

# STORIES FROM THE THIRTIES

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Panda Books



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MODERN Chinese literature, which had its origins in the New Culture Movement of 1919, reached a high level of achievement in the thirties. During this period, many fine writers emerged and a large number of their works have won critical acclaim abroad. The thirty-eight stories published in the two volumes in this collection describe urban and rural life, and provide a vivid insight into Chinese society during a time when the country was threatened by foreign aggression and in the ferment of revolution. The different styles represent the various literary trends of the period.

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# CONTENTS

## *Wu Zuxiang*

Green Bamboo Hermitage	9
Eighteen Hundred Piculs	20

## *Duanmu Hongliang*

Shadows on Egret Lake	73
Lost	86

## *Wei Jinzhi*

Wet Nurse	105
-----------	-----

## *Sha Ding*

Murderer	125
The Magnet	136
In a Teahouse	152
The Story of Old Droopy	172
An Autumn Night	187

## *Ai Wu*

Mrs Shi Qing	209
--------------	-----

## *Ye Zi*

Harvest	235
Fire	296
Stars	327



## Wu Zuxiang

WU Zuxiang (1908- ) was born in Jingxian County, Anhui Province. During his middle school days he was influenced by the New Culture Movement. In 1929, while studying Chinese at Qinghua University he began writing. His early works were autobiographical, although his context later broadened and he wrote novels and essays on rural conditions. After Liberation, he joined the teaching staff at Qinghua University. He is now a professor in the Chinese language department of Beijing University.

His representative works include "Eighteen Hundred Piculs", "Peace in the World" and "The Fan Family Store". He is known for fine, descriptive prose and tightly-knit plots.





## Green Bamboo Hermitage

AYUAN and I arrived home on the tenth day of the fifth month of the Chinese lunar calendar. It was the trying damp season in our province, scorching sun alternating with relentless rain, an ordeal unimaginable for those who have never gone through it. Mother told us that Second Aunt had inquired about our return and sent a verbal message saying, "I am so ill-fated that even my nephew and his bride neglect me." This meant she would like us to visit her and stay for some time.

*I had been to Second Aunt's home only once in my childhood. That was more than ten years ago before I left home to live in another world of electric lamps, cinemas, books in stiff foreign-style covers and asphalt roads. My old home had seemed a legendary place in my recollection and my impression of Second Aunt's home was even more hazy, like a wisp of cloud or a streak of pale smoke. Her large, sombre house with three courtyards, the study littered with moth-eaten, mildewed old books and the pond, bamboos and plants in the garden were all as unsubstantial as a dream in my memory.*

The tale of Second Aunt's past seemed to have been taken out of a story-teller's script. Of course I never saw her in the prime of her beauty. But what I saw of her later in her life — the way she carried herself, her tall slender figure, the pallor of her comely face,

her narrow sorrowful eyes and reticent melancholy — all fitted in perfectly with the sad story of her past.

We need not go into the details of her story now. As a matter of fact, my knowledge was fairly limited, for all my elders had always avoided the subject. The little I did know was gleaned from hints they let fall in casual conversation through long months and years.

It seemed many years ago, there was a clever young boy studying under my grand-uncle. He was the sole heir of a man who was an only child himself. Because he noticed the many attractive butterflies embroidered on the canopy, the brush sheath and the large square of brocade in my grand-uncle's room his heart warmed towards the girl who had embroidered them. And his admiration was reciprocated by the girl who often heard him mentioned with approval by my grand-uncle. I did not know how the hero and heroine came to meet each other, and few of the older generation knew this either. From the scraps of material I had gathered, I learned the climax of the sad story: one balmy spring day at noon my grandmother who had gone into the deserted back garden to admire the peonies in bloom caught, by accident, a pair of naughty children fumbling in confusion with their belts in the artificial rock cave.

When this comedy of beauty and talent became known, the girl so much admired for the butterflies she embroidered was suddenly scorned even by serving maids. My broad-minded grand-uncle tried his best to make a match of it but did not succeed. Several years later, the young man, on his way to take the imperial examination in Nanjing, was drowned in the Yangzi River, when his boat capsized in the storm rising with the autumnal tide. The girl who embroidered but-

terflies was nineteen at that time. When the news reached her she tried to hang herself from a cassia tree but was rescued by the gardener. The young man's family thought there was some praiseworthy quality in the girl after all. They got the consent of her family and amid wedding music took the girl home to receive the young man's coffin. She went through the wedding rituals in mourning dress and red bridal shoes, and holding a wooden tablet inscribed with the name of the deceased young man, paid homage to ancestors in the family temple.

This story would not have been so interesting had it not concerned Second Aunt, nor would we have been so eager to visit her had she not been the heroine of this story.

Mother urged us to go, of course, saying that we were newly-weds and we seldom returned home. We should not grudge Second Aunt, lonely all her life, what little enjoyment she hoped to get out of our visit. But Ayuan was more than a little afraid of the old ladies in my home. My uncle's wife was a good example of these old ladies, she loved to pull Ayuan down to sit on her knee, to call her pet names, kiss her cheeks, pretend to bite her and caress her arms. She even wanted me to show her how I kissed Ayuan. Whenever she had time, she would come to sit in our room, a water-pipe in her hands, to stare at us with a beaming face and to utter all sorts of embarrassing compliments. I personally didn't mind it so much. But Ayuan was often so embarrassed that she didn't know where to look. Hence her reluctance to visit Second Aunt.

Since I knew the crux of the matter I assured Ayuan that Second Aunt was not such an outspoken and



merry old lady. Besides, I knew how to intrigue romantic young girls. I added many touching episodes to Second Aunt's story so that Ayuan was moved to tears and sighed in sympathy. When I assured her also that Second Aunt was not the kind to bother her, she overcame her reluctance. Before long she was all eagerness to go, for she found Second Aunt's story as interesting as those taken out of ancient Chinese romances. Furthermore she was glad of a chance to get away from the old ladies at home to enjoy the beautiful scenery of Golden Swallow Village, so much talked about, and the cool, spacious quarters of Green Bamboo Hermitage.

Second Aunt lived in Green Bamboo Hermitage, her house in Golden Swallow Village. We followed the stone dike of Jingxi Stream for seven or eight *li* until the surrounding mountains converged to meet us and emerald green of old locust and willows deepened. There were more dark ochre boulders now in the stream and the sound of water dashing against them was louder. This part of the Jingxi was called Echoing Pool. The banks of Echoing Pool were thronged with lush green locusts, willows and elms, their rich foliage entwining to form a canopy over the foaming water so that not a ray of sun could penetrate to the pool. A score or so of malm-brick houses could be detected among the trees, the largest of them being a white house on the west bank. Peeping out over the enclosing walls with plum-blossom shaped openings were some bamboos, half of them green, the other half, sprinkled with flowers, just turning brown. This was Golden Swallow Village and the largest of the houses was Second Aunt's Green Bamboo Hermitage.

Ayuan, born and bred in the city, had seen nothing

comparable to this outside traditional paintings. Her delight at finding herself in such picturesque surroundings defied description. And when I remembered the western-style buildings, asphalt roads and factory chimneys which usually met my eyes in cities, I felt as if I were dreaming and random fancies filled my mind.

I hadn't seen Second Aunt for many years and found her much aged.

"Last night three big snuffs formed on the lamp wick and this morning the magpies chattered from the eaves. I knew that guests were coming."

Her pale wrinkled face was devoid of expression and her slow gait, her dull tone of voice all matched the sombre melancholy of her face. She took us inside and tottered into her own room to fetch sweetmeats and nuts, at the same time telling the maid to bring water for us to wash. The maid, Orchid, was over thirty and had formerly worked for my grandfather. He had sent her to look after Second Aunt when her own maid, who had gone with her to her husband's family, had died. Orchid had been living in this big house with Second Aunt for more than twenty years. She studied poetry and chanted Buddhist prayers with her mistress, who also taught her to embroider butterflies. She said she was not interested in getting married and having a family.

Second Aunt told us she had not expected us so soon and our rooms were not ready. She showed us around the house telling us to choose a room for ourselves. The four of us set out with my aunt in the lead while Orchid brought up the rear. Following in Second Aunt's footsteps, Ayuan seemed ill at ease. From time to time

she turned to catch my eye and smile knowingly. We all walked in silence.

The house was massive and grim, also in conformity with Second Aunt's character. The stone steps, brick pavement, pillar foundations, even the wooden walls were mottled with moss in varying shades of green. A musty smell mingled with the odour of mouldering earth and wood filled our nostrils. Light brown swallow nests hung from the eaves, a few had fallen off leaving only bits of mud, but in others the swallows were feeding their young and chirruping noisily.

All the rooms, except the suite occupied by Second Aunt herself, were locked and Orchid stepped forward to open them for us one by one. After looking through the main building, we came to a garden through a side passage. Close to the garden was a charming room with "Awaiting the Moon" written in square characters above its lintel. There were Venetian blinds on the window and a door in the shape of an ancient vase with a small opening pasted with transparent paper. I liked the proximity to the garden, and this room seemed brighter, more airy and cheerful than the others. So I told Second Aunt that we would like to have it. When Orchid undid the lock and pushed open the door, we were startled as two lizards and a bat fell at our feet. The lizards crawled slowly away while Orchid picked up the huge bat to place it in a corner, chanting something which sounded like a weird incantation:

"Please move out, Grandpa Bat, to make room for some honoured guests!"

Ayuan tugged at my coat with misgivings; it seemed that she was afraid to live here. Second Aunt, no less sensitive because of her age, perceived what was troub-

ing her. "Don't worry.... These rooms are swept and cleaned every year when your uncle, my husband, returns home. I'll tell Orchid to tidy this room up properly for you, and Grandpa Bat and Grandad Lizard will move out too." She went on to say, "Your uncle likes this 'Awaiting the Moon Studio' best of all. He asked me to have it repaired when he came home last year. Have a look inside. It has been newly furnished."

I poked my head into the room only to get my face brushed with cobwebs. Everything was really brand-new inside. The calligraphy and paintings on the walls and the bric-à-brac on the desk were all very fine. Only, they were covered with a thin layer of dust.

We watched Orchid make a duster with bamboo twigs and fetch a broom to sweep the floor. Second Aunt had returned to her own rooms. With a childlike expression of mystified surprise Ayuan asked:

"What was that she said about uncle?"

Putting down the broom and staring sombrely before her, Orchid told Ayuan in a low mysterious voice:

"The master often comes back. Every two or three days he appears in a dream to my mistress. I see him from time to time too, walking about in the garden in a handsome scholar's cap and a sapphire-blue gown."

Gripping my sleeve Ayuan stared into Orchid's eyes. When the maid had finished dusting the room she brought quilts, blankets and a straw mat. In the middle of a wide sandalwood couch against the back wall stood a small low table on which were a set of Chinese chess and a platter of large porcelain peaches. As she removed the table and made our bed, Second Aunt came tottering back with a mosquito net. It was made



of fine gauze and was one used by her husband, she said. We could have it if we were not afraid of catching cold. I of course wanted to have this cool mosquito net. But Ayuan gave me a look as if to say that even this beautiful net appeared frightening to her.

The room was really elegantly furnished. This was clear from a glance at the walls. Four large silk panels on the east wall were embroidered with a set of poems on Green Bamboo Hermitage, the words neatly fringed with small butterflies of different colours, creating a magnificent effect. On the west wall hung a painting, *Zhong Kui Catches a Ghost*,\* flanked by a couplet by Hong Liangji:\*\*

The snow on plum blossoms and breeze in the  
pines refresh my couch and my desk,

The daylight and shadows cast by clouds guard  
my lute and my books.

The window with Venetian blinds in front opened on to the garden. Under the window was a desk and on the desk stood an old vase of cinnabar red holding a horse-hair whisk.

I liked the room's air of antiquity. The clump of bamboo half green and half brown outside and the barely audible splashing of the water in Echoing Pool made the place particularly tranquil and peaceful.

Soon we sat down to supper in silence. Neither

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\* Legend has it that a talented scholar of the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907) named Zhong Kui failed to pass the imperial examination because he was so ugly. After his death he was made a judge of the nether world and his task was to catch ghosts. People often hung a painting of him in their homes to keep out evil spirits.

\*\* An 18th-century poet of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911).