



*Sanliwan
Village*

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We Start with Flagstaff Compound

At the south-east tip of Sanliwan Village are two connected courtyards known as Flagstaff Compound.

You won't find many flagstaffs like this nowadays, and some young folk may never have seen them. They're quite simple really—two slabs of stone to the right of the gate and two slabs of stone to the left, with a tall pole clamped between each two. Though they're called flagstaffs, they weren't really used for flags but just to make the old landlords' houses look more imposing. It wasn't every landlord who could fix them up, though. You had to be a "provincial graduate"* at least.

Sanliwan's provincial graduate was one of the Liu family, but no one knows how long ago he lived. Liu Lao-wu, who worked for the Japanese, did say the Liu family records showed that the provincial graduate came eleven generations before him. But no one else in the family had seen those records, and after Liu was seized and shot for helping the enemy no further interest was taken in the matter. Wang Hsing, now over sixty, heard his father say that all the houses for half a street near Flagstaff Compound used to belong to the Liu family. That must have been some sight! But now there is nothing to show that they ever produced a provincial graduate, except the tablet over the gate and the stone slabs at either side.

Flagstaff Compound is the best building in Sanliwan. Before the Anti-Japanese War there were several others

*One of the ranks in the imperial civil-service examinations.

just about as good, but they were all burned during the enemy's "mopping-up campaign." Flagstaff Compound was left because the Japanese put up here each time they came to the village. That was why they didn't burn it even after old Liu was shot. After that—this happened in 1942—the county government let the village take it over, and most of the rooms became offices: the village office, the local militia, the primary school, the peasants' night school, the reading room, the club, and the supply and marketing co-op all moved into these two courtyards. Only the back west room and both floors of the small house in the north-west corner of the back yard were made over to a woman in her sixties whose children were away all year working in government jobs. Because of her age and because she lives in the back, the young folk call her Backyard Granny.

Sanliwan is a model village. It was liberated early, and plenty of people here worked for the revolution, so they're a capable, experienced bunch. Whenever an important new job is given to the county, they nearly always try it out first at Sanliwan. That's what they did with weeding out traitors, reduction of rents and rates of interest, land reform and mutual aid, right down to 1951 when they tried out an agricultural producers' co-op. Before starting any new job, all sorts of local officials come here to pick up tips, so Sanliwan is used to putting up functionaries from outside. And because Backyard Granny has plenty of room, as well as a good temper, the village authorities generally send these visitors to her. She runs a sort of hostel for visiting officials.

The last few years, some of the rooms in Flagstaff Compound have changed hands. After the whole country was liberated, the militiamen stopped meeting so often and their office in the front east wing was often empty. So when the co-op was set up in 1951, they

started borrowing it for meetings or to work out their accounts—in fact it turned into a sort of co-op office. But during the summer and autumn the militiamen still took it in turn to stand guard in the fields or at the threshing-floors, and since this was just the time when the co-op had to work out its members' shares, both sides wanted the place. Luckily the primary school and the night school had holidays during the harvesting, so the militiamen could sleep in the classrooms for the time being. By 1952, however, the movement to wipe out illiteracy was going with such a swing and the county educational authorities were so impatient to finish the job that they made the mistake of forbidding holidays during the harvest. That meant another shortage of rooms, until the villagers decided to hold the literacy classes in the classrooms after supper, and then hand the place back to the militiamen.

1. The Holiday

Straight after supper on September the first this year, Yu-mei, younger sister of the Party secretary Wang Chin-sheng, went to the west classroom in Flag-staff Compound for her class. She was a model Youth Leaguer and one of the keenest in the movement to wipe out illiteracy. The first to arrive, she found the room pitch-dark. But since she was always the earliest, she knew her way about. She knew the militiamen who were guarding the harvest kept all the tables against one wall to serve as beds, and all the stools by another wall, leaving a space between the windows and door. She knew the paraffin lamp and matches were kept on the window ledge by the militiamen's beds. She threaded her way successfully by memory to this window without bumping into a single desk or stool, struck a match

and lit the lamp, then started to sort things out. Sturdy and quick on her feet, she whisked each table upside-down to its place, set it lightly down and darted back for the next. She was dashing to and fro when she heard a call outside:

"Not bad, your acrobatics!"

She guessed without looking who it was.

"Why not come and help," she retorted, "instead of acting so high and mighty, Mr. Teacher!"

It was a lad called Ma Yu-yi, who wore a middle school uniform and hadn't cropped his hair like most of the peasants. The fourth son of Ma To-shou, otherwise known as Muddlehead, he taught Class B in the village night school. Sanliwan had two teachers in the anti-illiteracy campaign: one was this lad, who had attended junior middle school for two and a half years but had not graduated; the other was Fan Ling-chih, daughter of the village head Fan Teng-kao, who had been young Ma's classmate, and had just graduated from junior middle school this summer. She taught Class A. Since Yu-yi enjoyed Ling-chih and Yu-mei's company, he had slipped over to their classroom before his own students arrived; and now that his help was asked with the desks, he came in. But Yu-mei was moving so fast he took care to keep out of her way to avoid a cracked skull.

"Better go and teach your phonetics!" she twitted him.

Soon they had all the tables and stools in place, and while Yu-mei cleaned the blackboard Yu-yi paced up and down by the window with nothing to do. When he strolled up to the light, he noticed how badly her name was scrawled on her exercise book.

"Say, Yu-mei! This *mei* of yours is lying on its back!"

She looked round to see what he meant.

"What can you do with a character that's so hard to write?" she demanded. "Written straight, it looks a mess. Slanting, it still looks a mess!"

She wrote a few *mei's* for practice on the newly cleaned board.

"See, Yu-yi! There's one written straight, and there's one on the slant."

"It doesn't have to slant so much! I'll show you how to write it."

He ran over to guide her hand and, sure enough, this *mei* was an improvement.

"Why use a name that's so hard to write?" he asked.

"You should talk! Your *yi* is much harder than my *mei*! Look at the length of it!"

"Let's see you write it."

Yu-mei laboriously traced an *yi*, about twice as long as her *mei*, which set the boy laughing.

"Just look how tall you've made me!"

"Well, you are tall."

"I may be tall, but you've made a mole-cricket out of me! Let me show you how to write it."

He was guiding Yu-mei's hand again when someone behind called out:

"So that's the way you teach! No wonder Yu-mei's come on so fast with her writing!"

When Yu-yi saw Ling-chih had arrived, he let go of Yu-mei's hand, and Yu-mei picked up a duster to rub out the *yi* which looked so like a mole-cricket. But Ling-chih had caught sight of the two names next to each other.

"You make a fine couple side by side," she chuckled. "Why rub it out?"

"What's funny about two characters side by side?" demanded Yu-mei. "Isn't it much more funny the way you two were classmates together and are now teachers together and in the same mutual-aid team?"

Before Ling-chih could answer, steps were heard outside and several students came in. Thereupon they changed the subject.

When there's work, it has to be done. Though they waited a long time, only five of Class A turned up and four of Class B. Finally losing patience, they went to the gate and climbed on the stone slabs to see if anyone was coming. Presently Yu-mei's cousin Wang Man-hsi arrived, a young unmarried fellow known as Moody because his moods changed so fast you never knew where you were with him.

"That's all then!" said one young fellow.

"What do you mean by 'that's all'?" demanded the others.

"Five of Class A and five of Class B—five all!"

They laughed.

"Don't count me in!" cried Man-hsi. "I've come to ask to be excused."

"Haven't you had your supper again?" asked Yu-yi.

"I've not only had no supper—I've not started cooking it yet. In fact, I've not even had time to think of it."

"What's the rush?"

"I'm on duty today in the village. Section Chief Ho's here from regional headquarters. I've just taken him food, but I haven't found him a billet yet."

"What about Backyard Granny?" suggested Yu-mei.

"Full up!" replied Man-hsi. "The water conservancy survey team, Comrade Liu from the county Party committee, the deputy district head, Liang the artist, and the team to reckon harvest work-points are all there, besides that health inspector and the insurance man. She's no room left. I've been running round the village calling on everyone with a room to spare, but at harvest time they're all chock-a-block."

"You can't have been everywhere!" put in Yu-mei. "I know a family with room to spare!"

"Which?"

"Yu-yi's. Have you been there?"

"Them! With all respect to Yu-yi, have they ever put anyone up? I don't want a dressing down from his ma!"

"Yu-yi!" exclaimed Yu-mei. "Can't you help out by going home and talking to her?"

"Not I! Don't you know ma's temper?"

"Is that the way Youth Leaguers talk?" chided Ling-chih.

"If you make him go," said another lad, "I bet he won't finish three sentences before his ma stops his mouth with a string of cuss-words!"

"I've got an idea," announced Yu-mei after some thought. "Man-hsi! Go to Aunt Tien-cheng first to ask for the use of her west room. . . ."

"That's no use!" broke in Man-hsi. "That room's so packed with dried bean-pods, dried eggplant, tobacco, millet and peas you can't even get your toe in!"

"Wait till I've finished!" said Yu-mei. "Asking for their west room is just a trick to make Aunt Tien-cheng find a place for you! Don't talk to her old man. Just call her out and tell her in confidence that an officer has come from the regional court to look into some lawsuit, but he can't find a room in the village, so you want to borrow her west room. If she says she can't clear it, ask her to go to Yu-yi's ma to borrow their east room. I'm sure she'll get it for you without any trouble, because. . . ."

"I know!" cried Man-hsi. "That'll do the trick! But Yu-yi mustn't warn his ma in advance."

"I won't," promised Yu-yi. "Still, she's bound to find out later."

"Once the man is in, all she can do is scold. Hard words never broke any bones." Saying this, Man-hsi left.

When there's work, it has to be done. The nine of them waited and waited, but still no one came. Man-hsi had at least asked for leave, but the others didn't even do that—they just stayed away.

"That rule the county made was a bit narrow," remarked one student. "They forbade the teachers to ask for leave, forgetting that the students might play truant!"

More footsteps sounded, west of Flagstaff Compound.

"They're coming!" cried Yu-mei. "Quite a crowd this time!"

Sure enough, a number of people came into view from behind the house on the west and headed for their gate. The first was Wang Chin-sheng, secretary of the local Party branch and deputy head of the co-op. Just behind him came the deputy village head Chang Yung-ching, the leader of the production team Wei Chan-kuei, the co-op head Chang Lo-yi and the woman deputy head Chin Hsiao-feng. There wasn't a student among them—only village and co-op officials.

"It's no use waiting," announced Ling-chih. "No class again today. We may as well go."

They started leaving. Two of the students were militiamen whose turn it was for duty, so they went to the classroom to move back all the tables which had just been put out.

"Can't we have a few days' holiday?" Ling-chih asked Chang Yung-ching.

"They've all stayed away of their own accord—isn't that the same as a holiday?"

2. *The Handy Man*

Leaving Flagstaff Compound, Yu-mei walked west down the street, and after a short climb reached her own door. Her home was at the foot of the west hill, so the

gate faced east. The courtyard was rectangular. Four caves had been hollowed out in the cliff, but the front of each cave was of brick, and inside was brick-lined too. One small side wing, formerly a stable, had been empty after their donkey was taken to the co-op this spring until recently when Yu-mei's second brother and his wife set up on their own and started cooking here. Opposite this were three rooms, used as the offices. There was a shed on each side of the gate, too small to live in, but handy for storing grain, tools or furniture. The southernmost cave, South Cave, was where Yu-sheng lived with his wife Hsiao-chun. Next came Middle Cave, used by Chin-sheng, his wife and children. Then North Cave, where the old folk lived. And last of all Inside Cave, with only one big window, which you entered by a small door in North Cave. This was Yu-mei's room.

As she drew near the gate, Yu-mei heard a clanging—ti-tung-ti-tung, and guessed that her father and younger brother Yu-sheng were forging. Once in the yard she was sure of it, for she saw intermittent flashes from the kitchen window. She went in to watch the fun. Yu-sheng was not among the five people in the room, but her uncle Wang Shen was there, helping her father. And her elder brother Chin-sheng's three children were there: seven-year-old Ching-miao, the girl, and the two boys, Li-ming and Ta-sheng, aged five and three.

The two old fellows were among the best workers in Sanliwan. Yu-mei's father Wang Pao-chuan was known as the Handy Man. As a lad he had worked for Liu Lao-wu, and learned to drive a mule and look after an orchard; and though he was never apprenticed to any trade, he could make shift as a carpenter, smith or mason. Wang Shen was about as clever with his hands and head as the Handy Man, but he was a fairly well-to-do peasant. His father and grandfather before him had owned fifteen *mou* of land, never more, never less, and

he still had that fifteen *mou*. A hard worker and a skilled one, he disliked having to team up with anyone else, though he had to hire one or two hands in the busiest season. Since he always touched up anybody else's handiwork, grumbling as he did so, "No good! No good!" his nickname was No Good.

The only worker No Good respected in Sanliwan was the Handy Man, and vice versa.

So when any job turned up that called for skill, they usually tackled it together.

They both knew the value of good tools. "When the tools are poor," said the Handy Man, "I feel like pitching them over the wall." And whenever No Good used borrowed gear, he kept muttering, "No good! No good!" Neither of them had all a jobbing workman's tools, but they were adepts at making do. To forge this iron, for instance, the Handy Man had four pieces of makeshift equipment: for bellows he used the small kitchen bellows, for furnace an old iron pan caulked with mud, for anvil a sawn-off tree stump covered with a big, flat metal weight, and for hammer an axe—which was what caused the *ti-tung-ti-tung* sound instead of the usual *ding-dong*. These makeshifts might look poor stuff, but they worked all right.

They were forging some of the drills that masons use. Real stone masons make their own instead of going to a smith, for these drills have to be sharpened every day—to go to a smith would waste time. They are made of ingot iron, which is softer than steel but stronger than most wrought iron. You buy a short rod as thick as a man's thumb, and just shape one end. You forge a good few each time, and sharpen them when they're blunt, until they're too short to use.

When Yu-mei saw what they were doing, she asked what these drills were for.

"To fix the roller for the threshing-floor!" said her father.

"Why?"

"Because it's too small," said her uncle teasingly.

"You mean by chipping it you can make it bigger?"

"Ask your father if you don't believe me!"

"Can you make it bigger, dad?"

"Your uncle is right," said the Handy Man with a chuckle, "but he didn't tell you the whole story. We've combined all the small threshing-floors in our co-op into one big one; but our rollers are meant for small floors and can only be pulled in small circles. If we make the mules do bigger circles, the girth is going to chafe their off-right legs. That's why we've got to fix the rollers."

"But how can you fix them to make a bigger circle?"

"If we make the large end smaller, won't they turn in a bigger circle, silly girl?"

"I see!" cried Yu-mei with a smile. "You'll just make one end smaller."

"Who told you to start a co-op?" Her uncle was joking again. "If there wasn't any co-op, we wouldn't have all this work."

"It's to get a bigger yield! Say, uncle, why don't you join our co-op? Don't you want a bigger yield?"

"Your uncle is very particular how he sows each furrow," said the Handy Man. "He's afraid other folk would mess things up for him."

"You're right there, brother," responded Wang Shen. "I don't mind working with you or your Yu-sheng, but I don't want to muck in with anyone else!"

"Then why did you let Chieh-hsi join the mutual-aid team?" asked Yu-mei.

"He can do what he likes with our five *mou* of low land, so long as he doesn't mess up the ten *mou* on the hill."

"Have you shared your land with him, uncle?"

"He's given his son a share of the land," said the Handy Man, "but he won't allow him his share of grain. Your uncle doesn't think anything of your cousin's farming, but he doesn't mind how much grain he takes off him!"

"I don't use it all myself, do I?" protested Wang Shen. "Doesn't he eat with us?"

Once they started an argument, Yu-mei knew there was no stopping them.

"Where's Yu-sheng?" she asked her father. "Why isn't he helping you?"

"While your father plays blacksmith here," said Wang Shen, "your brother's playing carpenter in South Cave."

"What's he making now?"

"A roller!"

"How can a carpenter make a roller?"

"It's a wooden roller! That's the crazy sort of notion your co-op gets!"

Yu-mei turned to her father.

"Is it true, dad?" she asked.

The Handy Man chuckled again.

"Just like last time. It's true, but your uncle hasn't told the whole story. He's making. . . ."

"Cut the cackle! They're melting!" Wang Shen pointed to the drills in the furnace.

The Handy Man dropped the subject of the roller. He put down the bellows and picked up the axe, then extracted the sputtering drills with the tongs in his left hand.

"I'll go to South Cave and have a look," said Yu-mei.

As she turned to go, her father laid one white-hot drill on the anvil, levelled the axe and brought it lightly down. The iron was so hot that a great shower of sparks shot up, and one fell on Ta-sheng's leg. The three-year-old started howling. The two men dropped