

The Young Coal-Miner and Other Stories

BY CONTEMPORARY CHINESE WRITERS

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The Little Listers

Fu Tseh

It was well after midday when our unit arrived at the place where we were to find our billets for the night.

We had got to a valley surrounded by sky-high mountains covered with pine, larch, oaks and many other trees and shrubs still bare of leaves although spring was drawing near. Through the bare branches and withered grass red sandstone could be seen dotted with patches of snow here and there. It was a beautiful scene under the setting sun.

The mountain stream-bed was nearly dry; only at the lower levels were several small pools covered with thin ice. Higher up there was no water at all, just a bed full of white round pebbles. Reeds and thorns grew thickly along both banks; they were withered and bare too.

The road by the stream twisted and turned up the mountain, through gorges, out again straight up a high peak, and then turning sharply back on itself. We could see it above us. The high peak, we knew, was the famous Mount Kil Myon, which we had got to climb the following day. Three months ago we had won a big victory there; one of our units had wiped out over a thousand enemy soldiers who had desperately held this mountain, and since then the front line had been rapidly pushed southwards. Today this place was well back in the rear, though it was still under heavy raids by enemy planes.

The interpreter sent by the local government led us across the stream. There was quite a pool here, covered

with a thin layer of ice, so thin that you could break it with a finger. We walked over a line of stepping stones. Ahead was a huge dark mountain range, some hundred metres off, across unploughed fields, their last year's stubble still standing. There were small orchards on the slopes, separated by low stonewalls.

Our interpreter pointed out the hut where we were to be billeted, and left. We went down a path between two of the low stonewalls to a hut at the foot of the mountain. As I went I began to search in my mind for my small Korean vocabulary, so as to have words ready for the owner of the house, whoever it was. Some old man or woman, I expected, or maybe a young housewife. But to my surprise, when we got there, three little girls opened the door for us. For a moment I did not know what to say to them. They none of them looked more than six, and all three seemed about the same age, and all alike, with the usual short bobbed hair, and red, round faces like apples. They smiled when they saw us and shouted a welcome.

"Volunteers! Very good, very good!"

"Volunteers!"

I told the men to sit down and rest outside and went into the house myself.

"Where is your mother?" I managed to say in my halting Korean.

"Gone there!" They pointed to the sky-high Mount Kil Myon. They might have meant that she had gone to her relatives' or to shop—I didn't know.

I didn't know when she would be back either. . . . We'd got to cook ourselves a meal and heat water for washing, and the men had got to get some sleep. The interpreter was gone. How ever would we be able to talk such things over with these little girls?

They stood there staring at me. Of course they didn't know what I was worrying about.

"Are you going up there?" asked one of them — she had on a short red cotton-padded jacket. She pointed at Mount Kil Myon to make sure I understood.

I shook my head. What I wanted to say was that we weren't going anywhere, and we only wanted to stay overnight in their house. This was too much for my amount of Korean, though, and I tried to explain with gestures and some Chinese words thrown in.

The three pairs of eyes stared at me for a moment, then after exchanging glances among themselves, they beamed at me again and the three burst into a big laughter.

The girl in the red jacket suddenly came out with a few words in Chinese herself. She said something about "our . . ." and then said, "We don't know," but it all ended in giggles.

She must be the eldest of them, I thought — she'd have to be considered our hostess.

"You," I said, pointing to their house, "mine," and pointed to the soldiers resting on the ground. "Stay here." I tried to illustrate sleeping by gesticulating.

This time they understood what I meant, though the one in the red jacket, still laughing, made it clear that my Korean was awful.

Then she turned round, suddenly serious, and spoke to her two sisters. I could see her mother speaking from the manner the child adopted, the mother we had never met. I could see in her child a resolute Korean woman who had undergone much hardship and suffering.

The two little things nodded and began to clear away the things from the raised part of the room, which served as the sleeping place. The eldest sister looked at them, and said something—it must have been to leave more space free. Then she turned to look at our men and began counting them. There was not going to be nearly enough room. She opened a door and went through another room. I could see into it: it was empty and I

could not think why she did not suggest we should just go there in the first place. Perhaps they didn't want us to take too much space. Afterwards I learned that she didn't think the other room was warm enough, nor was there any matted space there. Anyway, now that it was clear we could not all get into the first room, she made up her mind and pulled me over to the door.

It was not much of a place, I must say. It did not seem to have been used for some time. It was quite bare, save for a few old straw sacks, and it smelt of mould.

I said it was all right, though, and she understood me, and beckoned to the men to come. She was a most considerate little hostess! Obviously still worried, she tried to express her apologies for the cold bare room, hugging herself to show that she was talking about the cold, and saying, "Awful, awful!"

I called the men in and we began to settle down. The smaller children came and tried to make some of us go into the other room. One of them, in her bare feet, scampered over and dragged me out by the hand, much to the amusement of the men, who, though tired, were very touched.

I went with them, but it was hopeless to think we could all get in there. I decided that two of the most exhausted men should sleep there, though. The children still tried to do their best to look after us, and helped me off with my kit, tidying it up, putting the food bag into the cupboard, and so on. The biggest one showed me where the cooking-pots were, and where the wood and water bucket were kept.

This sweet, practical kindness made me nearly forget my hunger. I could only smile at first. Then I pulled myself together and began to think of making some hot food. I picked the child up to hug her, and then told the men to get going on a fire and boil some water. The children put their shoes on and came to help, showing us everything and trying to do anything they could, skimming around us like butterflies. We tried to stop them several times and make them sit down, but they just waved us off.

I was splitting firewood when the girl with the red jacket ran up and pulled at my sleeve. Obviously she wanted me to go and see something, so, still holding the chopper, I followed her—to the kitchen, as it turned out.

It was a cheerful scene. One of the children was showing the squad second-in-command how to light the queer little Korean stove. He had got the wood burning well, and the light flickered over the child nestling against him, and his unshaven face. She was a proper "little teacher." When she told him to push a bit more wood in, he obediently carried out her orders. I grinned when I saw it, since I knew he was one of the quiet but stubborn sort, and it was an awful job making him do anything that he did not want to do. Nice to see him now, being so meek! Just then one of the men, Little Chou, called me.

"Staff Officer Feng, come here, quick!"

Little Chou was smiling all over his face as he tried to stop the littlest one getting right into the cupboard to fetch out their copper bowls. The child was so small that she couldn't reach the back of the shelf, and her legs were dangling in the air. I asked the eldest one to stop her, but she refused with a stern shake of the head.

I went over and pulled the child out gently. She pulled herself away, obviously cross with me, and looked at me with her lips pursed. She said something I couldn't understand and then began to pick up the bowls she had already succeeded in getting. The pile was much too heavy for her, and she caught her foot in a bit of firewood on her way to the stove and dropped the lot. Luckily they were copper and didn't break. We all

laughed, and I wouldn't let the big sister reproach her. Little Chou picked the little one up and said it was the squad second-in-command's fault for leaving firewood all over the floor, to which he agreed in good humour.

The eldest child pulled at me again and I obediently followed her. She took me to a cooking-pot covered with a cloth and pulled the cloth off. Obviously she meant us to eat the food in it, three bowls of rice, one dish of sour vegetables and one dish of red pepper sauce. It seemed to be the supper that their mother had left ready for them.

I had a difficult time trying to explain that we had brought our food with us, but I convinced her at last and covered the food up again. Then we went back to the room. The three girls showed us everything which they thought useful for us, always with the sweetest smiles. We got the fire going well and got the rice cooked.

Little Chou came over to me to see about the food to go with the rice. "What about frying that salted fish?" he suggested.

"Um," I said, thinking that we still had several days to go and the fish was meant to be kept for later.

He knew what I had in mind, but said, "Oughtn't we to give our hostesses a treat?"

"All right, then!" I said. "Let's have the fish."

He was encouraged by this, and tried again. "How about opening a tin of meat, too?" he asked tentatively.

That's all very well, I thought. I gave him an inch and now he wants a foot! But before I said anything, he added hurriedly, "Only one tin, for them, not for us at all."

"... All right!" I said, as though I was grudging it. Heaven knows I wasn't — I was in full agreement with him.

When the food was ready we ate outside under the eaves, with the special dishes set aside for the children. The second-in-command thought it was not enough, so

he took some from our dishes to put with it. "That's right! Give them more!" the men said approvingly.

But by now our little guests had run over to the low stonewall under the peach trees and begun to sing, first only broken phrases, and then a song in unison. When they finished one they discussed what to sing next and decided on the March of the Chinese People's Volunteers.

Spirit high, stout of heart,
The Yalu River we cross. . . .

They followed it with the Bright Sky over the Liberated Area and We, the Workers, Have Strength.

They were trying to sing them in Chinese for us, but they were not at all sure of the words, and those they knew they mispronounced, so we could only guess from the tune what they were singing, but they kept on very sweetly, and were quite unselfconscious about it.

"Some of our soldiers must have taught them," said Little Chou, who had gone over to them. "They're very clever, the little devils!"

"Who are you calling little devils?" said the squad second, disapproving of the expression. "D'you think you're so much better than them, eh? You'd much better see if we can't get them to eat something."

The men agreed vigorously and there was a general rush over to the children.

The children laughed and jumped down into the corn stubble on the further side of the wall, dodging being caught. Finally, one after another, they were captured and carried over to the house. They were a bit shy in the beginning but soon began to eat happily.

Then the eldest sister discovered that their dishes were different from ours. First she asked us to eat with them, but Little Chou went over, his mouth full, and said, "Don't you like this? Do have some."

The eldest child said something to the other two and they each picked up a dish and came over to our ring.

What could we do? We couldn't push them away. I started to say something, and Little Chou guessed what it was. "Let's open another tin!" he said promptly, to the great satisfaction of the men.

The squad leader stealthily opened a bottle of wine, took a mouthful and held it out to us, saying, "Come on!"

I could not tell you how long we took over supper. We were all intent on seeing that the children had a good meal.

Afterwards they insisted on helping to wash the dishes. When it was all cleared away Little Chou and several of the others asked the children to dance for us.

As serious as ever, the eldest sister became the "director," and after a little discussion they began to put on their make-up by the stonewall. It is a Korean custom that when a girl is putting on make-up, she should be surrounded by other girls so as not to be seen by the audience, and they kept to this. Their make-up was nothing more than a package of powder they found in their mother's wooden trunk, which they dabbed on with a piece of cotton-wool. When they came out to the "stage" their little faces were as white as lime. They had wanted to search for proper costumes, but we wouldn't let them.

The performance began, starting with some Korean dances which we had already seen somewhere else, but they went on to some we knew nothing about. Solemn little things! They were as self-possessed as grown-up girls, and they danced as seriously as if they were on a real stage. After each dance finished they put their heads together to discuss the next, and we had to wait until they were ready. We were an enthusiastic audience, and encored them every time.

Dusk falls very early in the mountains. The last rays of the setting sun were on the opposite mountain-tops,

and the moon began to show through the tangled branches of the trees. The valley was still and quiet.

None of us will ever forget these three children dancing so gracefully in the moonlit valley. Their piping little voices, their childish movements under the peach branches, their self-possession. . . .

Suddenly there was a loud roar of aeroplanes from the mountains to our left, a roar which filled the whole valley. The next minute two fighter planes came low over us, so low that we could clearly see the smoke from their exhaust.

The three children were terrified and ran to us. The youngest one, trembling with fear, clung to the squad second. I called to the men to take the children and pick up what we could and take cover under the trees.

I stood under a pine tree with the biggest sister in my arms. She was trembling and burying her head in my shoulder. I could see one aeroplane against the sky, machine-gunning up on the peak of Mount Kil Myon.

What are they raiding up there? Had we got some troops there? I worried as I watched, and then more enemy planes came up, and we could hear bomb explosions.

"They must have seen something," I thought. "I didn't know we'd got anybody up there now."

Suddenly the whistle of a bomb began to sound right over our heads.

"Lie down! Don't move!" I yelled.

Four bombs fell halfway up the nearest mountain. Smoke rose from among the trees and a big pine tree crashed. The narrow valley could not contain such a loud explosion. It sounded as if the whole mountain was bursting. The noise was deafening and reverberated among the mountains for a long time.

"Oh, Mother!" cried the littlest sister.

The big sister in my arms leaned forward and called to her. I could feel a hot tear trickle down on to my hand.

"Hold her tight!" I said to Little Chou, and then turned to the big sister. "It's all right, dear child!" I said. "Don't worry."

The enemy planes hung about for a while and then left. We went back to the house, but the children didn't want to dance any more. We tried to amuse them by teaching them to sing.

But now they seemed to have lost their spirits, especially the big sister. She tried to help us cheer up the two little ones, but she seemed to be listening for something all the time. At first I thought that they had been scared by the bombs, but then I realized that they were waiting for their mother to return.

She had told them that she would be back at night, I said to myself. I thought of the three bowls of rice ready in the pot, and imagined how she had kissed them goodbye and told them to be good girls and stay at home, and how she turned back to look at them every few steps as she went off.

The moonlight was bright in the mountain valley now, covering the trees and hilltops with a milky mist; the water in the pools began to freeze again. Still the mother did not come back.

Surely she was a bit too bold! How could she let three such little girls spend the night by themselves in these lonely mountains? Something must have detained her. Perhaps now, I thought, she's already on her way back, coming carefully down the steep hill path.

The big sister broke away from us first. She ran over to the door, put on her shoes and went out. The two little ones followed her out. We were just starting a meeting, and I waited uneasily.

Just as we started we could hear the big sister's voice. "Mother. . . ."

"Mummy, Mummy," echoed the other little voices. In the silent night the sound filled the valley. "Staff Officer Feng!" called out the squad leader. The words burst out of him as though he was in pain.

"Little Chou," I said, "go and bring them in."

Off he went with two of the others.

"Mummy!" The voice rang out again a tearful, childish sound. Little Chou came back quickly. "They won't come in," he said. I got up myself and went out. There they were, under the moonlight, leaning against the stonewall, staring up towards Mount Kil Myon and calling their mother in turn.

"Little sisters," I said. I could hear my own voice was trembling, too. "Come in!"

The big sister turned round and ran to me. "We want Mother," she burst out, flinging herself into my arms and bursting into tears. The little ones came after her. We picked them up and cuddled them in our coats. They were as cold as ice. Little Chou tried to distract the third sister by pointing at the moon and saying, with appropriate actions, that he would pull it down for her. He succeeded for a minute, but then she turned back again to stare at the great peak, standing so quietly in front of us.

"Take them in," I said. "It's too cold out here."

We went in and continued with the meeting. Three of us held a child each, and rocked them gently till they fell asleep.

When the meeting was over we put them down on their quilts side by side and covered them up. They looked so touching, those three little faces, like three blossoming flowers.

We put the candle out, and lay down ourselves, but I for one could not sleep. The way they had called for their mother, and now their gentle, deep breathing, beat at my ears. The guard outside kept on stamping his feet to keep warm. We had to go on the next morning, and still the mother did not come back. I was worried. Who would take care of the children? What ever could

the mother be doing? My head was full of thoughts, until finally the fatigue of a long day's journey overcame me and I, too, fell asleep. I was suddenly awakened by someone talking. I didn't know what time it was. My first thought was that it must be the mother coming back. Then I woke up fully. It was a man's voice. Little Chang, the guard, was speaking outside to someone who had an interpreter with him. Then he opened the door and called me quietly.

"What is it?" I got up and asked.

"The interpreter and the village head."

I lit up the candle as the interpreter and the village head stepped in from the cold.

"Don't get up," the interpreter said. "The village head's come here to see the children."

What ever does the village head want to see the children for at this time of night, I wondered. I felt more like telling him to find their mother for them. I sat there, looking at them, despite the earnest request of the village head that I should lie down again. He walked over, looking at the sleeping children, and sighed.

I couldn't help saying what I thought to the interpreter. He smiled bitterly and said briefly, "Their mother's dead!"

"What!" Little Chou turned over and sat up. So did most of the men. Like me, they had been awakened by the conversation.

"Dead!" the interpreter repeated sadly. "Those enemy planes got her on the peak of Mount Kil Myon just before dark."

"What?" "Those planes we saw!" "Why should they bomb her!" We all exclaimed in horror.

"Yes, they got her," said the interpreter. "They bombed an ox-cart. Both she and the driver were killed."

"Oh, damn them. Damn them for ever!" said the squad second, kicking at his quilt. The listening men echoed his words. The village head brushed the back