooking rice. Glancing up, I saw a loft under the roof, a simple affair knocked together of a few boards. A few pieces of rickety furniture were stored there, several bundles of sugar-cane stalks. . . .

I was thus looking at everything when the woman came back. She closed the door behind her and shaded the little oil lamp still further, then sat down opposite me and said: "These two who just left are also our own people. I got in touch with them only recently." Probably she was thinking about my arrival a while ago for she

added, pointing at a hole in the corner: "When you come here next time, you better take a peep first, so there won't be any trouble." Obviously she knew how to handle such situations.

She looked more like a woman in her thirties than the age our political commissar had mentioned. Her hair, combed back and done up into a knot, looked rather short; it left her with an air of having "cut her hair and joined the Red Army." Her face was rather lean; but she had a pair of shiny, bright eyes which showed her spirit — kindly, serene and alert. Her eyes misted because she was overcome with emotion, but soon she wiped them with a corner of her skirt.

After a long while she spoke at last. "You don't know, comrade, how it felt to be cut off from the Party! I was like a kite whose string is broken. Life had no taste! With the people around me in difficulties, with the Red Army in trouble, I knew, of course, that I must struggle on. But the trouble was, how? But all's well again, now that I've contact with the county Party committee. As long as I'm alive, as long as you people are alive, we'll somehow make the red banner fly here again!"

I was supposed to give her a message that would cheer her, our political commissar had instructed me when I left the mountain; and I had prepared word for word what I was going to say. But it didn't seem necessary to do that — she showed such a staunch character, she herself recognized the need for keeping up the struggle, did not let the difficulties prey on her mind, what more could I say? I decided to tell her outright what I had come for.

But as I was to give her the instructions from the county Party committee, she thought a moment and said: "Just look, the joy of seeing you's made me forget everything—let me get you something to eat first!" And removing the lid from the earthen vessel, she took out two rolls filled with sweet potatoes minced in with chopped cabbage leaves. From a chipped jar she fished out a salted carrot. These delicacies she laid before me saying: "Since the putting-together of the villages, we're much farther from the mountains and the Kuomintang watches like demons, so we haven't been able to send any food up to you. You must have had a hard time of it. I haven't got anything decent for you to eat, and this is all I can offer you. . . ."

After a whole night's tramp I was famished and I had not tasted salt for such a long time that the sight of the pickled carrot whetted my appetite. So I started eating without further ado. The carrot had a slightly sour taste, since there had not been enough salt to pickle it with. But still it was a delicacy to me. And once I tasted the salt, I could not help thinking of the sallow faces of the comrades up in the mountains where there was a terrible shortage of salt.

As I was eating, I told her what instructions our political commissar had given for future underground operations of the Party. They included a lot of things, like information about enemy moves, organizing the resistance against the collection of rent and land-grabbing by the landlords, the difficulties that might arise and how to meet them. She listened nodding, often asking a question. When I had finished, she said, "What Political Commissar Wei said is quite true. There will be difficulties. But, after all, I'm used to seeing things

through. I stuck it out in 1929* when I first joined the struggle, and through all we did against the 'encirclement campaigns.' So I think I can do the job now as well!" Her voice was firm and full of confidence as she promised to carry out all the difficult assignments.

We were still talking about how things were when the cocks began to crow. As this was my first visit, I must not stay any longer but slip back to the mountains under cover of the morning mist. As I was going towards the door she stopped me. From inside the lining of her jacket, she brought out a package with her Party membership card, worn and frayed, but with the hammer and sickle and the chop of the county Party committee still a bright red. Inside the membership card there were two silver dollars. She weighed them in her hand for a moment before she offered them to me. "My child's father gave me these, Comrade Cheng, before he left with the Army. I haven't paid my membership dues all these months since the villages were put together. I want you to give this money to the commissar. Even a little bit like this might be of some use to the Party!"

But how could I accept? First of all, I hadn't been told to do anything of the sort, and second, a woman with a small child, her husband away, without definite income, who still was ready to carry on political work under these circumstances—she should have at least some cash in hand. So I said: "My superiors didn't tell

* The local people in western Fukien took 1929 as a landmark in their struggle for emancipation because most of the revolutionary governments in the revolutionary base there were set up after the Summer Harvest Uprising that year.

me anything about collecting membership dues, so you just keep your money!"

She thought a moment before she replied, "All right then, the way things are, something practical might be better!"

So that's how it was! She thought of paying her Party membership dues in kind then, instead of money! She really adjusted well to the situation! Nobody could have thought then what this idea of hers would lead to. . . .

A fortnight or so afterwards we learned that the Whites had become aware of the people's continuing underground activities despite the "amalgamation of villages" and that they had been able to harm the Party organization in a few villages through some waverers. I had to bring fresh instructions to Eight-Corner Hollow.

When I reached Comrade Huang Hsin's hut, I did as she had told me and peeped in through the hole in the wall. I saw she was busy sorting piles of salted vegetables by the light of an oil lamp—cabbages, carrots, beans—and putting them into a large basket, and coaxing her child meanwhile:

"Don't, baby mine! Mummy wants to sell these. Wait till Mummy has sold them and got the money, then she'll buy you a big sesame bun—anything you want! Just don't touch anything, please, don't!"

The little girl, who could not take the hardship as well as an adult, was even thinner than her mother. Her small head uncertainly held up by a thin neck, she was leaning weakly against her mother. Since she hardly ever tasted either oil or salt in her food, it was small wonder that she couldn't tear her wide-open eyes from the piles of salted vegetables and kept smacking her lips greedily. She paid no attention to her mother's coaxing

but went on pulling her clothes, demanding to be given some of the pickles. Finally she reached into the chipped jar, dipped her skinny little hand into the brine and licked it off her fingers. That gave her enough courage to grab one bean from the pile and stick it into her mouth. But her mother turned round just then — and with a glance from the child to the vegetables in the basket, she took away the left-overs, making the little girl burst into crying bitterly.

Watching through all this, I felt a lump in my throat. I could not stand it any longer, so I knocked at the door and went in. Right away I gave Huang Hsin a piece of my mind. "That's not right, the way you're doing it! Even if the vegetables are for sale, a small bit for your child won't count that much, will it? Don't be too hard on the little girl!"

When she saw me, she began explaining about the vegetables with a deep sigh. "Do you really think I wanted to sell them when salt's more expensive than gold this year? Who can have salted vegetables for sale! We few Party members scraped them together to pay our membership dues with them. We thought that this way we might make things a little easier, perhaps, for you comrades up in the mountains. We just got them ready, waiting for you!"

Now it dawned upon me that these were the cabbages and vegetables they had been plucking when I came the first time.

Huang Hsin rested her glance first on me, then on her child, as she said more to herself than to me: "As long as there is our Party, as long as we have our Red Army, just think how many children they can save from the White Terror!"

I looked at her child who had stopped crying, but was still hovering near the jar with the brine. I took a handful of beans from the lot and handed them to the little girl, while I said to Huang Hsin: "Never mind our troubles, it won't matter if this little bit is missing. I'd rather go without food for ten days than see the child hurt! . . ."

The words were hardly out of my mouth when there were hurried footsteps outside; someone came up to the door and whispered, with a light knock: "Quick, open the door, quick!"

When we opened the door a crack, the other woman I had seen plucking the cabbage leaves on my first visit was standing there panting. "It's been reported that someone's come here from the hills. The Whites will be making a search. Hurry up and make a getaway! I'm going to notify the others." With that, she hurried away.

When I heard this, I wanted to leave at once, to avoid getting Huang Hsin into trouble. But she stopped me, taking me by the arm. "If they make a search, they'll surround the village so that even a raindrop can't get through. Where can you go that way? You better hide right here!"

I had thought of this possibility, too, but not to involve her I still wanted to try for a break. She became very severe at that, her face darkened and she no longer sounded mild and kindly as she had done only a moment ago. She was firmly resolved as she said in a steely voice:

"For the discipline of underground work, you have to listen to what I tell you! For the sake of our Party, you must stay alive!" With that, she pointed to the

loft above: "Go and hide up there! And whatever happens, don't move! I'll deal with everything!"

By this time, there was a commotion outside; shouts and the shuffle of footsteps were coming nearer and nearer. I climbed up to the loft. Through a crack in the floor I watched what was going on down below. I saw Huang Hsin put a straw lid over the basketful of salted vegetables, then pick up her child and put the little girl down on the pallet with a kiss. Then she turned towards me and said: "We're in a spot, Comrade Cheng, they've found us out. Don't worry if anything happens to me; the Party organization in Eight-Corner Hollow is still there. What's to be done against the landlords' grabbing of land has all been planned out. Next time you come, get in touch with Comrade Hu Min-ying, that's the woman who just brought the warning. Remember — she lives in the fourth hut on that side of the road, counting from the other end of the village. You can recognize the place by the small banyan-tree in front. . . ."

"You must find a way to get these vegetables in the basket up into the hills," she said then, pointing. "They are in payment of our membership dues!"

She paused and listened for a moment to the noise outside, then she spoke again, her voice once more kindly: "If you can take the child along, I'd like you to take her with you either up into the mountains or somewhere else, if someone's willing to care for her. And when our Red Army comes back here again, you can hand her over to her father. . . ."

Again she paused, her heart obviously in turmoil. "One more thing," she went on then. "My Party membership card and the money I asked you to take last