



# THE SCARECROW

Stories for Children

BY YEH SHENG-TAO

# *THE SCARECROW*

*A COLLECTION OF STORIES  
FOR CHILDREN*

*By Yeh Sheng-tao*

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## PREFACE

Thirty years ago I wrote a few dozen stories for children and those published here have been selected from among them. My intention was to call upon children to take an interest in real life and be attentive to things around them.

After "The Statue of the Ancient Hero" appeared in a Chinese reader a great number of teachers and students wrote to me about it, each holding a different view as to the moral of the story and asking whether their interpretation of it was correct. In my replies I could only tell them what I had in mind when I wrote it and that the moral would be divulged only at the end. The greatest significance in life for the stones of all sizes lay in forming a solid road for people to walk on. Before the road was built the hewing of the great rock into the statue of a hero and the use of the smaller stones for its base were of rather minor significance. When the big stone became proud after having been hewn into the statue of a hero, thought himself high and mighty and looked down upon the others, I only guessed at the "psychology" of that big rock. And when I wrote about how the smaller stones

felt about the big one's pride, I was also only venturing a guess at how they must have felt.

"The Language of Birds and Animals" was written at the time when Mussolini launched his war of aggression against Abyssinia. "The Experience of a Locomotive" was written during the Japanese imperialist invasion of China when the entire Chinese people had a strong desire to resist the Japanese but were prevented from doing so by the reactionary Kuomintang government. To point out this one fact is sufficient for our foreign readers and there is no need for further explanation.

It must be made particularly clear, however, that the actual conditions in China as related in my stories began to change on a nation-wide scale in 1949. The Chinese people, under the leadership of the great Communist Party of China, carried out a thoroughgoing revolution against the unreasonable old social system and took up the struggle against a ruthless nature. Though it has been only ten years since the task was begun, the face of China is already entirely changed.

If the thrush were flying now, he would certainly meet with many happy adventures wherever he went. There would be no end to his joyful praises. And if the scarecrow were standing in the fields now he would see large tracts of well-cared-for farmland, protected by rows of shelter belts and water flowing in irrigation canals. None of these things could he have seen ten years ago. He would be surprised to see the

great enthusiasm the peasants show for their work. How well they work together, smiles on their faces, their songs echoing above the clouds! Such things never happened ten years ago. He would also find it strange to see such sturdy crops and rich harvests. Are these the same as the crops that were planted ten years ago? The scarecrow would begin to feel sorry for himself in an entirely different way. He would reproach himself for being immobile like a tree rooted in the ground, unable to take so much as half a step, but for which he would have long since joined the peasants in their work.

The sensitive plant<sup>1</sup> would never have occasion to feel ashamed of itself for anything, because all that brought shame on it has vanished for ever. True, its leaves may still fold and droop as a bashful child lowers its head but this happens only when the children touch it out of curiosity, for the children like to see it act that way, and how can it disappoint them?

But changes have taken place not only in China; the whole world has moved on. Where is Mussolini today? The whole continent of Africa, like a giant awakened from a deep sleep, has stood up proudly and stretched out its arms to the rising sun. True, there are still men of Mussolini's ilk in the world. Sometimes we say, "Here is a second Mussolini" and "There's a third". But they can never run amuck as did Mussolini himself because they are closely watched by giants standing guard on every continent. Besides, these Mussolini

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<sup>1</sup> Called in China *han hsiu tsao* or "shy grass".

men might not relish the thought of a public hanging in Milan.

Thus, almost all the stories in this volume deal with events of the past. This is just right! Isn't it the custom to begin children's stories and fables with "Once upon a time . . ."?

Yeh Sheng-tao

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## *The Seed*

Once upon a time, there was a seed. It was as big as a walnut with a lovely green skin. No one who saw it could help admiring it. It was said that if planted, it would put forth a jade-green shoot, and of course its flower would be even more beautiful. No rose, peony or chrysanthemum could compare with it. No orchid, cassia or plantain-lily would be able to match its fragrance. No one had ever planted this seed, however, so that no one had ever seen its beautiful flower or smelt its fragrance.

When the king heard of this seed, he laughed for joy. A snowy white beard covered his mouth like a thicket but now it parted—he could not shut his mouth for laughing. He said: “In my garden, there are all kinds of flowers. The small white ones that grew under ice and snow in the north have been transplanted here by my special envoy, and lotus flowers as big as plates from the tropical south have been presented to me as tribute by the people. But all these are ordinary flowers. Other people have them too. So what’s special about them? Now this seed is the only one of its kind. When it sprouts and blossoms, there won’t be a second plant like it in the whole world.

That'll show how much nobler and more powerful I am than anybody else. Ha, ha, ha. . . ."

So the king sent men to fetch the seed and they planted it in a white jade pot. Soil from the royal garden was sifted again and again for fear it wasn't fine enough. Water from a golden jar was filtered again and again for fear it wasn't clean enough. Every morning, the king himself would carry the pot out from the greenhouse to the porch steps in front of the palace and carry it back to the greenhouse at night. When it became cold, a stove was installed to keep the seed warm.

Even in his dreams, let alone when he was awake, the king longed to see the jade-green shoot grow in the pot. He sat beside it waiting, all the time. But there was no sign of any jade-green shoot. There was only the white jade pot filled with greyish black mud.

Time slipped by and two years passed in the twinkling of an eye. In spring when the grass sprouted, the king prayed to the seed: "The grass has sprouted. May you soon follow suit!" In the autumn, when the second batch of seeds came up, the king again prayed to the seed: "The second batch of seeds have come up, you should follow suit!" But all this was of no avail. So the king became angry. He said: "This is a dead seed, an ugly, stinking thing. What do I want it for?" He dug the seed up from the mud. It was just the same as before, big as a walnut with a glossy green



coat. The more he looked at it, the angrier he grew. So he threw it with all his might into the pond.

From the king's pond the seed drifted into a small stream that ran through the countryside. A fisherman fishing there caught it in his net. Since it was such an unusual seed, he went round offering it for sale.

A rich man heard about it and smiled so gleefully that his eyes nearly disappeared in folds of his fat face which was just like a round rubber ball. He said: "In my house, I have treasures of every kind, diamonds as big as eggs, pearls as big as walnuts. I paid high prices for them, but what do they amount to? I am not the only one who has such things. Besides, it really is a bit vulgar to talk about gold, silver and pearls all the time. Now here is this seed — the only one of its kind! When it blossoms, it will show my cultivated taste and I shall outshine all the other rich men in the world. Ha, ha, ha. . . ."

So the rich man bought the seed from the fisherman and planted it in a platinum jar. He hired four noted gardeners to do nothing but look after it. These four gardeners were selected from more than three hundred. Very difficult questions concerning all the secrets of growing rare flowers were asked in their examination. They all answered well and to the point. Having been engaged, they were paid very high wages, and even given allowances to make suitable arrangements for their families so that they could devote their whole attention to their work. These four men did their best.

They watched the platinum jar by turn without leaving it for one minute or even one second. They saw that the very best earth and the very best fertilizers were used. They watered the seed and sunned it daily. In short, they did everything they could.

The rich man thought: "Since the seed is so well tended, it'll certainly sprout and blossom quickly. When it blossoms, I'll give a big banquet, invite all the rich men of my own rank and let them see my beautiful rare flower which cannot be matched in the whole world. They will admit that I'm the richest and that I outshine them all." The thought of this made him more and more impatient. Time and again he went to the platinum jar to look, but there was no sign of any jade-green shoot. There was only the platinum jar filled with greyish black mud.

Time slipped by and two more years passed in the twinkling of an eye. In spring, when the time for giving banquets approached, he prayed to the seed: "I shall soon be giving a banquet. Please help me, by shooting up and blossoming quickly!" In autumn, when once more the time for banquets was drawing near, he again prayed to the seed: "I shall be giving another banquet. Please help me, by shooting up and blossoming quickly!" But all this was of no avail. So he became angry and said: "This is a dead seed, an ugly, stinking thing. What do I want it for?" He dug the seed up from the mud. It was just the same as before, big as a walnut with a glossy green coat. The more he

looked at it, the angrier he grew. So he threw it with all his might over the wall.

The seed fell at the door of a shop. The shopkeeper picked it up. Greatly delighted, he thought: "A rare seed has just dropped by my door. This is a sure sign that I'll soon be rich." He planted the seed by his shop and longed for it to sprout and blossom. Every day when he opened the shop he would go and take a look, and when he closed up at night he would go once again. A year soon passed. But no jade-green shoot appeared. The shopkeeper became angry and said: "I'm a fool to think this is something rare! It is only a dead seed, an ugly, stinking thing. Now I know this, I shan't waste my time on such a foolish thing." He dug the seed up and threw it into the street.

The seed lay in the street for half a day and then a street cleaner swept it into his garbage cart with the dirt and dumped it near an army camp. A soldier who picked it up said happily: "A rare seed has come my way, I'll surely be promoted." So he planted the seed by the camp, longing to see it sprout and blossom. After drill he would squat watching by its side with his short rifle in his arms. When the other soldiers asked him what he was doing there, he wouldn't tell them.

More than a year passed and still there was no sign of the jade-green shoot. The soldier became angry and said: "I'm a fool to think this is something rare! It is just a dead seed, an ugly, stinking thing. Now I know this, I shan't waste my time on such a foolish thing."

He dug the seed up and threw it with all his strength as far as he could.

The seed flew as if it were an aeroplane. It flew and flew till finally it dropped into a green wheat field.

There was a young peasant working in the wheat field, his skin like burnished copper. Muscles stood out on his arms; he was like a sculptured giant. After loosening the earth in the field with his hoe for a while, he raised his head to look round, and a peaceful smile played round his lips.

The peasant saw the seed fall and exclaimed: "Ha, what a lovely seed! Let me plant it." So he dug a hole with the hoe and buried the seed.

He worked as usual, tilling when it was time to till, hoeing when it was time to hoe and watering when it was time to water. Naturally the place where the seed was planted was tilled, hoed and watered — just like the rest of the field.

Not many days later, a green shoot, as thick as his little finger, grew from where the seed was planted. A few days more passed. Its stem and branches grew so fast that it looked like a small tree, carved from green jade, standing in the field. On its tip a bud appeared: At first it was as big as a walnut, then it grew and grew, till it was the size of a tangerine, an apple, a grape-fruit and finally a water melon. Then it blossomed. The petals were red, layer upon layer of them, while inside there was a mass of golden yellow stamens. A strange

rich fragrance spread from the flower. This fragrance clung to all who came near and never vanished.

The young peasant worked as usual, going to and fro in the field. When he passed this rare flower, he would stop for a while to look at it and a happy peaceful smile would play round his lips.

All the villagers came to see this wonderful flower. When they returned home, their faces were wreathed in smiles and the sweet perfume was everywhere.

1921

## *The Thrush*

Once there was a thrush who lived in a golden cage. The bright sun shone upon the wires of the cage, making it glisten as brilliantly as the king's palace. The water cup was made of green jade, which, imparting its colour to the water inside, made it look like a lotus pond after a rain. The food bowl was made of chestnut-coloured agate. Three ivory perches were fixed in the cage for the thrush to stand upon. At night the cage was covered with a piece of the finest satin.

The thrush's feathers were glossy and smooth, not a single one was missing or dishevelled. He was given the very best food to eat and bathed twice a day. He felt very comfortable and each time after he had been fed and washed, he would skip about in the cage. When he was tired he would stand on one of the ivory perches to rest. Then he would preen his feathers one after another with his beak, straighten his body, flap his wings and after casting a swift look around, hop back and forth again.

The sound of his singing was soft and sweet; those who heard it were enchanted and intoxicated by the melody. He was kept by a rich man's son who loved

him very dearly. The boy fetched the bird's drinking water from a mountain spring every day and it was carefully filtered. The grains of millet the thrush ate were carefully selected; each one had to be full and round; and they were well washed. Why did the owner of the bird take so much trouble? Why did he use such an expensive cage for the thrush? It was because he liked to hear thrushes sing, and the singing of a thrush gave him such joy as he thought he could not get from anything else.

The thrush, aware that his owner treated him well and liked to hear him sing, tried to sing as much as possible. Even when he was tired he still sang, although he did not understand what was so good about his singing. He did not know why his owner should have such a taste. He just knew that his owner really loved to hear him sing, so he sang for him. The boy often said to his playmates, brothers and sisters: "My thrush is wonderful; he sings beautifully. Come and hear him." They came along to watch and listen and lavished praises on the thrush. The thrush thought: "I really can't understand what's so nice about my chirping, that they love so much to hear? However, since they have been invited by my owner, if I don't entertain them well he will be disappointed." So he sang with all his might.

Day after day passed. Life went on as usual and everything was fine. The thrush kept on singing for his owner, for his brothers and sisters. However, he

could never understand what was so interesting about his singing.

The thrush was perplexed and anxious to find out the reason for his owner's strange taste. One day after his owner had put food and water into the cage he forgot to close the door when he left. The thrush hopped to the cage door, looked around, went out of the cage, and flew up to the roof of the house. He glanced around. It was all so strange and beautiful. Clouds like white sails floated in the blue sky. Green willow branches waved to and fro. In someone's courtyard apricot trees were in full bloom. Far away there was a mountain which, shrouded in light mist, looked like a picture seen through sleepy eyes. The more the thrush saw the happier he was. He skipped about and then stopped to take a long look round.

His heart soared; he forgot about the cage and his life there. In his excitement, he flew off without thinking where he was going. He flew past green pasture, a wide expanse of sandy wilderness, the Yangtse with its roaring waves, and the muddy, turbulent Yellow River. Then he thought of taking a rest. He fluttered his wings, flew down and alighted on a gate tower in the wall of a big city. He watched many pedestrians, carts and horses passing below in the streets.

It was a strange scene that he saw. From afar came a man half reclining on a wooden seat with a wheel on each side while another man pulled him along, running like mad. He was not the only one doing this,



for as soon as the puller and his load passed by, a long string of others doing the same thing came along. The thrush thought: "Those who recline on the wooden seats probably have no legs. Otherwise, why do they not walk but have to be carried along by other people?" He took a careful look at one of the men who was being pulled along. The lower part of his body was covered by a fine woollen blanket, from under which protruded two feet in shining, fashionable black shoes. "So he does have legs," thought the thrush. "Then why does he have to be carried by another man? If this is the way things are done, there will be fifty useless persons among a hundred?" He thought the matter over many times but still could not understand it.

"Probably those who do the pulling think it very interesting." But when he took a careful look at them, it did not seem so. Sweat streamed down their red faces, while their backs were so hot that one could almost feel their heat. They leaned forward as they ran with big strides like ostriches fleeing for their lives. Before one foot touched the ground the other one was already lifted. "Why are they in such a hurry? Where are they going?" The thrush could not make it out. Then he saw a man on the seat pointing to the left with his hand. The man running in front at once slowed up and turned the wheels, the seat and the man reclining on it all to the left, and went dashing down the road that way. Then the thrush understood.