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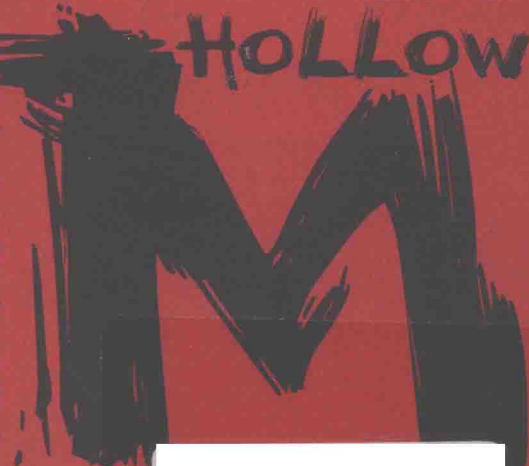
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HOLLOW



A Story from a Mountainside Tibetan Village



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PART ONE

Translated by
Saul Thompson



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Chinese Modern Classics

Hollow Mountain

Part One

空 山

(第一部)



阿 来 著

[美]Saul Thompson 译

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Contents



The First Part

Scattered in the Wind 1

The Second Part

Celestial Fire 209

The First Part

— Scattered in the Wind



One



Years had passed since the incident. In the time between, Gela grew up.

Enbo strode along the path. His head was bowed as he ate up the distance between them. Gela's fear was gone now, and so was the habitual guilt he could never explain. On the prolonged rise and fall of the path between the mill and the village, Gela's first sight of Enbo was a felt hat bobbing above the line of the slope. Gradually, a broad pair of shoulders appeared beneath the hat, and finally Enbo's powerful torso rose from the ground like a demon from a crack in the earth's crust moving menacing towards him. At the last possible moment before the two passed each other, Enbo raised his head and looked at Gela through blood that flecked his eyes.

Before, Gela was afraid, always; constantly burdened with guilt he couldn't understand. But it was different now. He raised his head, flames of hot hate bursting from his eyes despite the faint tremor in his chest. But the flames were irresolute; they burned out, hate replaced by doubt. Then, his eyes lowered, and his head fell.

The two men, one old, one young, always met on this

path. The wordless confrontation between them was just part of the routine. In the beginning, young Gela invariably was the timid loser of these battles. But the advantage was his now—though Enbo was still in his prime, he was aging fast. More often than not these days it was he who kept his head low, out of sight of the sharp gaze of the still dangerously young. He even looked like he'd begun to resign himself to defeat.

The conflict between Gela and Enbo began with the death of a child. The child had been four years younger than Gela. The child had been Enbo's son.

When the boy was nine years old, he was injured by a firecracker during the Chinese New Year celebrations. His wound became infected, and he died not long after the end of the holiday season.

Firecracker burns were a common hazard of life as a village child, but usually they didn't pose any real danger. On the fateful day, a group of excited children lit their firecrackers, dropped or threw them chaotically, and scattered. They left behind one pale, skinny little boy with a burn crying in the middle of the small village square. His tears came more from fright than actual pain; he was very easily frightened, and because of this trait, he was known in the village by the name 'Bunny'. Bunny cried all the way home.

That should have been the end of the matter, but as winter stretched from the Chinese New Year to the Tibetan New Year, the white bandage wrapped around Bunny's neck grew steadily dirtier. Bunny began to succumb to fatigue. There was a grove of willows at the western edge of the village—when they began to blossom, he told his

grandmother in his weak little voice:

"I'm going to die."

True to his word, he passed away that evening.

Before Bunny's death, a faint rumour began to circulate. It was the kind of rumour that floats half-formed above small villages. The rumour said that the firecracker responsible for Bunny's injury had been thrown by the hand of Gela. That was the rumour—no more, no less, and though it was light of substance it permeated the whole village, like a faint but probing breeze.

"They're wrong", Gela thought to himself at the time, "I never even had a firecracker. How could I have a firecracker when I don't have a father! I don't even have an older brother to steal one for me."

He went to Bunny's grandmother, and asked her from over a hedge:

"Do you believe them? Do you think it was me who threw the firecracker?"

The old woman raised her clouded eyes to face him.

"You're just as much to be pitied as he is, child. No, it wasn't you."

But the first time he saw Bunny's father, the fury in the older man's eyes was almost enough to convince him that he *was* responsible for little Bunny's death. He felt like a thief who had stolen away the boy's tiny bunny voice and his sickly bunny body. Little Bunny was dead, his body taken to the cremating ground, his whole biology taken by fire and changed into a column of black smoke that scattered in the wind.

Bunny always used to sit out in the sun with his

grandmother, taking in the silence. Not anymore. He would never be seen in the village square again.

On an afternoon when fluffy white willow seeds floated in the air, Gela was walking home from the mill with a bag of flour over his shoulder. That was when he crossed paths with Bunny's father, Enbo.

When Enbo was a child, he had left home to be a monk, following his uncle Jamcan Gonbo, who was a Lama at the Wanxiang monastery. In the year 1956 of the new calendar, Enbo was forcibly returned to secular life by order of the government, along with his Lama uncle. Back in the village, they were on the top tier of the very small number of people who could read and write. Enbo's uncle was the most learned man in the village. Enbo was the second most learned.

Jamcan Gonbo was a gentleman, fully possessed of the aura of a scholar. He was a good role-model for Enbo to emulate. And Enbo did have a lot in common with his uncle—he was quick to smile and had kind eyes, though they seemed at odds with his rugged physique.

But the Enbo who was currently advancing towards Gela was anything but smiling. His sturdy body was bent with grief, while his eyes, normally so bright and clear, seemed bloodshot and bleary in a face twisted with hatred. The light from his eyes was as cold as the blade of a knife, but somehow it burned through the cold, hotter than blazing charcoal. Gela stopped. His throat twitched as he tried to think of something to say, but so transfixed was he by Enbo's baleful gaze that he couldn't even get his mouth open. He heard a voice in his stomach. The voice said:

"Grandma said, she said . . . it wasn't me who killed Bunny."

Of course, only he could hear the voice in his stomach. Enbo had already walked past him. That evening, Gela suffered repeated bouts of chest pain as he lay on his sheepskin rug. Later that night, Bunny appeared to Gela in his dreams, a timid smile hanging from his face. Bunny spoke, in a voice that was soft and small:

"They're all blaming you, but it wasn't you who threw the firecracker."

Gela sat up gasping:

"So then who was it? You have to tell me! Was it Aga? Or the Wang Tie brothers, or loudmouth Lhowu Dongzhug's son harelip Jimi, or . . ."

It was a peculiar dream. Every time Gela said the name of a boy from the village, that boy's face would materialise in the space behind Bunny. As they grew in number, the faces turned nasty and began to circle around Bunny. They spoke with one voice:

"TELL ME, WHO WAS IT!"

Bunny's face grew whiter and fainter until it blew away like a sheet of paper in the wind. Gela called for his Ah-Ma. But his Ah-Ma wasn't at home; she must be at the threshing barn again. In the barn, there were piles of straw that had a special, heady fragrance—a good place for men and women to take their pleasure together. Great, gulping tears streamed down Gela's face.

Gela was an illegitimate child, and he often wondered

if that was the reason he was so alone in this world. Maybe his birth was also why this horrendous injustice had fallen on his head. Precisely because of this doubt inside him, the kindness and calm smiles that used to shine so often from the faces of the two de-frocked monks had always given him a feeling of warmth, and even a kind of intimacy.

Jamcan Gonbo was already fifty when he returned to the secular world, so it is no surprise that he maintained a monkish distance from women once he was back in the village. Gela enjoyed watching the normally serene Lama's awkwardness upon encountering Gela's mother, who was the kind of woman that wore her belt loose, so to speak. As far as any good monk was concerned, this kind of woman was a she-demon, dripping with the deadliest evil. But the she-demon had no mind to seduce him or infringe on his piety, just a habit of giggling in a way that people found affecting, though her giggles really had no specific object. She also liked to mumble to herself, though as with her giggles, her chattering was always a one-sided interaction.

Gela used to secretly imagine that the de-frocked monk Enbo was his father. But Enbo was married to another woman, the lovely Ler Kymcog, and together they had their own child, Bunny—Bunny of the feeble constitution. But then, Bunny's life was whisked away by a firecracker, and as word in the village had it, that firecracker came from Gela's hand.

Gela called out for his mother, but she had gone out to the threshing barn. Moonlight entered the room, so he reached his hand out toward the window. His hand had never known the touch of a firecracker's red paper

packaging, an object that made a huge noise way out of proportion to its size. But now, under the wavering moonlight, he clearly felt a firecracker, a distinct action, explode from his fingertips. He saw the dripping of blood as a sharp pain ripped apart his lungs.

Two



Ler Kymcog really was lovely, yet back when she was single, there were very few men in the village willing to marry her.

Her appeal lay in her delicate waist and porcelain complexion, but these days the people of Ji village favoured a more robust version of beauty. This new trend gave the old people something to sigh about; they said that if she had been a young woman before the People's Army came and carried out the Great Liberation, she wouldn't have lasted long in the village. She would surely have caught the eye of some chieftain or other who would have quickly married and carted her away.

But in this era, the whole village had to go to work in the fields together; no exceptions for old chieftains or headmen—hunger was an ever present and very egalitarian threat. So Ler Kymcog's ill-timed beauty came down to one question: who could afford such an indulgent taste in aesthetics in days like these?

"If someone doesn't get on with it and pick this lovely flower soon, she'll wither away", Enbo's mother liked to sigh. She herself was once a big-eyed beauty. In fact, it

was from her that Enbo got his own large eyes and thick eyebrows, which, combined with his masculine build, gave the de-frocked monk quite the dashing appearance.

When spring came, it brought new depths of concerned compassion for the young woman into the heart of Enbo's mother. One day, she commandeered Ler Kymcog and led her by the hand to Enbo, so the issue could be addressed directly.

"It would be such a pity if such a beautiful young flower like you wasn't picked by a man who deserved you," she murmured to Ler Kymcog, still holding her hand.

Actually, by that point Ler Kymcog was already heavily pregnant, as was clearly evident by how her previously tiny waist had swelled to the width of a barrel. But Enbo's poor, elderly mother didn't know that—she had cataracts and couldn't see very well.

Generally, only a very small number of Ji village women were able to keep their faculties sharp past the age of fifty; most of them were too kind-hearted to stave off old age, which took advantage of their softness and left them addled. By contrast, Ler Kymcog's nerves were as delicate as her figure, so when the old woman stroked her hand, the dry rasp of skin on skin was all the reason she needed to skittishly pull her hand back and make a dash for freedom.

The old woman stayed where she was and pricked up her ears. She could hear the receding swish of the young woman's skirt. She could also hear the wind weaving through the wheat fields, bringing with it the spring-time sound of cuckoo calls.

"What a shy girl!" she laughed.

Little did the old woman know, shy Ler Kymcog went from that short-lived intervention straight to her son's arms. She wriggled and pinched in Enbo's embrace, and said to him, through a mixed shower of sobs and laughs:

"Oh Enbo, your mother really likes me you know, *why* don't you just hurry up and marry me?" she implored.

Enbo's heart felt burdened, so he went to his uncle:

"Please beat me, master," he presented himself to the lama.

"Believe me, I would. But I can't risk killing any tiny insects that might be resting on your body. My nephew, I know you have broken the precepts, but surely you can't be suggesting I do the same? This is not the way of the disciple, and you should know it!"

Having made his stance clear, Jamcan Gonbo strode off through the undulating wheat fields in the direction of the village, his hands clasped behind his back. He saw his sister sitting by a spring in the shade of a cluster of cypress trees, peering towards him through her blurry eyes. She used to be Ji village's outstanding beauty in a time gone by.

The Lama sighed inwardly: "Do you really think you are capable of comprehending today's world?" he thought to himself. Even people who had two good eyes to see out couldn't make sense of what was happening in the world. Not even the ability to read, which he possessed and she didn't, could help much with that.

He greeted his sister:

"Congratulations, dear sister, you have a grandchild on the way."

"But . . . that can't be true, you can't be saying that!"

Enbo is a monk; if he is expecting a child, then surely the Buddha will punish him for breaking the precepts!”

Jamcan Gonbo looked up at the dull blue sky, and replied in a quiet voice:

“I wouldn’t worry. The Buddha has been elsewhere these last few years”.

There was no real conviction behind her words to begin with, even as they came out of her mouth. But once she began to process the idea that Ler Kymcog and Enbo were already lovers, she began crying. The emotion was all too much for her, and her subconscious opted to handle the situation by short-circuiting—she swooned to the ground.

While his mother lay stretched out on the ground unknown to him, Enbo was walking up the small path through the wheat fields with the honourable intention of announcing the news to her in person. A sea of tall wheat stalks, which were just beginning to put out their first ears of the season, swallowed the path almost whole with their tall stems bending double in the wind.

Enbo’s tall, sturdy frame plunged through the middle, kicking up clouds of pollen that shimmered in the sunlight as he parted waves of green wheat.

Jamcan Gonbo watched. He saw a lot—he could see the dew that clung to the lower lengths of the wheat shoots being smashed into flying mist by the feet of Enbo, who loomed large and solid, like a bald-headed beast of the wild.

The old man was so overwhelmed by the beauty of the scene that he very nearly passed out, too. After all, this kind of joy is surely of the same nature as the enlightenment he