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The
RED SPEAR

By Shih Wen-chu

The Red Spear

SHIH WEN-CHU

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AN action-packed story of how Chinese youngsters grow up in revolutionary struggle in the northeast of China. It begins under the Japanese occupation and ends with the victory of the War of Liberation in that region. The hero, Hardy Chang, is a shepherd boy who becomes head of the Children's Corps in his village. He is educated by his elders — Big Tsao, Grandpa Chao, Auntie Li and Political Instructor Sun — in the fight against a tyrannical landlord. The struggle is won when it merges with that of the whole Chinese people led by the Communist Party to overthrow the Chiang Kai-shek regime.

This book is close to the life of the time, vivid in characterization, and clear and simple in language.

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CHAPTER I

The Birthday

1933. Winter came particularly early that year. An icy northwester swept relentlessly across the plains of western Liaoning Province, though it was only October. Beyond the Great Wall, the first cold wave had struck, then another and yet another. The heavens seemed to have it in again for the poor.

A pall of grey clouds blocked the sun and hung over the snow-covered earth, where there was no light, no heat, only a persistent and bitter cold. Outside the village, the fields were empty, and so were the village streets and compounds, where no childish shouts or laughter could be heard. Behind each closed door, children huddled together on the mud *kangs*,* for there was no grass or wild vegetables to be picked outside. Bleakness reigned, and the very air seemed frozen.

The Great Dark Mountains brooded down over Taheishan Village below. In the centre of the village sprawled the landlord's manor. The gaudy flag of the puppet "Manchukuo" regime, with crossed stripes on a yellow background, fluttered above its pretentious gate. Around the manor was a welter of tumble-down thatched huts. Their windows and doors rattled miserably in the snowstorm.

* A *kang* is a raised brick bed, which can be heated in winter, commonly used in northern China. — *Tr.*

From a mud hut beside the threshing ground at the west end of the village, the wail of an infant was heard. Another life had come into the world and was lamenting its chilly reception.

The cries of the child mingled with the moans of the mother and the sighs of the father.

"Another mouth to feed, another debt to pay, in this day and age. . . . What'll we do, wife, with us so poor. . . ."

The birth of a son should have been a cause for joy. But to Chang Tung-ho and his wife, it brought only dismay.

Before the month was out, the family had run short of food.

The nursing mother sat on the small *kang*, a ragged quilt over her shoulders. She stroked the tender skin of her tiny son, which was blue with the cold. She hugged the crying baby closer, trying to give it some of her warmth. But in her emaciated body, there was none. The child wriggled in her arms, its mouth seeking her breast, then turned away, wailing in disappointment.

Chang Tung-ho was squatting on a pile of straw at the mouth of the stove which heated the *kang*. He had only a tattered jacket over his shoulders and a pair of well-patched trousers. He tried to resist the dull pain of hunger gnawing away at his belly by straightening his back. All the while, his mind was milling, and as he thought he rubbed his large coarse hands and cast a look at the hungry little life in his wife's arms. His heart ached. He thought despondently, "You bringer of sorrow, don't you know better than to be born into this household?" Hardly had these thoughts passed his mind, when suddenly, he struck his forehead, exclaiming, "The boy's not to blame. It's these bad times!" He got to his feet, and with one bound, was at the door.

His wife looked up, startled. "Where are you going?" she cried. "To see Chin the Twist," Chang replied roughly. "To borrow more grain. What am I to do? Let you all starve?"

"It's no use. Didn't he put it about that all debts must be cleared this year, because the crops are bad? Anyway, we can

never pay him what we owe already, with that killing interest. We can't borrow from him again. Why don't you. . . ." As she uttered these words, a thought struck her and she looked out of the window. "Where've you sent Little Ling? It's getting dark, she should be back. . . ."

"She's gone to Uncle Chao's," the husband answered, distraught. He turned back from the door and paced up and down the small room, running his hands through his unkempt hair, his forehead furrowed.

"We shouldn't have troubled Uncle Chao again," the wife sighed. Old man Chao and their other kind neighbours and friends had already helped with all they could spare — some flour ground from sweet potatoes and a bit of rice for her confinement. They had had to tighten their own belts to do it.

"What a time to have a child," the wife continued, "when we can hardly keep body and soul together! Even if we do get by now, with help from good people who're as poor as we are, what'll we do later? Poor little boy. Of all families to be born into, why did you pick ours? We'll just have to let you grow as best you can. . . ."

To Chang, these words awakened memories of his own past. Like the darkness pervading the room, his thoughts, too, grew sombre. He had been raised at the foot of these same mountains, and his father Chang Lao-ta (Chang the Elder) had rented a dozen *mu** of hillslope land from this same landlord, Chin the Twist. His first memories were of tagging after his dad to till the land. But every year when the crops were in, the lion's share had gone to Chin as rent, leaving the Changs almost nothing to eat.

One year, the father took the whole family to the river bank. They reclaimed with much sweat and labour a few *mu* of waste

* A *mu* is one-fifteenth of a hectare. — T7.

land. When the spring shoots came up, they carefully nursed each plant, hoping for a good year and more food on the table. But even so, they did not have enough to fill their bellies.

Life was already hard, but then came a searing drought, laying the fields waste. Famine took over, and gave Chin the Twist the chance he had been waiting for. He had plenty of money and grain to be lent out, at rates he could fix as he pleased. The Changs had no one else to go to. In five years, the usurious interest on a hundred catties of sorghum they borrowed had snowballed so much that their house and the ground upon which it stood became Chin's property. Chang the Elder died a shattered man.

The father's debt passed to the son. To pay off part of it, Chang Tung-ho was forced to work as a hired hand for Twist. He laboured wearily and endlessly, a beast of burden on a track beset with difficulties, with his debt growing heavier all the while. At forty, Chang's shoulders were hunched, his back bent, his hair grey. He felt at the end of his tether, with no hope for the future.

Sometimes, he would comfort himself. "It's all up with me, but the children may live to see better days."

Chang Tung-ho's wife had already borne him three children. Poverty and disease had killed two in infancy, leaving only a girl. And now here was this boy. Would the tiny life survive?

Chang felt the full weight of fatherly responsibility. A wave of protectiveness came over him. Once more he decided. "Come what may, I must go to Twist. Must have some food for a start. If there's nothing left from my wages this year, I'll repay out of next year's. The children must live, even if I have to go hungry and work myself to death."

He pushed open the door and went out. The sudden onslaught of wind and snow forced him to lower his head. As he made his way forward, his mind was busy. Ever since the autumn har-

vest, he had worked up in the mountains for Twist. Bran-cakes brought from the Chin house, cold and hard as stone, were his daily fare. At night he stayed at old man Chao's. He had not gone to the manor for a month. And he had been knocking off an hour here and there to take care of the wife and baby. If Twist were to learn about this, he would give him hell — not lend him grain.

Chang slowed down as he thought: "Why even ask? Might as well go to my friends again. Poor as they are, they'll help."

Almost before he knew it, he found himself outside the Chin mansion. There he stopped short. Huge red lanterns hung over the main entrance, and great clusters of flowers, twined from silk, decorated the portals. People were bustling in and out.

"Oh, how stupid! I clean forgot!" Chang tapped his forehead. "Chin has had a son by his concubine. They must be celebrating the boy's first month of life. I'll go in to congratulate him. It should be easier to borrow from him at a time like this."

He hastened forward but had to move aside for some guests staggering drunkenly down the high stone steps. Then, suddenly, amid cries of "Get out! Beat it!" a ragged old man was kicked down the steps by one of Chin's toughs.

"You old beggar!" came the voice of the landlord, who had followed them out. "You've a nerve, asking for a settlement of accounts! What have you got to settle, anyhow? You're off your head!"

As Twist turned and went in, a big black dog pounced on the old man.

Chang hurriedly drove off the dog. The old man was the one-armed village beggar. "Are you hurt?" Chang asked him. "Don't you know, dad, that this is no place to come begging?"

Clutching Chang's arm, the old man shook with fury. He stamped his feet and brandished his fist at the mansion. "Crooks, robbers!"

Turning to Chang, he said, "I didn't come to beg. I came to collect a debt of three generations — he owes it to me in blood and tears! You wait! I'll collect it yet. . . ." His whole body trembled as he tottered away.

Chang cast a look into the yawning doorway. Above it, a wooden plaque on which were three huge characters traced in gold stared down at him, proclaiming: "Hall of Benevolence and Virtue." Worried, he walked in. The vast courtyard was brightly lit. From the sitting room came the blare of a gramophone mingled with peals of laughter. A clatter of crockery sounded from the kitchen. Strings of firecrackers, hanging from the high battlements at the four corners of the courtyard, were exploding in sharp staccato.

To landlord Chin, already fifty, the birth of his first son was a boon from heaven. With his wealth, he had everything he could wish for, but no heir. This had become an obsession with him. Twenty years earlier, he abandoned his wife and took a concubine, a notorious loose woman from the city, better known as the "Fengtien Coquette."

With her finery and her seductive ways, she had brought Chin to her feet, then helped him to make contact with the Fengtien officials. By milking the tenants and the other poor people and engaging in speculation, she helped quickly to increase the Chin family's fortune and power. She had Twist feeding out of her hand, obeying her every whim and fancy.

When Coquette turned forty, she finally conceived and bore a sickly child. But sickly or not, he was Chin the Twist's own blood, and Twist was ecstatic. He gave feasts every few days. And now he was celebrating his son's first month of life, a special occasion.

Having seen to the guests all day, Twist was resting in his study. He had a fortune-teller brought in to predict his son's

future. The man, blinking his near-blind eyes, poured honeyed prophesies into the landlord's ears. Twist, with eyes half-closed and legs outstretched, reclined on his rattan couch and listened raptly.

There was a knock on the door. The steward, nicknamed Two-Faced Yang, opened it, saw Chang Tung-ho there, asked his business and told him to wait.

The news that Chang had come to offer his congratulations was shrugged off by Twist, who continued questioning the fortune-teller.

"You said the young master would have a life of. . . ."

"Of gold, pure gold!" Rolling his eyes, the man held out his left hand and with his thumbnail, counted on his matchstick-thin fingers.

"The young master will have a propitious life, a golden life! First, he is born into a family with the name 'Chin' — which means gold, of course. Second, he is born in the autumn, which is golden. The Book of Odes calls the winds of autumn golden winds."

Chin grunted contentedly. The fortune-teller went on in a sing-song voice:

A golden breeze wafts into a noble home.
A golden blossom flowers upon a minted vine.
The golden bud bears golden fruit,
From golden lineage comes a golden babe.

He stopped, awaiting Chin's comment. Hearing none, he sensed that he might have made things too perfect. So he made a turn and said, "Without doubt, great riches and honour lie in store for the young master. But that doesn't mean there will be no minor reverses."

Chin's short stumpy legs hung in the air for a second before he brought them to the ground with a thud. Clutching his paunch he leaned forward.

"Venerable Soothsayer," he muttered into the fortune-teller's ears, his face working. "I'm over fifty, and have just this one heir. He must be a reward from heaven for the virtues of my ancestors. I would give all I have for him, all I have. But in fact, ever since his birth he's been frail. . . ."

"Hm," said the fortune-teller. Then, rolling his eyes, he counted on his fingers again and mumbled, "Tzu-Chou-Yin-Mao-Chen-Szu-Wu-Wei-Shen-Yu. This is the Year of Yu, the Year of the Cock, to which the young master belongs. A person born in the Year of the Cock is full of fighting spirit, and independent. I see. I see now. An evil star threatens the young master's course. . . ."

Moving closer to the fortune-teller, Twist urged, "Venerable Soothsayer, tell me what to do. How to ward off the evil?"

"There are ways," the man replied, "only. . . ."

He stuck out three fingers and counted. "There are three ways to meet evil. The first is to confront it. The second, to hide from it. The third, to do away with it. Everyone knows the first way won't do. The second — to hide — means pitting soft against hard. This may offset the danger, and even turn it into luck. The third way is to pit hard against hard — one of the two has to give way. Yes, I think it's best for the young master to adopt the second course. Hide him until the danger blows over."

"Hide?" stormed Twist, his vanity outraged. "Hide from whom, tell me. Don't you know that even the Great Dark Mountains quake when I stamp my foot? I hide from nobody here. They hide from me. I won't hide the young master. I'll crush anyone who dares to cross his path. . . ."

"Even so, even so!" agreed the fortune-teller in his pampering manner. "You know what's best, of course. As a matter of fact, no one has a better horoscope than the young master. A little upset here and there won't hurt!"

"That's better," Twist waved his hand in dismissal. "Give him some money and a bowl of celebration noodles," he told Two-Faced. "Then send around the village at once to check on every one born in the Year of the Cock."

Two-Faced led the man out.

Waiting outside, Chang had been too preoccupied with how he was going to ask for a loan to hear what went on inside. Now he entered and offered his good wishes.

The landlord slowly turned his head, looking at the farmhand. Then he coughed, spat, and said, his voice hoarse, "What, still here? I thought you came to offer your congratulations. I've already been told that. What else do you want?"

"I . . . I . . ."

"Well, what is it?"

"I — want to ask if you will lend me a few more pecks of sorghum. . . . We've nothing to eat at home. . . ."

After a moment's thought, Twist said, "All right. I'll take pity on you, as you've worked for me a long time. But, mind, work harder next year."

He took up his brush and wrote a loan note for Chang.

Chang put his fingerprint on it, explaining, "I wouldn't have come . . . only times are so hard, and my wife has given birth again. . . ."

"What! Another one? When?"

"Just a month ago today, the 23rd of August. The same day as the young master. . . ."

"What's that you say?" stormed Chin, breathing hard. A shudder passed through his fat frame. He glared at Chang, his pendulous chins shaking.

Rooted to the spot, the note clutched in his hand, Chang thought that Twist had fallen into a fit. Now Two-Faced hurried in. Pushing Chang aside, he panted. "Oh, master. The mis-

tress wants you in the rear-courtyard. The young master's having another fit, his arms and legs are twitching. . . ."

Chin's fat cheeks shook as he hurried away.

Two-Faced, following behind his master, turned threateningly to Chang. "You just wait. If anything happens to the young master, you'll answer for it."

By now, the front-courtyard had become hushed, while the one in the rear was in an uproar. Sudden shrill cries rose from one of the main rooms. Two-Faced rushed out and pulled Chang into the accountant's room.

"Is it true that your wife has dropped another brat?"

Chang looked at him indignantly. "We did have another baby, to speak decently."

"Huh! And when?"

"The 23rd of August."

"Boy or girl?"

"Boy."

"Does he belong to the Year of the Cock?"

"Yes."

"So! Male, the 23rd, Year of the Cock. You would pick this very day!" Two-Faced exploded. "A curse on you! Your ill-begotten brat is the evil star threatening the happiness of the old master and clashing with the star of the young master. Damn you!"

"But, Steward Yang, I'm not the goddess of birth. How could I know when he would appear?" Chang flared up, insulted. "Besides, the young master is a fruit from a golden vine, and my son comes from a bitter vine. The young master has his propitious life to live. My son came into the world to take punishment. Each has his course picked out. So what does the date of birth matter?"

"Damn you, Chang!" Two-Faced banged his fist on the table.