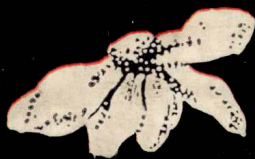


LAO SHE
CRESCENT
MOON
AND OTHER STORIES



Panda Books

老舍短篇小说选

熊猫丛书

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《中国文学》杂志社出版
(中国北京百万庄路24号)
中国国际图书贸易总公司发行
(中国国际书店)
外文印刷厂印刷
1985年第1版
00320
编号: (英) 2—916—32
10—E—1678P

Panda Books

Crescent Moon and Other Stories

LAO She, whose real name was Shu Qingchun, was a Manchu born in Beijing in 1899. He lost his father early, but in spite of his family's poverty managed to graduate from a normal college in 1917, after which he taught for some years and started writing.

In 1924 he went to England to teach in the School of Oriental and African Studies. While there he wrote several satirical novels. On his return to China he taught in universities, and among his many works was his masterpiece *Camel Xiangzi*, a novel about the tragedy of a rickshaw puller in the old society. After the outbreak of the anti-Japanese war, Lao She went to Chongqing and organized writers and artists to support the resistance. Then, in 1946, he went to America to lecture and write.

After his return to China in 1949, he became vice-chairman of the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles and the Chinese Writers' Association. He wrote twenty-three plays and many songs and ballads in praise of the new society. His *Teahouse* is the first Chinese play to have been staged and acclaimed abroad. A prolific, versatile and realistic writer, Lao She made an immense contribution to modern Chinese literature. He died in 1966 during the "cultural revolution".

Crescent Moon and Other Stories

Lao She



Panda Books

Panda Books
First edition 1985
Copyright 1985 by CHINESE LITERATURE
ISBN 0-8351-1334-5

Published by CHINESE LITERATURE, Beijing (37), China
Distributed by China International Book Trading Corporation
(GUOJI SHUDIAN), P.O. Box 399, Beijing, China
Printed in the People's Republic of China

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Preface

Hu Jieqing

IN 1956, Lao She chose thirteen of his favourite short stories from five earlier anthologies and compiled them into a book entitled *The Selected Short Stories of Lao She*. In a brief afterword, the author wrote that several of the stories in the book were about twenty-five years old, and that he could no longer remember precisely when they were written. He expressed the hope that readers would enjoy them as antiques, since antiques have their own special fascination.

The contents of the present collection of English translations differ somewhat from the volume mentioned above. Six of the original stories have been retained and six others added, leaving us a total of twelve stories. All of them were written between 1933 and 1937, the latest of them nearly fifty years ago.

It might be of interest to mention here that most of Lao She's novels have appeared in English translation, while this is so for only a relatively small percentage of his shorter fiction. The present volume represents an effort to remedy this imbalance. Actually, many of Lao She's short stories are extremely popular among readers. Lao She himself particularly liked "Crescent Moon", "A Vision", and "This Life of Mine", even though he

thought he was too unsophisticated to write short stories and felt he was better suited to writing novels. We'll leave this question unresolved for the present.

On a hot summer day, though there's hardly anything more refreshing than a cold bath, a simple glass of sour plum juice provides its own special form of enjoyment; if it "hits the spot", as they say, it can leave an impression which lasts a lifetime.

This book, then, can be compared to a cup of sour plum juice. It reveals a few aspects of the crises faced by the Chinese people, the corruption of Chinese society and the tragic side of life in China, besides stimulating thoughts and associations which extend far beyond its limited perspectives.

This book is a true "thirst-quencher". Try it and see!

Beijing

May 18, 1984

A Day in the Life

JUST as it was supposed to do, my alarm clock rang at 6:30. By barely raising my eyelids, I could tell that the sun's rays had not yet risen to the level of the window. I closed my eyes again; my faith in my alarm clock turned into reverence for the sun.

I didn't get up until eight o'clock. If I washed and ate breakfast quickly, I'd be able to get right down to work on my writing.

After breakfast, I smoked my first cigarette of the day and arranged the things on my desk. A special delivery letter arrived: Wang, a good friend of mine, would be passing through Ji'nan, and he asked me to meet him at the train station. I stopped writing, buttoned up my shirt, put on my hat and rushed out the door. There wasn't a single ricksha to be found outside my front door. No problem; if I ran down to the end of the alley, I'd be sure to find one. I thought to myself: spending time with good friends always makes me happy. Maybe I should tell Wang to get off the train and stay with me for a few days for a few good heart-to-heart talks. When I got to the end of the alley, there was not a single ricksha to be found. Maybe I sent all the ricksha pullers away!

After running a few hundred meters, I finally found one and jumped into the seat. "Take me to the Jinpu Station." The man was moving so quickly that I was

sure I'd be on time for the train. I started recalling my friend's smile and voice, and could imagine him trying to locate me on the crowded train platform.

No wonder no rickshas were available; the street we came to was full of them. Lined up as far as the eye could see, they had all stopped dead in their tracks. A silk store on the west side of the street was on fire. Seeing this, I immediately decided to go via a side street. Waiting there would have been sheer idiocy. I told the driver to make a detour. I was demonstrating how decisive and clever I could be.

Only after pulling into a side alley did the advantages of staying in the main street become evident. The alley was also jam-packed with rickshas; once you got in there, there was no backing out. I came up with another brilliant idea; giving the driver a dime, I leaped out of the ricksha with the agility of a monkey. Once I found my way out of this traffic jam, I could catch another ricksha and still make it to the station on time or at worst, ten minutes late.

The side flap of my padded cotton gown caught on the side of the ricksha, and I gave it a sharp tug. What was the loss of a single gown compared to the opportunity of seeing a good friend? I relinquished a large corner of my gown. But in tearing it free with a great burst of strength, my elbow smashed into a baby resting in its mother's arms. Without a second's hesitation, the mother let out with a crystal clear diatribe consisting of the most distasteful invectives, directed right to my face. Her voice sounded as loud and clear as if I were wearing a pair of earphones. The child was crying in a very strange manner; its mouth was as wide as the mouth of a volcano, but it didn't shed a single tear.

Offering an apology would have been fruitless. Those minor provocations which in most foreign countries are easily resolved with a polite "Excuse me" inevitably set off extended altercations in China. The entire crowd of bystanders, including five policemen; a bunch of old people, two girl students, a candy seller, two dozen street urchins and one mutt, swarmed around me so closely there was no way to escape. None of them said a word; they just stood there watching all the crying and swearing, and witnessing with big smiles on their faces every detail of my being hauled over the coals. The candy seller, bless his soul, had the makings of a saint; one glance from him and I immediately understood. I reached out and stuffed a big handful of candy into the child's arms. Instantly, the mouth of the volcano was sealed. The crowd must have been terribly disappointed. After paying the candy seller, I found an opening and thrust my way out of there.

When I got to the train station, I went directly to the China Travel Service representative. A man with tiny slit-like eyes, he was his usually polite self. And though I rarely came to the train station, he still remembered me. "Have you come to pick up your luggage, sir?"

"No, I'm here to meet someone." I didn't really have to say so much, since it was already ten o'clock. Unfortunately, my friend Wang didn't have the sort of influence required to keep the nine o'clock train waiting at the station for an hour.

The more I thought about it, the more exasperated I became. *I was ready to kill myself then and there.* However, when I left the station, I somehow managed to leave my suicide plans behind on the platform. Now I could go back and continue my writing.

When I got home, I discovered that my pet kitten had climbed up onto the roof. This was the first time it had behaved in this manner, and there was nothing I could do to induce it to come down. Old Tian, who is over sixty, gets dizzy every time he climbs a flight of stairs. He politely withdrew under the pretext of being too clumsy to climb up the side of the house, leaving it to me to show my stuff. I had no choice but to answer the call. I soon learned that this was no easy task, for after climbing halfway up the wall, my legs for some strange reason starting spinning around. This was no mere nervousness, but out and out trembling. Though Old Tian barely concealed his hostility behind a grin, I had to rely on him to give me a hand as I climbed.

Usually, all I had to do was call Snowball by its name and it would come over and start sniffing me and purring. But Snowball-on-the-Roof was an entirely different creature from Snowball-on-the-Ground. The more I called to it, the further it backed away. I knew that if I continued pursuing it, I'd force it over to the other side of the roof and very likely end up rolling off the roof like a snowball myself. After mouthing a lot of sweet nothings to no avail, I decided to imitate a woman's voice: "Come here, little Snowball. Come over here, sweetie pie Come and eat your liver. . . ." But again, all of this proved useless. I became impatient and started to threaten the cat, but that was equally futile.

After wasting nearly an hour at this business, my second sister arrived. She called Snowball's name once, and without the slightest regard for me, the cat leaped onto the wall — using my head as a bridge — and then

into my sister's outstretched arms — using my back for a ladder.

Of all my siblings, my second sister is the closest to me. Her best quality is that she doesn't interrupt my work. If she sees me busy writing, she doesn't say a word. All I have to do is say a few polite things to her and she immediately excuses herself and goes away.

"Why don't you play with Snowball for a little while," I said to her affectionately, "I've got a little writing to do."

"If you've got a few minutes first, do you think you could write something for me?" she replied with equal affection.

Of course I had a few minutes; she was always so nice to me, how could I refuse her?

What she needed was a letter. That made it even easier. Having just climbed down from my adventure on the roof, this would be a good way for me to prepare for my other writing.

My sister's letter was to the husband of her mother-in-law's niece's godmother's cousin's niece. It took us more than half an hour to figure out how to address him. As we discussed this question, I learned many things about the personalities of, and the relationships among her mother-in-law, her mother-in-law's niece, the godmother and the cousin. Just as she was telling me how the godmother had lost a tooth in 1903, Old Tian came in and announced that lunch was ready.

After lunch, my sister told me she was going to take a short nap, and that we could continue writing after she woke up.

I'm the kind of person who can never put an unfinished task out of mind. Any attempt to ignore her mother-

in-law's niece's godmother and get on with my writing was bound to result in Shakespeare ending up as somebody's niece's husband. Fortunately, my sister was only planning to take a quick nap.

But my sister's nap lasted until 3:30. She apologized profusely, telling me that the night before she had played four extra rounds of mahjong. In any case, it was now time to write the letter. But my sister suddenly decided that if she went to the Li's home near the eastern gate she could speak in person to that niece's husband's older brother, so writing the letter was no longer necessary.

After my sister left, I began to rearrange my desk and asked Old Tian to make me a pot of good strong tea. I needed something to exorcise that godmother and the rest of them from my mind.

When Old Tian brought the tea, he told me they were checking residence permits and asked me when my birthday was. I told him, "The first day of the first month in the lunar calendar."

If Old Tian heard something he suspected wasn't true, he always found someone to discuss it with. He told the policemen who were doing the checking, "It's a little hard to believe that the date he gave me is correct, since I seem to remember he was born in March. In any case I know his birthday can't be January 1." The policemen became suspicious, and seeing in this a chance to uncover a Communist Party organization, demanded to interrogate me in person. They carried out a lengthy investigation, in the course of which I explained that January in the lunar calendar was the same as March in the solar calendar, adding that I was born in the Year of the Dog. As soon as I mentioned the lunar

calendar, they promptly forgot about the Communist Party. But it meant wasting another fifteen minutes.

Four o'clock. I just remembered that today was the last day of a painting exhibition I wanted to see. For my writing's sake, however, I decided to sacrifice the exhibition, and picked up my pen once again. With a pen in my hand, I feel like everything is going my way; no matter how much excitement I've been through, I can always sit down and get to work.

The doorbell rang. The mail had arrived, a whole pile of letters. If I didn't open them immediately, those letters would begin to play naughty tricks on me. The first was from an old-age home asking for a contribution. The second was from my uncle. Did I want to buy some imported narcissus bulbs? The third was addressed correctly but the name was wrong. I started thinking about whether I should open it or not. I stared at it for many minutes, analysing the handwriting and the postmark in great detail and applying the detective methods of Sherlock Holmes, but all in vain. I put it aside. The fourth was a new book list. I browsed through it and found nothing of interest. The fifth was from a friend asking me to help him find a job. He needed an urgent reply, and so I decided to write to him immediately. Writing letters is like curing an illness: the longer you put it off, the harder it is to cure. I finished the letter but discovered I was short a one-cent stamp. I called to Old Tian, but he had gone out. I'll run down to the post office myself, I thought, it isn't very far away anyway.

By the time I'd mailed the letter, it was already dark outside. Since it's unhealthy to write before eating, I sat down and read the newspaper.