

Lu Hsun



OLD TALES  
RETOLD

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# OLD TALES RETOLD

LU HSUN

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Lu Hsun at the age of fifty.  
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## INTRODUCTION

*Old Tales Retold* is the third collection of stories by Lu Hsun, great writer and leader of the Chinese cultural revolution. There was a lapse of thirteen years between the time when Lu Hsun wrote the first of these eight stories and the time when the collection was published in 1935. The first tale, written in 1922, was "Mending Heaven."

The substance of these stories comes mainly from ancient myths and legends or historical incidents, and although it is used to satirize contemporary society the characters are depicted according to their historical background. Thus the little men in ancient costume who appear between the legs of the goddess Nu-kua are a parody on those shifty and vicious moralists of that period who opposed the cultural revolutionary movement. In "The Flight to the Moon" the author sympathizes with the hero Yi who has fallen on evil times and condemns Chang-ngo for hankering after comfort and enjoyment. "Curbing the Flood," while paying tribute to the great achievements of our forbear Yu who overcame immense difficulties and toiled hard to conquer nature, also holds up to ridicule a group of sycophantic "scholars" who were really politicians. Through Lord Hsiao Pin in "Gathering Vetch" Lu Hsun hits out at bourgeois literary ideas. "Leaving the Pass" satirizes the philosopher Lao Tzu who did nothing

but indulge in empty talk and who is sent out of the pass without any pity. "Forging the Swords" conveys the resolute fighting spirit and the spirit of justice of the Chinese nation. "Opposing Aggression" praises Mo Ti who sacrificed himself to oppose aggression and was written at a time when the people of all China were demanding with one voice to resist Japan. "Resurrecting the Dead" was aimed at the men of that day who exhorted young people to study ancient anthologies of literature and the works of Chuang Tzu, exposing to ridicule such pseudo-philosophers who pose as high-minded but are actually running after wealth and power.

These eight tales, especially "Opposing Aggression," "Curbing the Flood," "Gathering Vetch," "Leaving the Pass" and "Resurrecting the Dead," all of which were written in 1934 and 1935, use the form of historical tales to expose and lash out mercilessly at the dark rule of the reactionary Kuomintang government, as well as the "eminent personages" and "scholars" of the comprador-bourgeoisie who were stooges of the reactionary Kuomintang government. At the same time these tales present fine portraits of the quiet heroism and industry of the toilers, applauding the fighting spirit of the Chinese people.

This collection of powerfully militant stories is also strongly coloured with positive romanticism and embodies Lu Hsun's ideal of transforming society. Because he used ancient legends to awaken the conscience of his fellow men, these are not the usual run of "historical stories" but historical tales of socialist realism.

## THE AUTHOR'S PREFACE

This is a small volume of stories, yet the interval between the time when I started it and its completion was quite long: a whole thirteen years.

The first tale "Mending Heaven," originally entitled "The Broken Mount," was written in the winter of 1922. My idea at that time was to take material for some stories both from antiquity and the present age. "The Broken Mount" was a first attempt, based on the legend of Nu-kua who melted stones to mend the vault of heaven. I started off in sober earnest, though simply using Freudian theories<sup>1</sup> to explain the origin of creation — the creation of men as well as of literature. I forget what made me put down my pen half way to read the newspaper, where as ill luck would have it I found an article by a critic whose name I have forgotten on *Breeze over the Orchids*<sup>2</sup> by Wang Ching-chih. With tears in his eyes, the critic besought young writers to produce no more such effusions. This miserable plot struck

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<sup>1</sup> Lu Hsun was at one point interested in the Freudian theory of psycho-analysis, but he was never influenced by it; in fact he adopted a sceptical attitude. In an article he wrote in 1933 called "Listening to a Talk on Dreams," he pointed out the fallacies of this theory.

<sup>2</sup> *Breeze over the Orchids* was an anthology of verse. The critic was Hu Meng-hua, a student of the Southeast University.

me as so ludicrous that when I returned to my story, try as I might, I could not prevent a little man in antique dress from appearing between the legs of the goddess. That was how I lapsed from seriousness to facetiousness. Facetiousness is the worst enemy of writing; I was most displeased with myself.

So I decided to write no more tales of this sort and, when publishing *Call to Arms*, I appended it as the first and last attempt of its kind.

That was when our noted critic Cheng Fang-wu<sup>1</sup> was brandishing his axe at the gate of the Creation Society under the flag of "Adventures of the Soul."

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<sup>1</sup> Cheng Fang-wu, from Hsinhua, Hunan, was one of the chief members of the Creation Society at the time of the "May the Fourth" Modern Literary Movement. He was a well-known literary critic in that period, advocated romanticism and considered literature as the self-expression of the writer. After the May the Thirtieth Movement of 1925 he began to sympathize with the revolution, and his literary views also began to change. Between 1927 and 1928 he and Kuo Mo-jo started a revolutionary literary movement, but soon he gave up literary activities and turned to do revolutionary educational work. After Lu Hsun published his first collection of short stories *Call to Arms*, Cheng wrote a review of it for the *Creation Quarterly*, Vol. II, No. 2 (January 1924). Starting from his viewpoint that literature was the self-expression of the writer, he erroneously concluded that such stories by Lu Hsun as *Madman's Diary*, *Kung I-chi*, *Medicine*, *Tomorrow* and *The True Story of Ah Q*, were "naturalistic," superficial and vulgar. However, he maintained that "Mending Heaven," "though containing passages not good enough," was nevertheless a "masterpiece" showing that the author would "enter the palace of pure literature." The "adventures of the soul" mentioned here is a quotation from Anatole France: "La critique littéraire est une aventure de l'âme parmi les chefs-d'œuvre." This was quoted by Cheng Fang-wu in his review.



On the charge of "vulgarity," with some swings of his axe, he annihilated *Call to Arms*, and only described "The Broken Mount" as a fine piece of writing — though not without faults. Frankly speaking, far from convincing me, this made me despise this warrior. I have no contempt for vulgarity: I delight in being vulgar. As for historical stories, to my mind those based on extensive research with sound evidence for every word are extremely hard to write, even though they are sneered at as "novels smacking of the school-room"; whereas not much skill is needed to take a subject and write it up freely, adding some colouring of your own.

Besides, "The fish can tell whether the water is hot or cold."<sup>1</sup> In vulgar parlance, "A man knows his own illness." The second half of "The Broken Mount" is far too sloppily put together to be called a fine piece of writing. If I allowed readers to believe the judgement of that adventurer, they would be deceived and I would be deceiving them. So I cut this story out of the second edition of *Call to Arms* to strike back at this "soul" — that volume was wholly occupied by rampant "vulgarity."

In the autumn of 1926, I was living alone in a stone house in Amoy, looking out over the ocean. I leafed through old books, no breath of life around me, a void in my heart. But letters kept coming from the Weiming Press in Peking asking for articles for our magazine. Since I was in no mood to think of the present, old memories stirred in my heart, and I wrote the ten essays in *Dawn Blossoms Plucked*

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<sup>1</sup> A Buddhist phrase dating from the Sung Dynasty.

at Dusk. And, as before, I picked up ancient legends and the like in preparation for writing the eight stories in *Old Tales Retold*. But no sooner had I finished "The Flight to the Moon" and "Forging the Swords," published under the title "Mei Chien Chih," than I had to hurry to Canton, once more setting the project aside. Later on, though I found fresh scraps of material and wrote some hasty sketches, I never managed to put the whole in order.

Now at last I have made up some sort of volume. Most of it is still in the form of hasty sketches, not worthy of the name of "story" according to the manuals of literature. In some places the narrative is based on passages in old books, elsewhere I gave free rein to my imagination. And having less respect for the ancients than for my contemporaries, I have not always been able to avoid facetiousness. Thirteen years have passed, still I have made no progress: this does seem to be "trashy stuff like 'The Broken Mount.'" At least I have not made the ancients out as even more dead than they are, and this may justify the book's existence for a while.

December 26, 1935

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## MENDING HEAVEN

### 1

Nu-kua<sup>1</sup> woke with a start.

She was frightened out of a dream, yet unable to remember what she had dreamed; conscious only, rather crossly, of something missing as well as of a surfeit of some kind. Ardently, the quickening breeze wafted her energy over the universe.

She rubbed her eyes.

This way and that through the pink sky floated wisps of rock-green clouds, behind which winked stars. In the blood-red clouds at the horizon was the glorious sun, like some fluid orb of gold lapped in a waste of ancient lava; opposite, the frigid white moon seemed as if made of iron. But she did not notice which was setting or which rising.

The whole earth was a tender green. Even the pines and cedars, whose leaves fall so seldom, were strikingly fresh. Great blossoms, peach-pink or bluish-white, clearly visible near by, faded in the distance into a motley mist.

"I've never been so bored!"

With this reflection she sprang to her feet, stretch-

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<sup>1</sup> A mythical empress or goddess of ancient times. According to Chinese mythology the first men were made out of mud by Nu-kua.

ed her perfectly rounded arms so compact of strength and yawned at the sky. At once the sky changed colour, turning a miraculous flesh-pink so that for a moment Nu-kua was lost to sight.

She walked through this flesh-pink universe to the sea, and the lines of her body merged with the luminous, rose-tinted ocean, only a zone of pure white remaining visible at her waist. The astounded waves rose and fell in perfect order spattering Nu-kua with foam. The reflection of this pure white flesh flickered in the water as if it meant to scatter in all directions. But without observing it, not knowing what she did, she went down on one knee and scooped up a handful of soft mud. She kneaded this several times till she had in her hands a small creature much like herself.

“Ah! Ah!”

Though she had made it herself, she couldn't help wondering if it hadn't been in the mud all the time like a segment of potato. She started with surprise.

This was happy surprise, however. She went on with a verve and zest hitherto unknown, breathing into the figures, mingling her sweat with them.

“Nga! Nga!” The little creatures were calling out.

“Ah! Ah!” She felt with a pang that something was streaming out from every pore of her body. The ground was misted over with white, milky vapour. She mastered her panic and the little creatures stopped crying.

Some of them said to her: “Akon! Agon!”

“Ah, you darlings!” Without taking her eyes off them, Nu-kua tapped their plump white cheeks with her muddy fingers.

“Uvu! Ahaha!” They were laughing. For the first time in the universe she heard laughter. For the first time she laughed herself, unable to stop.

Caressing them, she went on with her task. The finished figures circled round her, going further off by degrees, talking more volubly. By degrees, too, she ceased to understand them. Her ears were simply filled with a medley of cries till her head began to swim.

Into her long drawn out joy had crept weariness. Her breath was nearly exhausted, her sweat nearly spent. Moreover her head was swimming, her eyes were dim, her cheeks burning. Gone was all her excitement; she was losing patience. Yet she toiled on, hardly knowing what she did.

At last the pain in her back and legs forced her to stand. Leaning against a smooth, high mountain, she raised her head to look round. The sky was full of white clouds like the scales of a fish, while below was a deep, dark green. For no apparent reason the sight displeased her. Moodily she put out one hand to pluck a wistaria which reached from the mountain to the sky. On it were clusters of huge purple flowers. She threw it down on the ground and the earth was covered with petals, half purple, half white.

She flicked it and the wistaria rolled over in the muddy water, sending up a spray of mud which falling on the ground turned into little creatures like those she had made. But most of these looked stupid and repulsive, with heads like deer, eyes like rats. Too preoccupied to pay any attention, eagerly and impatiently, as if in sport, she flicked the muddy

wistaria faster and faster, till it twitched on the ground like a coral snake scalded by boiling water. Drops of mud splashed off the vine and while still in mid-air changed into small howling creatures, which crawled off in every direction.

Barely conscious, she swung the wistaria yet more wildly. Not only were her back and legs aching, but even her arms were tired. She had to crouch down to rest her head on a mountain. Her jet black hair streamed over the mountain top. After regaining her breath, she closed her eyes with a sigh. The wistaria fell from her fingers to lie limp and exhausted on the ground.

## 2

Crash!!!

As heaven split asunder and the earth burst open, Nu-kua awoke with a start to find herself sliding towards the southeast. She put out a foot to stop herself, only to discover nothing there. Throwing one arm around a mountain peak, she managed to break her fall.

Water, sand and rocks were raining down on her head from behind. When she looked over her shoulder, water poured into her mouth and both her ears. She hastily lowered her head — the earth was heaving and shaking. Luckily this soon subsided, and stepping back she sat down on solid ground to wipe the water from her forehead and eyes and see what exactly had happened.

The scene was one of utter confusion. All over the earth great torrents were cascading. Here and there, in what she took to be the ocean, leaped and towered sharp-crested billows. She waited, dumb-founded.

At last great calm was restored. The largest waves were no higher than the old peaks, and where the land must be projected jagged ridges of rock. Turning to the sea, she saw several mountains sweeping towards her, whirling round in the tumbling waves. Afraid they might bump her foot, she put out a hand to stop them. That was when she noticed, in the gullies, some creatures she had never set eyes on before.

She drew one of the mountains to her for a closer look. Vomited on the ground beside these creatures was something resembling gold dust and powdered jade mixed with chewed pine needles and meat. Slowly, one by one, they raised their heads, and Nu-kua's eyes widened when she recognized the little creatures she had made. They had covered their bodies in the most curious fashion, and some of them had snow-white beards growing from the lower part of their faces—beards matted by the brine like pointed poplar leaves.

"Ah, ah!" She gave a cry of fright and astonishment. Her flesh crept as if a caterpillar had crawled over it.

"Save us, Goddess. . . ." One with a white beard on his chin had raised his head. Between retchings he said in a broken voice: "Save us. . . . Your humble subjects . . . are in quest of immortality. None of us foresaw this disaster, the



collapse of heaven and earth. . . . Mercifully we have met you, Goddess. . . . Save our worthless lives. . . . And give us an elixir . . . to make us immortal." He raised and lowered his head in the strangest manner.

"What's that?" asked Nu-kua, quite baffled.

Several of them started speaking at once, retching as they invoked the Goddess, all going through the same strange motions. This was so exasperating that she bitterly repented the action which had brought such bewildering trouble upon her. She looked helplessly around. A school of giant tortoises<sup>1</sup> was sporting in the ocean. Surprised and pleased, she lost no time in putting the mountains on their backs and giving the order: "Take them to some quieter place!"

The giant tortoises nodded and trooped off into the distance. She had pulled the mountains too hard, however, so that one of the creatures with a white beard on his chin had fallen off. . . . He could not even swim, let alone overtake the others, but prostrated himself on the beach, slapping his face. Nu-kua pitied him but paid no attention to him—she simply had no time to attend to such matters.

She sighed, her heart grew lighter. She turned around and saw the water lapping round her subside considerably, revealing broad stretches of earth and rock with a multitude of small creatures in the

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<sup>1</sup>These giant tortoises of the ocean were considered divine in ancient mythology.