



THE  
*R*AINBOW ROAD

By Hu Chi

# *THE RAINBOW ROAD*

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*O brave little bird,  
Lend me a pair of wings.  
I want to soar across the  
    high snowy mountains,  
To distant lands on the  
    blue horizon.*

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## Village Under the Snow-capped Mountains

In a land far, far away some children lived in a lonely little village surrounded by snow-capped mountains. They had little opportunity of meeting people from the outside world for people from other places seldom came to see them.

If a stranger came to the village unexpectedly, or if someone near and dear to them returned from afar, then he would immediately be surrounded by the children who would gather as if they were hunting. They would ask so many questions that unless he had a hundred mouths and a hundred tongues, he simply couldn't answer them all.

One day the children were playing a game of ox-horn. Just when a little chubby round-faced boy had nearly hit the last of the ox-horns in the row and was about to win the game, Old Niehchin's grandson, Tanchu, or Sharp Eyes as he was called, suddenly shouted, "Look, look, isn't that Uncle Puba? He's come home!"

They all dropped the stones in their hands and clustered around Tanchu. Their eyes followed the direction in which his finger was pointing, straight across the snowy mountain. There, on the winding mountain

path, Uncle Puba was making his way towards the village. As usual he was astride his roan horse, the one he rode home on every year.

In his excitement, Sangtun, Uncle Puba's nephew, began to hop up and down. Soon he reached the limit of his patience and instead of waiting for the rider to come nearer, he ran off to meet his uncle, leaving his little circle of friends like a stone flung from someone's hand.

None of the other children could remain still now. They followed Sangtun one by one and raced towards the rider.

As he rode along on his horse, Uncle Puba likely saw his nephew Sangtun, or perhaps he was moved by the warm welcoming cries of the children, for he loosened his reins and let the horse gallop forward. With one finger on his lips, Uncle Puba let out a shrill and musical whistle; to greet his nephew and his friends.

On a newly harvested *chingko*<sup>1</sup> field, the horse and rider were surrounded by the shouting, laughing children. Sangtun rushed up to the horse, and with unexpected strength pulled at the reins forcing the stamping steed to come to a standstill. As soon as Uncle Puba jumped to the ground, Sangtun stretched up his head and touched his uncle's broad forehead with his little one. When this ceremony was over, uncle and nephew hugged each other.

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<sup>1</sup>A kind of grain like barley, which is the staple food among Tibetans.

"My, you've grown tall, Sangtun."

"Have I? Granny said by next year I should be able to go with you to the pastures to herd the cattle."

"Good. You seem to be nearly grown up now." Uncle Puba patted Sangtun's shoulder affectionately.

"What about me, Uncle Puba? Haven't I grown taller?" Tanchu pushed aside the other children so that Uncle Puba could see him too. Why should Sangtun get all his attention?

"Whose child are you?" asked Uncle Puba pretending not to know Tanchu.

This made Tanchu very annoyed. Though he said nothing, he muttered inwardly, "What a bad memory Uncle Puba has. How is it that he doesn't know me? Didn't he take me to the pine groves across the river to hunt with him last winter? Why, we caught three black sables; how can anyone forget that. . . ."

"Ah! I remember now." Uncle Puba blinked playfully. "You are Grandpa Niehchin's little grandson, Tanchu, the one called Sharp Eyes."

Tanchu was happy now and his long narrow-lidded eyes shone like two stars.

"Now mind, Uncle Puba, when you go hunting for sables this year please don't forget to take me with you."

"Of course I couldn't go without you. How could I forget to take sharp eyes along with me?" Uncle Puba bent down to look into Tanchu's eyes. "However, you must always use your eyes to look around carefully before we start or we won't be able to bag anything."

"Uncle Puba, let's go and hunt tomorrow evening then." Tanchu had always been an impatient child and he added without pausing for breath, "Do you know, under the three straight pines right across the river, black sables often come in search of acorns and nuts. I've seen them there twice with my own eyes. Nothing can escape me!"

Tanchu's long narrow-lidded sharp eyes swept the other children and he gave Sangtun a particular look as if to say, "You, Sangtun, can only go with Uncle Puba to herd the yaks, but I am strong enough to hunt sables with him. Don't you know what a fine animal the sable is? I'm positive that being a herdsman isn't half as nice as being a hunter."

The other children began to show their dissatisfaction with Tanchu for monopolizing Uncle Puba's attention. "For shame, Tanchu," one shouted. "You are doing so much talking. You've said everything to be said under the sun. Remember Uncle Puba isn't yours alone, he wants to talk to us too. You should stand aside. . . ."

"Well, children, have you had a good year?"

"Yes, we are all well, Uncle Puba." The children answered together.

"And your mothers and fathers? How are they?"

"Our mothers and fathers are well, Uncle Puba."

The children crowded round the tall sturdy man, who stood out among them like a strong iron pillar. With his right hand, he stroked the children's faces, touching one little head after another, while his left hand rested



lightly on the silver dagger hanging outside his long maroon coloured coat. Under his gentle hand, the children became even more lively, chattering and shouting like little sparrows unable to close their mouths.

Only one young boy in a long sheepskin coat stood all alone on a boulder some distance away. When Uncle Puba noticed this, he walked towards the lonely boy.

"Why are you standing there all by yourself, Chula?"

Flinging up his arms, Chula jumped down from the boulder and went up to Uncle Puba. "They surrounded you so closely that I had to stand up there to get a good look at you."

The boy was tall and thin. His big black eyes had a pensive and somewhat startled look. His lips were usually tightly pressed together, giving people the impression that he was afraid he'd say something wrong.

"So, that's the reason, eh?" Uncle Puba treated Chula like his own nephew, let him touch his forehead first and then took him into his strong arms.

"Uncle Puba, you've got a new coat on." Chula scrutinized the older man. His glance shifted to the green tassel dangling from the dagger at Uncle Puba's waist and he added, "You've changed the tassel too. When you came back last year, I remember that tassel was a red one, wasn't it?"

"Your memory is good, child. Now tell me, Chula, do you think the tassel is pretty?"

"Oh, very. Is it a plain silk one or is it heavy brocaded silk? Look, everyone, how bright and shiny it is! It's so soft too, softer than lamb's wool."

Chula lifted the tassel gently and admired it with amazement in his eyes. But quickly his face became thoughtful, he sighed softly and let go of it.

"Why do you sigh, Chula?" Uncle Puba walked down the road by Chula's side.

"Uncle Puba, do you still remember what I said to you last year?" Chula looked very serious and his steps slowed down little by little.

Uncle Puba matched his steps with the boy's. "You are still little, Chula," his voice was full of concern. "Just think of all the hardships of your life, if I were really to take you with me from one grazing place to another. We can talk of that matter in a year or two, not now."

"Uncle Puba, I'm not so little any more. No matter how hard the life is outside, I'm not afraid."

Chula was usually not one to get impatient. But now for some reason or other, he knitted his brows, bit his lower lip and looked greatly upset.

Uncle Puba's heart ached as if a thorn had pricked it.

Chula was an orphan whose parents were murdered by bad men when he was still a baby. Mama Hsiang-pachihma, a poor woman, had begged for goat's milk with which to feed the baby Chula and had brought him up to boyhood.

As Chula grew older and began to understand things,

he asked everywhere about the murderers of his parents. He also had a very urgent wish to be independent. He felt it was not right to let his poor foster mother, the good Hsiangpachihma, give him his daily food.

"I can manage to feed myself, Uncle Puba. Take me out with you: I shouldn't continue to let Mama Hsiangpachihma provide for me."

"Don't worry, Chula, as soon as your bones are strong enough, I'll take you along. Let your mama provide for you now, in the future when she is old you can provide for her."

They walked side by side into the village. Behind them the other children followed in a noisy crowd, one leading Uncle Puba's horse, another holding on to his whip. At the very end of this procession, Sangtun and Tanchu followed. They were arguing about a very important question: Is it better to be a herdsman or a hunter?

## Astonishing News

When Uncle Puba reached his home, his mother went quickly to light the holy lamp in the house, weeping and laughing at the same time. She kowtowed to the god who was supposed to protect and guard the whole family and said her prayers. Only when she had completed this ritual, did she speak to her son.

"The gods always bestow blessings on our heads, Puba. I never dared to hope that everything would go so well with you this year, that our cattle and sheep would thrive and that you would cross the big snow-capped mountain and return safely home."

"You are quite right, mother. This time the real sun has shed its light on our snowy mountains and the dear benevolent father has remembered those who live among them. The comrades of the People's Liberation Army have built a road across big snow-capped mountains."

Uncle Puba stretched his hand into a cowhide bag and as if by magic produced a bamboo cask of fragrant tea and two big chunks of yellow yak butter.

"Will you make a bucket of butter tea, mother? Sangtun, go and invite our friends to come in for a good chat. There is so much to talk about this year."

Listening attentively to what his uncle was saying, Sangtun felt reluctant to leave. Really and truly, what Uncle Puba was saying was more interesting than anything he had told them before. What was this about the real sun shedding its light on the snowy mountains! Could it be that the snow on the mountains he had crossed this year was thawed by the sun? And who did he mean by the dear benevolent father? And who were the uncles he called the People's Liberation Army? He said they had come to build a highway on the snowy mountains, but why had Sangtun himself never seen a single person on the mountains round his village.

"Uncle," Sangtun pleaded, "please tell me all about it."

Though Uncle Puba was always nice with children, he didn't understand that boys are the most impatient creatures in the world. He simply insisted that Sangtun go at once to invite the guests.

Sangtun went first to Grandpa Niehchin's cottage.

"Grandpa Niehchin," said Sangtun, removing his sheepskin hat and bowing low to the old man. "My uncle has just returned from the pastures and he asks you to come over with Tanchu to partake of a little butter tea he has brought back. Would you have time to honour us?"

Grandpa Niehchin with his long white flowing beard was sitting squarely on a sheepskin rug. He gave Sangtun a sidelong glance. "Time," he said, "cannot be measured in gold or silver, it is more precious than gold or any treasure. Since your uncle sends you to invite us over, he must have important things to talk about. Of course I'll come."

To Sangtun's knowledge, there was no other person in his village as old as Grandpa Niehchin. However, though Grandpa had long passed his eightieth birthday, he would not give in to old age. At the horse race last spring he had insisted on competing with the young men of the village. He was a brave man but Sangtun was not very fond of him. The old man liked to talk down to the youngsters and he was always moralizing. Sangtun did not remain with the old man long. Taking

the first opportunity, he went off to a corner of the room with Tanchu.

"Say, Sangtun," Tanchu whispered. He always talked in a hushed voice when at home. "What hat shall I wear to go and take tea with Uncle Puba?"

"Wear anything you like."

"Then I'll wear my black sable."

As a matter of fact, Tanchu's mind had already been made up. He only wanted a chance to show off, a chance to talk about this valuable animal he had helped to hunt down.

"Do you know, Tanchu," said Sangtun, also trying to show off, "just now Uncle Puba told me that the real sun has shed its light on the snowy mountains. The dear benevolent father has thought about our snow-capped mountains where comrades of the People's Liberation Army are building a highway. . . . Do you know what this is all about?"

"What? What's that? . . ." Tanchu was even more impatient than Sangtun and his fine narrow-lidded eyes opened wide in amazement.

"Oh, dear, you don't understand anything! How am I to tell you?" Sangtun was secretly very pleased that he had made Tanchu puzzled. With a sly wink at his friend who was so fond of showing off, he ran away with a satisfied smile to invite Mama Hsiangpachihma and Chula.

Darkness came before he reached Hsiangpachihma's door. The little river by the road gurgled and Sangtun

thought he heard someone's heavy footsteps coming towards him along the river bank. The footsteps made Sangtun think of Uncle Tochi, Hsiangpachihma's husband. A few years before, Uncle Tochi had tramped all over the snow-covered mountains looking for a magic pill to cure Hsiangpachihma, because she suffered from a certain ailment. Then one day, when Uncle Tochi was scaling a sharp cliff on the mountain, he slipped, fell into the river and was killed.

"Whose steps can I hear walking by the river? Can it be Uncle Tochi? . . ."

Sangtun was getting rather frightened. While still a long way from Mama Hsiangpachihma's house, he cried out, "Are you there, Mama Hsiangpachihma?"

"What do you want?" A person really appeared out of the darkness, and came towards Sangtun. Sangtun's heart went pit-a-pat.

The person turned out to be Chula. Sangtun immediately gave his friend a warning. "Granny has told me, Chula, that spirits and ghosts go to drink at the river at night. What are you doing here by the river now?"

"Would you like to know what I was doing? Why, I do a lot of things by myself." Chula said this airily, wanting Sangtun to know that he, Chula, could do anything he pleased and was not afraid of spirits.

"Oh, I know." Sangtun remembered that Chula had often told him he meant to build a big house by the river for his foster mother. Grasping his friend's hands, he

said impulsively, "Hurry, Chula, and get that big new house built. I'll come and help you."

"Talk is easy. Is it possible to build such a house?"

"And why not?"

"Let me ask you, what about the timber? What about digging the foundations? Didn't Uncle Puba say I am too young to be doing anything?"

The two friends walked on in silence until Sangtun remembered what Uncle Puba had said and became excited again.

"Chula, Uncle Puba talked about some very strange things today."

"What?"

"He said the real sun has shed its light on the snowy mountains and that the dear benevolent father has remembered our area so that the comrades of the people's army are building a highway through the mountains. Chula, do you understand what this means?"

Chula turned the words over in his head, but he too could not see what they signified.

Sangtun brought Chula and his foster mother home with him. As soon as he pushed the door open he discovered that his home looked very different from the way he remembered it.

First of all a fire burned brightly in the hearth, though that was not really strange. The strange things were a shiny yellow copper pot sitting snugly over the fire, and a green felt rug spread out beside the hearth,



a rug Sangtun had never set eyes on before. However, even these were not the strangest things. What surprised Sangtun most was that Granny sat in style on the green rug arranging a set of white china bowls with gold dragons on them. Then she took up a long-necked glass bottle and poured red liquid into the white bowls.

Sangtun began to think he was dreaming. He heard Grandpa Niehchin say in his usual lofty manner, "Is that the nectar from heaven that is being poured out, Puba? You should set it before the Buddha's tablet right away."

"No, Grandpa Niehchin, this is not nectar from heaven. It is red wine sent across the mountains in an automobile by the benevolent father."

When the new arrivals had sat down Sangtun squeezed in close beside his uncle. "What has happened, uncle?" he asked in a mystified tone. "Are the yellow copper pot and the green felt rug all sent to us in an automobile across the snowy mountains by the benevolent father?"

"That's right, Sangtun."

"Oh, uncle, do tell us at once what an automobile is and who this benevolent father is?"

Tanchu, sitting beside his grandfather and wearing his black sable hat, slapped his knees and gave Sangtun a withering look.

"Why can't you understand who the benevolent father is? Uncle Puba has been telling us about the uncles in the army who are building a highway across