

The Young Skipper

AND OTHER STORIES



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Young Skipper*

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THE YOUNG SKIPPER

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The Young Skipper

Chang Tao-yu and Chang Cheng-yu

CLOSE to Gold Hill Bay, on the East China Sea, is located the headquarters of a fishing brigade. The fishermen of this brigade seemed to possess the "Dragon King's key to the sea," for every time they put out, they never failed to return with fine catches. Year after year, their haul increased. Notable among them are the crewmen of motorized trawler No. 715 and her auxiliary vessel. Known for their socialist consciousness and sound outlook, they have been rated as an advanced unit of the brigade. Every season their haul surpassed that of others by 15 to 20 tons. The red banner of the advanced unit fluttering from their main mast seemed to have taken root there.

But last autumn, much to everyone's surprise, No. 715's catch fell behind that of No. 717 by about 20 tons, while the other boats were catching up too. Some units were close runners-up. The red banner had to be transplanted to the mast of No. 717! Just at this critical moment, No. 715's old skipper had a severe attack of rheumatism and had to go off to the hospital.

The crewmen felt that a skipper was to them what a commander was to soldiers, and put in a request to the leadership of the fishing fleet to send another skipper as early as possible. Aiming at a new record catch, the leadership weighed the matter in the interest of the whole brigade and answered their request. But who would the new skipper be? This had become the main topic of conversation among the sailors of No. 715.

As a folk adage says: A high flood brings in gold; a lesser one brings in silver; but the golden season of fishing does not wait. For three days a wind had been blowing at sea. As the day was drawing close for them to set out, the crewmen were anxious to have their new skipper, but no one showed up. "Sea Tiger" Ah-jung got impatient. He went to the brigade headquarters to inquire.

"What's the hurry?" Old Chou, secretary of the brigade Party branch committee, said to him leisurely. "With rice in hand, you needn't worry about the meals. With salt in hand, you needn't worry about the fish spoiling. The Party branch is studying the matter. We guarantee that you won't be delayed."

Ah-jung almost jumped up with joy. He darted off to the brigade propaganda team, where he picked up drums and gongs, threw them over his shoulder with a clang, and rushed back to his boat.

All hands were on deck on the day the new skipper was to arrive. The gongs and the drums were sounding off loudly. A stout drumstick in each hand, Ah-hsing, an experienced seiner, was pounding on a big drum with gusto.

It was nearly noon when the new skipper finally arrived, accompanied by Party Secretary Chou. The gongs and drums sounded still louder when the men moved over to welcome them. But, what was this? The new skipper was none other than Ah-hsing's 28-year-old nephew. Ah-hsing's heart sank, and the sticks in his hands automatically came to a pause. The gongs, too, seemed to lose their ring.

Finally, Ah-hsing put the drumsticks down and drew the Party secretary aside. "I say, Comrade Chou, in sailing boats or catching fish, a lot depends on the skipper and his skill. I'll say my nephew Ah-hai is strong and energetic, but don't you think he's a little young to be a skipper?"

"Comrade Ah-hsing," replied Party Secretary Chou, "whether sailing boats or catching fish, what you rely on is Mao Tsetung Thought and the joint effort of the collective. You don't measure the sea with a pail. So you mustn't judge a man only by his looks. Ah-hai is a Party member, the second hand on boat 717. He has matured under the personal guidance of his skipper who knows the sea like the palm of his hand. The Party branch committee has reviewed his qualifications quite thoroughly before deciding to send him to be your new skipper." Then, in lighter vein, Chou continued, "Perhaps he's not welcome here. In that case, how about sending him back?"

Ah-hsing knew Ah-hai well. He and Ah-hai's father were distant cousins. They had worked together on a boat for a tyrannical fishing-boat owner before the liberation, slaving all year round in all sorts of weather. One hard winter day shortly before Spring Festival, when they were far out at sea catching hair-tail fish, a fresh gale

came up from the northwest. Sea-gulls flew low, screaming before the approaching storm, while enormous foam-crested waves began bearing down upon the boat. The devilish boat-owner did not allow the men to return to port before it was too late, but forced them to take advantage of the gale to get in all the fish they could. The boat was driven into an area of submerged reefs known as White Breaker Rocks, where at a place called Broadside Wave Turn she was rammed and sank with all 16 hands on board, including Ah-hai's father. Only Ah-hsing and one other fisherman survived. Ah-hsing had helped Ah-hai's mother to bring the lad up.

After liberation, Ah-hai went to school for several years and then became a fisherman, working alongside Ah-hsing. He grew into a fine young man who cherishes deep love for the Party and Chairman Mao, has a sound socialist outlook and is good at his work. In a few years he became engineer on boat No. 717. During the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, he conscientiously studied Chairman Mao's works and applied Chairman Mao's teachings to his work. As head of a revolutionary mass organization in the brigade, he had fought in the front ranks of those defending Chairman Mao's revolutionary line, and was highly thought of by his associates. His uncle, Ah-hsing, was of course well pleased with all of this. But now that Ah-hai was to be his skipper, he could not conceal some doubts he had about his nephew's ability in that capacity. Party Secretary Chou's remarks were helpful, however, and he went on deck and surveyed the lad from head to foot. There stood his nephew with strong arms and a sturdy, straight back, his complexion well tanned and his big round eyes smiling under thick

dark brows. They used to see each other often, but today this young man was more than ever an image of his father.

Ah-hai was not at all embarrassed by his uncle's scrutiny. Candidly he said, "Uncle, I've got plenty to learn from the comrades here."

"In that case, you'd better get acquainted with the boat first," suggested Ah-hsing. "We're leaving for the fishing ground in a few days."

When Ah-hsing started introducing the new skipper to the crew, mostly his childhood pals, everybody appeared a bit unnatural. Party Secretary Chou cut in with a smile, "You may have been working on different boats, but you're certainly no strangers to each other. Do you think he needs introducing? Isn't it like adding salt to salted fish?"

At this, Ah-chin, Ah-fa, Ah-jung, Young Chen and other members of the crew swarmed over their new skipper, caught his hands and pulled him into the cabin. Their merry laughter rang throughout the vessel.

II

A three days' wind had swept away all clouds, and countless stars sparkled in the sky. Slowly the dawn appeared on the horizon. A mist hung low over the sea like a veil until a morning breeze tore it to ribbons and scattered it far and wide. Then the rising sun gilded the surface of the sea, the dark blue water turned to crimson with myriad golden lights dancing everywhere.

"Red is the east, rises the sun. China has brought forth a Mao Tsetung..." The song *The East Is Red* rang out vigorously as the trawlers swung away from the quay. A new challenge faced the crew!

No. 715 led off, cut through the waves like a knife, leaving in its wake an ever-lengthening silver streamer that glistened in the sun. On the deck a hot debate was going on. The majority of the crew believed they could fulfil their plan to catch 190 tons of fish that winter, as Ah-hai had pledged on behalf of the No. 715 crew and their Party group at the brigade mobilization meeting. Ah-hsing had accepted somewhat dubiously the target figure. At the back of his mind he thought that it was unrealistic. The new skipper Ah-hai listened carefully with an open mind.

"I say," said "Sea Tiger" Ah-jung, representing the majority view, "if we want to make substantial increases in our catches, we must first have the will to do so. It's all up to us to decide. If No. 717 can set a target of 175 tons, why can't we aim at 190?"

"Who doesn't want to catch a lot of fish?" Ah-hsing declared meaningfully. "Last winter we caught only 125 tons. Now, with the same crew and nets, we think we can get 190. Everybody in the county says that No. 717's skipper knows the sea by heart, and they set their target at only 175 tons. Do you think you young fellows can beat that skipper?"

"It's because we've got so many young people on our boat that we should do better than 717!" Ah-fa interposed.

"Yes, young people are full of pep," Ah-hsing continued, "but technique... that's something solid and indispensable."

"Whether or not we fulfil this winter's 190-ton quota is a matter of responding to Chairman Mao's great call: **'Be prepared against war, be prepared against natural disasters, and do everything for the people.'**" The new skipper's words sounded serious. "What my uncle said is only half the truth. Yes, we've got to have technique in fishing, but what matters first is ideology. When fishermen revolutionize their thinking, the fishing-boats are bound to have fine catches. Fishermen had plenty of skill in the old days, but their winter catches amounted to only 15 to 20 tons per boat. And look at the miserable life they had! We all know these things, don't we, Uncle?"

Without waiting for Ah-hsing to answer, Ah-hai went on, "Now, after liberation, with our Party and Chairman Mao to lead us, we've advanced from our early co-operative to the more highly developed people's commune. We've got fine motorized fishing-boats now instead of the small sampans we had before, and can fish on the high seas as well as along the coast. And you can see for yourselves we're getting larger catches all these years. What counts here is not technique, but the superiority of the socialist system and the correctness of Chairman Mao's leadership."

"The skipper's right," Ah-jung affirmed feelingly. "Ideology comes first. Thinking only of skill is a poison left by Liu Shao-chi's wrong idea that 'technique comes first.' Such an idea should be thoroughly repudiated."

"That's so," Ah-fa followed up. "Technical competence depends on constantly revolutionizing our thinking. We'll lose our bearings in our advance if we fail to put Mao Tsetung Thought in command."

Ah-hsing was impressed by the young skipper's sincerity and seriousness, and his comparison of the old society with the present. He began to see the young man in a new light and felt that, after all, he had not quite known his quality as a skipper. But is he only fine in words? How about his deeds?

Ah-hsing stood up, gave a dry cough, then said, "Everyone wants to catch more fish. I'd like to catch five thousand tons at a haul. To serve the people all over the country with our fish catches is of course our highest ideal, but it's got to be matched by action. If not, we'll not only lag behind 717, but become braggarts as well!"

"Oh, you're pulling our legs," exclaimed Ah-jung, stamping his foot in a huff, with Ah-fa agreeing.

III

Hundreds of fishing-boats plowed briskly through the sea. As No. 715 and her auxiliary entered the fishing ground, Young Chen, the observer, kept his eyes on the fish detector fluorescent screen. Skipper Ah-hai called out from the helm, "Port 25!" "Starboard 13! . . ." The vessel answered obediently.

"Fish ahead!" Young Chen reported joyfully. "Go on—continue your watch," was the skipper's calm reply.

"More shoals, large ones!" Young Chen shouted again with renewed excitement.

The crew popped out of the cabin and took up their positions, ready for action. They expected the skipper to

give an immediate order to lower the net. The 400-metre-long net would soon be filled with silvery hair-tail fish when lowered into the sea between the lead boat and its auxiliary. They could almost see the fish thrash about in the net as they were brought in through the foaming water and laid on the deck. But Ah-hai remained calm and did not give the order. He scanned the expanse of water ahead where an occasional hair-tail flashed over the surface of the water, then turned to glance at the rest of the fleet which were following so close that he could hear the engines and the laughter of the happy socialist-minded fishermen. The auxiliary boat had spotted the shoals too, and signalled that they were ready to close ranks and set the seine.

"Notify the command boat: Large shoals ahead," the skipper gave the first order.

Ah-fa jumped onto the platform, flagged the signal and resumed his post.

"Notify auxiliary boat to sail on," the skipper's second order followed.

Ah-fa reiterated the order word by word as he signalled the message to the auxiliary.

"Seiner!" the skipper was calling.

"Here!" Ah-hsing answered. This old fisherman, though a little conservative in thinking, was always ready at crucial moments to carry out the skipper's orders to the letter.

"Is the net ready?" asked the skipper.

"All's well," Ah-hsing reported back. "We're ready to set the net."

"Good!" It was Ah-hai. As he spotted the few took up the seine line, the scoops, the floats and sinkers, an-

icipating his order to lower the net. But after glancing again at the other vessels, Ah-hai ordered, "All hands at ease. Full speed ahead!"

The boat picked up speed, cresting wave after wave and slipping low in the deep troughs between. The sailors did not question their new skipper's order, but Ah-hsing was worried and demanded doubtfully, "What are you after, Ah-hai? Why are we passing up all these fish right before our eyes?"

"Uncle," Ah-hai replied with another question, "tell me which is bigger, 190 or 1,900,000?"

"Of course the latter," replied Ah-hsing.

"Now, figure this one: which is bigger, 715 or 750 million?"

"Even a kid knows the answer," Ah-hsing shouted at the new skipper. "What are you driving at?"

"At just this, Uncle," replied Ah-hai seriously, "though we're working on 715, we must keep the other figure, the nation's 750 million people, in mind. Our boat's quota is 190 tons, but what about the 1,900,000-ton quota of the 20,000 boats of the whole fleet? If we think only of ourselves and lower our net here, we'll be in the way of all the others. If we move on, the boats behind will get a better catch."

"Ah-hai's right!" the sailors agreed. "That's just what broad-minded fishermen armed with Mao Tsetung Thought ought to do!"

Only Ah-hsing failed to understand. "Our net won't cover the entire sea and draw in all the fish. I still don't see why we should move on," he went on saying to himself.

IV

The sun set behind a screen of crimson clouds and it would soon be dark. No. 715 lowered her seine after cruising for a while over the fishing ground. The catch was fine, each haul averaging about two tons of silvery hair-tail.

The sailors were enthusiastic, putting all their energy into bringing in as many hauls as possible before dark. Only Skipper Ah-hai stood with knitted brows as he gazed over the sea, golden now in the sunset. He was troubled over a problem; his face clouded as the dusk deepened.

Night fell. Lanterns on the fleet twinkled over the dark water like so many stars. No. 715 brought up only seven or eight lean hair-tail in its last haul. Obviously, it would be foolish to lower the net again. Ah-hai ordered the auxiliary boat to come close and cast anchor for the night. The day's work over, the men gathered in the cabin to talk things over.

Gazing over the sea in the silvery moonlight, the new skipper pondered many questions: Why can we catch plenty of fish only by day but not by night? Why do the fish shoals disappear at night? Do they leave the fishing ground at night and return the next day? Where do they go?

Unable to answer these questions, he took a copy of *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tsetung* from his pocket and, as a matter of course, began to study it by the navigation light on the main mast. An idea dawned on him: The wisdom of the masses is inexhaustible. Why not consult them? The day's fatigue vanished instantly. He

jumped to his feet and joyfully burst into the cabin where the others were.

Ah-hai sat down beside Ah-hsing. "I've been wondering, Uncle, why we catch hair-tail by the ton in the daytime but none after nightfall?"

Ah-hsing spoke impatiently. "Didn't old fishermen say that the hair-tail is a spirit that swims far away at night?"

"Then where do they come from the next day?" asked the new skipper.

"Hum. . . I've never thought about that. Fishing in the daytime and sleeping at night has been the fishermen's way for generations."

Others were drawn into the discussion. "Sea Tiger" Ah-jung got up from his bed and said, "You're onto something there, Skipper. I've noticed that when the moon's bright we can still catch a few fish, but we don't get any when it's very dark. Also, we seem to get better hauls when it's fairly warm. Why is this?"

"Strange," put in the observer, Young Chen, from the sidelines. "The fluorescent screen shows fish shoals at night, but when we lower the net it comes up empty."

"That's the problem we must solve," said Ah-hai, "and if we solve it, these fishing grounds will yield more for the state."

"We must solve that problem," agreed the others.

"Let's not brag," said Ah-hsing as though giving the sailors a classroom lesson. "We should just get all the fish we can by day and stop trying to do things that can't be done."

"But there must be a way, Uncle. There's dialectics in fishing as well. Know yourself and know your opposite,