

THEY WERE THREE



They Were Three

by Wang An-yu and Others

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They Were Three

by Wang An-yu

Chiu-shan was sound asleep at home. Suddenly someone thumped him. He opened his eyes, and saw his good friend Ta-ming standing by his bed. Ta-ming cracked a smile and said: "It's afternoon already. Aren't you afraid that so much sleep will make you tired?" Chiu-shan sat up abruptly and asked: "What's the matter?" Ta-ming, all cocky now, replied: "I got some great news."

"What great news?"

"Mao-tsai just told me that the PLA is coming to our village tomorrow so that the people can meet them. The whole production brigade is preparing to welcome them. If I'm lying, I'll be a monkey's uncle!"

Chiu-shan broke into a smile when he heard this. "Okay! Okay! The grown-ups are preparing, what are we going to do?"

"I've got an idea," Ta-ming replied. "Let's go and find Shih-tou to talk it over." Chiu-shan agreed and these two mischievous kids ran out.

Ta-ming and Chiu-shan were both sons of poor fishing folks, and both fourteen years of age. Since the previous year, they had been learning how to punt and steer a boat. And with Ta-ming in command they had also organized themselves into a spare-time youth study group and used their time after school to help catch the prawn fry in the sea for the aquatic breeding farms. The grown-ups were very pleased with the children and they all said how promising they were.

The late summer afternoon sky was already clouding over. The rain drops, occasionally, fell on the children's faces. They walked south down the road for a while and finally stopped in front of the doorway of a building. The door was tightly shut. Chiu-shan placed his hand over his mouth, faced the door and cried out twice. "Hoot! Hoot!" The door opened a crack. Then a young boy stepped out. This was Shih-tou. Shih-tou's father, Li Hung-ching, worked as a technician on a trawler. He was good and enthusiastic in his work but bad in the ways of teaching children. One moment, he was all warm and amiable, patting or hugging them; another moment he would start ranting with glaring eyes. So, Shih-tou was terribly afraid of making him angry and because of this, the boy had forbidden his pals from going to call for him at his home. They had fixed a secret call signal. If

they wanted him to come out, they would hoot outside and Shih-tou would steal out.

When he saw Ta-ming and Chiu-shan standing in the doorway, he made a wry face and asked in a whisper: "What's up?"

Ta-ming told him the good news and then continued: "My mother has already prepared some food to welcome the PLA. Chairman Mao called on us to **'support the army and cherish the people.'** I thought we could use our time this afternoon to trap some crabs. Tomorrow when the PLA arrive, we'll welcome them with a treat. What do you say?"

Shih-tou agreed completely with Ta-ming's capital idea. But he turned an anxious face skyward and his heart skipped a beat. He said: "Look at the weather. Do you think it'll be alright?"

"We'll follow the shore close by the sea." Ta-ming replied. "The minute the weather changes, we'll head for home."

"Let's go and ask Brother Mao-tsai," Chiu-shan suggested. "Anyhow, we're being perfectly open about this. He'll definitely support us."

"Yes. It's getting late," Ta-ming added. "If we're going, let's get a move on." They didn't even wait for Shih-tou's reply before dragging him along.

The three children reached the docks. Ta-ming found Chang Mao-tsai, the secretary of the docks

Party branch, and told him what they had on their minds. Mao-tsai felt that the children's idea was good. It was only because the weather was so bad that he was a little reluctant to let them go. Ta-ming said: "Don't worry. We won't wander far." He knew that the gang of kids had some boating experience and had a warm love for the army.

"All right, then. When you're fishing for crabs," he went on, "stay in the shallow water. The moment the weather changes, dock the boat." Ta-ming replied: "Yes," and the three kids leapt and jumped and raced for the east pier of the docks. There was a small fishing boat moored here that belonged to the brigade's aquatic breeding farm. During the spring it was used to capture prawn fry. But the season was now over, and so the boys could use the boat in the bay all day long to practise punting and steering.

Ta-ming climbed on board to make an inspection. He turned to Chiu-shan and said: "Okay, let's hurry up and get everything ready." Half an hour later, Ta-ming and Shih-tou were back at the dock with their crab-catching gear, but Chiu-shan was nowhere in sight. Just when Shih-tou started to get impatient, he saw Chiu-shan come carrying hooks, rakes, pots and a storm-lantern. Shih-tou was not as experienced as Chiu-shan in the ways of the sea, so that when he caught sight of Chiu-

shan, he accused him unfairly: "You really know how to kill time. It's already getting dark."

"I'm more anxious than you are," Chiu-shan said. "But the more anxious I got, the harder it was to find the storm-lantern."

"But we don't plan to spend the night outside," Shih-tou countered. "So what use is the lantern?"

Chiu-shan got into the boat and replied in a serious tone: "Have you forgotten what the grown-ups said? No matter how far you go to sea, be it one step or one kilometre, a lantern, water and fire should always be carried on the ship."

"He's right," Ta-ming added. "We shouldn't miss any one of a thousand preparations, even if the chances of having an accident are only one in a thousand. What would happen if we really met up with a storm?" He saw that Chiu-shan had already weighed anchor. He fixed the rudder and began to punt.

There was a small dock in Changchia Bay. Less than a hundred metres south of the dock lay the open sea. The sea to the east was studded with hidden shoals and desolate islands. Because people were unable to get on to these islands, their crevices were filled with oysters and large, meaty red-claw crabs.

When the small craft left the shelter of the bay, it went first from west to east, working its way along the promontory. It moved slowly until it

reached the hills which stretched out in a southeasterly direction. The boat then followed the coastline to the south. Because the western side of the hills was lined with shoals, it was difficult to cast the nets and sailors had to be doubly careful navigating here. A beacon had been erected on the southern tip of the hills to guide the boats so that they wouldn't wander into the area and strike the shoals. In any case, all boats entering Changchia Bay had to make a large detour around the promontory. Ta-ming and the others rowed the boat until they reached the base of the beacon, then reversed direction, and went from the northeast to the southwest in the direction of one of the small islands. When they reached an inlet in the island, Ta-ming used the oars to stop the boat colliding with the island and Chiu-shan secured the anchor on the slope of the shore. Then they clambered onto the island which was a big rock bare of trees, grass and even earth. Looking east from the island, the hills were less than one kilometre away. But Changchia Bay was more than twice that distance.

The three kids started along the sea ledge, using the iron hook to fish up the crabs from the water and the cracks in the rocks. The crabs were really big, with bright red pincers as thick as a thumb. Chiu-shan took off his shirt and tied it around his waist. He probed the cracks with the iron hook and then with a couple of tugs and jerks, he would

suddenly raise the hook, and there was a crab the size of a big bowl dangling on the end. Within two hours they had captured more than half a potful of crabs. He smiled at their success and suggested: "Let's get a head start tonight. First of all we'll cook them cherry red so that when the PLA arrive tomorrow, we can place the crabs in front of them and tell them, 'Eat first. These crabs are the speciality of the area.' "

Ta-ming continued: "We caught them ourselves and that's not the same as buying them."

Ta-ming and his friends were so taken up in fishing among the rocks for crabs for the army that they didn't even raise their heads to look at the sky. So, the crash of thunder that suddenly came rolling down on their heads as if a mountain was being blasted open took them completely by surprise. Shih-tou looked up, startled. The sky that had been so clear a while ago was now overcast and black. Thunder roared continuously, and lightning flashed again and again. Shih-tou said: "This is hopeless. There's a real storm brewing," and started for the boat anchored in the inlet. Chiu-shan looked at Ta-ming who was acting as if nothing had happened. He put down his pot and walked towards the top of the rock.

There was a story behind Ta-ming's calmness. His father had been at sea for thirty years and had experienced every kind of storm imaginable.

Before liberation, he and two others had wiped out five pirates, and in 1956, when he was setting his nets on the open sea, he met a force-11 typhoon. The storm raged for three days and three nights and they were blown more than five hundred kilometres off course. Not only did they survive the typhoon but later managed to haul in more than five thousand kilos of fish. Since his childhood, Ta-ming had been fascinated by the older generation's tales of their battles against the sea. He learned a great deal from them. The previous year he had been gathering spring prawn fry, when a force-6 north wind struck. The small boat he was in was forced four kilometres off course, but he was able to bring the boat safely back to port. He was, therefore, naturally regarded as the children's leader.

Shih-tou was in a panic and wanted to board their little boat. But since Ta-ming had not expressed his opinion, Shih-tou simply waited by the side of the boat.

The hills to the north were already blurred by the rain and fog. The wind at the peak was probably force-7 at least, and the sea, whipped up by the wind, was covered with foaming white-caps. Ta-ming still remained calm and collected. When Chiu-shan saw him come down to the sea ledge, he rushed up and asked: "What should we do? Leave?"

"No!" Ta-ming replied firmly. "No way. The older folks told us not to take the boat out in high winds and no forced landing if the waves are too great! We can't leave now."

Just then the wind and rain arrived. The rain came down in torrents. The three squatted on the island, thoroughly drenched. Ta-ming and Chiu-shan looked at each other. Chiu-shan's hair was plastered to his skull, water streamed down his face in a non-stop flow. Ta-ming's shirt stuck to his body. Suddenly an air pocket would form and the shirt would billow up as if a small mouse were running about inside it. But they were like the PLA, standing firm hour after hour. The rain finally let up and stopped around eight. But the wind that followed the rainstorm was still great. As far as they could see, the sea was covered with thick rolling fog. They couldn't even see the lights of Changchia Bay, only in the skies to the north could they see the flashes of lightning. "It looks bad." Chiu-shan broke the silence. "It looks as if the rain is going to go on."

Ta-ming quickly judged the direction of the wind and said: "Okay, let's get going. Let's try to row home!"

The three kids came down to the sea and boarded the boat by the light of one of the flashes still tearing the sky. Shih-tou turned on the lantern. Chiu-shan secured their three pots and weighed anchor.

The small boat left the island. They started out east, then turned around and rowed north. The gale was still blowing at force-4. The boat rode the crests of the waves, its bow now pointing up, now pointing down. Ta-ming and Chiu-shan put all their strength into rowing the boat while Shih-tou faithfully held the lantern. But they were still young, with limited strength, and today they hadn't even had their dinner. On top of all that, they were rowing against a headwind. Chiu-shan was soon so tired that his face was drenched in sweat and he was gasping for breath. Ta-ming noticed this and told Shih-tou to take Chiu-shan's place. Shih-tou gave him the lantern and took over the oar. After rowing for a while, Ta-ming, too, was exhausted. Chiu-shan handed the lantern to Ta-ming and they switched places. They rotated like this for more than an hour, but the small boat had still gone less than one kilometre.

The three of them braved the wind and waves and chanted with all their might: **"Be resolute, fear no sacrifice and surmount every difficulty to win victory."** They pressed on towards the north bank. Suddenly they heard the blasts of a foghorn from the outer sea off the bay. At first they didn't pay much attention. It was only when the sound of the engines had come within earshot that Ta-ming noticed that the beacon was not working, apparently damaged by the windstorm. Ta-ming

shone the lantern east. All he could see was the pitch black sea with something looming up in front of them like a large water-buffalo. He wiped the sweat away from his face. "Look," he said. "We've reached Long Neck. We've completed two of the three legs of our journey."

"Long Neck" was the nickname given by the people to the chain of rocks lying in the sea. It was less than one kilometre from here to the shore. If they rowed really hard, they would be ashore in less than half an hour. When the children saw this rocky shoal, they could already see the doors of their homes in their mind's eye. How relieved they were! But just then they again heard the foghorn blasts. The sound of the engines was coming closer and closer. Judging from the blasts, they realized that the ship would reach the hills very soon. "There's going to be trouble," Ta-ming said. "Listen Chiu-shan, do you think the ship might collide with the shore rocks?"

Chiu-shan was worried too. "This is a real mess," he replied. "What can we do?"

Ta-ming listened closely to the sounds of the engines. He made up his mind very quickly. "Let's hurry back east. Row the boat back to the foot of the promontory and we can climb up the hills to signal to the ship." Chiu-shan gave his assent and starting rowing back at once. The boat moved forward to the hills, but once there, the wind lashed

so hard at the sea that the children failed in three attempts to dock the boat, driven back each time by the force of the waves.

"I'm afraid that by the time we climb up to the hills, the steamer will have arrived," Shih-tou said. Ta-ming listened again for the ship's engines. The sound was getting closer all the time. And while they were unable to climb up, the ship approached relentlessly. Ta-ming opened the lantern, faced southeast and started waving it. But there was no reaction from the other side.

"Why don't they stop when they see the lantern?" Chiu-shan asked.

"They can't see it," Ta-ming replied. "The hills are blocking their view. This isn't the proper place to signal."

"Well," Chiu-shan asked. "What should we do then?"

"What should we do?" Ta-ming didn't reply at once. It was quite clear — if they wanted the ship to see the lantern, they must row the boat back to the hillside where they had originally been fishing for crabs. He thought of the words of Chairman Mao that a Communist should **"look upon the interests of the revolution as his very life"** and of the countless revolutionaries who had resolutely withstood every danger in the interests of the people. He was determined to row the boat back, and would have done so even if there had been a

mountain of knives in front of him. When Ta-ming still did not reply, Chiu-shan said: "Say something. We should be like the PLA — able to overcome any conceivable difficulty."

Ta-ming looked south and yelled: "Back the way we came!"

At his command, Chiu-shan and Shih-tou immediately started rowing with all their might. The boat swiftly turned about and then started southward.

Rowing very quickly in their anxiety, and with a tailwind helping them on, the children arrived back at the little island in no time at all. Shih-tou turned on the lantern and Ta-ming steadied the boat against the rock on the bank. Chiu-shan let out a gasp and hurled the iron anchor ashore. They clambered out of the boat, and, panting, started up the hills. To the east they spotted a red light flashing on the ocean. As it moved northwest, it was rushing towards the southern tip of the hills. Ta-ming immediately took the lantern from Shih-tou and started signalling and waving the lantern. Meanwhile Chiu-shan was shouting: "Ahoy there! Don't go forward! There are reefs ahead! Don't go forward!" Someone on the ship must have spotted the light on the island, for the engines suddenly stopped. After a brief pause, the engines started up again. All the three boys could see was the ship slowly changing course and moving south in the

direction indicated by the lantern signal. It travelled about one kilometre before turning around and heading northwest in the direction to Changchia Bay. When they saw that the ship had safely entered the harbour, they smiled and jumped for joy. They were left speechless. They forgot their tiredness, the cold. After the ship's red light had disappeared in the bay, they started towards their own little boat, but when they reached the base, they were taken by surprise.

"We're really in a mess now," Shih-tou said suddenly. "Our boat's gone."

They had been in such a rush to climb up the island to signal to the boat that they did not anchor the boat securely enough. The strong winds had dislodged the anchor and dragged the boat back away from the island. It was now about a hundred metres off shore.

The weather on the island was quite different from the mainland: when night falls, even in summer you still have to wear a padded jacket. They were only wearing T-shirts. Even these were soaked through, and the children had had nothing to eat. Once they stopped moving, then, they felt as if they were covered with ice.

Chiu-shan was a real optimist, never getting discouraged no matter what difficulties lay before him. Now, however, he was so cold that he could not help shivering. But he used all his strength to