



# Little Soldier Chang Ka-tse

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# 1

In the days of the Anti-Japanese War there was a small village on the shores of the Paiyang Lake in the central plains of Hopei Province. It had a strange name, "Kuei Pu Ling", meaning Even-The-Devil-Is-At-A-Loss.

In the northwestern corner of Kuei Pu Ling stood a small two-roomed thatched hut facing south, surrounded by a low wall with a wooden gate that opened to the west. Two willow trees stood on either side of the gate. Along the shore of an arm of the Paiyang Lake some fifty feet west of this gate was a dense growth of reeds, which rustled in the wind like a ring of laughter. It would have been an attractive scene were it not for the sinister sight of the Japanese fortress that lay beyond the arm of the lake.

This was in 1943, the most bitter days of the Anti-Japanese War, only a year after the Japanese "mopping-up" campaign against the people of Central Hopei.

At the end of this campaign, there was not a village or a household without a mourner. Now every time people went out they had to pass a check-point. The *pao chia* or tithing system, in which a contact-man had to be sent every day to report to the enemy stronghold, had been instituted in most villages. The Communist Party's armed forces and the Party and government workers had gone underground and were carrying on their arduous and secret duties only after dark. Japanese pillboxes stood at three *li*<sup>1</sup> intervals, and forts at five *li* intervals, along a network of highways on either side of which a blockade ditch was dug. All this was to further their countless "annihilation and suppression" campaigns.

In the hut an old white-haired woman in a long gown was sitting on the *kang*<sup>2</sup> beside the window, mending an old cloth shoe where the upper had come apart from the sole. Her back was bent with age and her eyes were dim. The weather was sultry, and beads of sweat lined the furrows on her brow. Yet she seemed entirely absorbed in her needlework, and oblivious of the heat.

Suddenly she started and pricked her finger as the sound of running footsteps drew close. The curtain on the door went up and from under it popped the head of a boy. "Granny! 'A snake slithers round a stack of slates and slips into the stack of slates.' Can you say it?"

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<sup>1</sup> Three *li* equals one mile or one and a half kilometers.

<sup>2</sup> A brick bed, usually heated in winter.

The old woman was nonplussed. Glowering at him and nervously pressing her hands to her breast, she sighed and at length found her voice.

"You really gave me a fright, young 'un. Why is it the more I tell you to stop running about the more you like to run about?" This struck the little fellow with the force of enlightenment. His eyes lit up and a big grin came over his face. He squatted down and leant his head against the *kang* as if he had made a big blunder.

This was her grandson — Chang Ka-tse, the light of her heart, the apple of her eye, the hope of her remaining years. The boy was now thirteen.

The two were all and all to each other. The boy's father, her only son, had been killed at the outset of a Japanese campaign and his mother had died when he was only five. Now nearing seventy, the old grandmother was bent on only one thing — to bring up the youngster. She eked out a bare living by weaving reed mats and spinning. Her greatest joy came from the fact that the boy, besides being able to put up with cold and hunger, was intelligent and cheerful. He helped her wash the dishes, gather firewood, and split the reeds into thin strips so that they could be made into mats. He also looked after her comfort. Though she might be afflicted with a million sorrows, he could appease them all. He added warmth and comfort to this lonely household.

After the bloody mopping-up campaign, misfortunes, death and destruction befell every household. The old woman and Ka-tse were driven hither and thither,

barely escaping death. This experience came as such a shock to the old woman that her heart began to play up.

It was during this storm, however, that the old woman, with irrepressible élan and loyalty, knitted an indissoluble tie with the Eighth Route Army. Party workers and wounded soldiers came to her for shelter. Her cottage lay on the fringe of the village where it was easy to come and go without being noticed. Though some of them came and went by night without her having so much as a chance to see what they looked like, her own bitter experience of life told her that they were the salt of the earth. They gave their lives for the nation and people without flinching from the danger facing them. Before the enemy they were men of iron, but with her they were as considerate and attentive as if she had been their own mother.

Ka-tse, however, found these comings and goings of absorbing interest. Every one of those who came and went was his friend and his hero. Who else, besides Ka-tse, knew so many heroes and had so many secrets confided in him — how the fort in East Village came to be burnt down; who penetrated into the enemy stronghold at West Marsh; who beheaded the traitor in the city in the middle of the night; how a Japanese steamship was sunk; how the Japanese were suddenly attacked from a bridal sedan-chair; how a fortune-teller had blown up a Japanese steamship; how some White Necks<sup>1</sup> had been disarmed with whisk brooms. His heart had time and again been carried away to the bat-

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<sup>1</sup> Name given to the puppet troops by the people.

tle-field by these stories. Thus with people always stopping over at his granny's home, there was no end to the curious and interesting stories to be heard. In the evenings, his playmates in the village used to jump with joy when he passed on the stories just as he had heard them.

A day without any callers from the Eighth Route Army left him depressed and restless. He could find no way to while away the time.

Now it was Ka-tse's job to patrol the village every day. When his grandmother first sent him to keep watch, he had gone happily enough because he looked on it as something of an adventure. Whenever the Japanese troops were sighted at the approaches to the village, he would turn quietly for home to give warning of their approach. In an instant, the Eighth Route Army men holding a meeting in their compound would vanish into thin air.

"Many, many no have!" the Japanese would say after a long and futile search. This was really something to take a pride in. But as time went on, the task began to pall — the same old pillboxes, the same old highways. He lapsed into boredom. Besides, every time the Japanese turned up in the locality the village administration knew of it long beforehand, so everything went smoothly. Young Ka-tse grew even more slack. Now he spent the greater part of the day in the room where the Eighth Route Army men were lodging. His granny, for fear of being alerted to no purpose, told him never to run unless he had something to report on the enemy.

But today he came pounding in, forgetting the old rules just because he had learnt a new tongue twister.

Now though his grandmother had contained her agitation, she pointed an angry finger at him. "You've been to Uncle Chung's<sup>1</sup> room again," she exclaimed. "Just keep on acting the fool and let the Japanese devils slip up on us and see if I don't give you a pinch!"

Without uttering a word, Ka-tse sat on the *kang* and rolled over in front of his granny. "I'll come in as quietly as a ferret next time, Granny. All right?" He was still smiling broadly.

His grandmother glanced at him and subdued a laugh.

"Hey, Granny! D'you know Uncle Chung's not married yet? You find a girl friend for him, a handsome one, eh?"

She gave a little laugh. "You've got a gift for the gab all right. I'll tell you something, I just had a message from Uncle Chung's unit today saying that if he's better he should go back at once. The Japs are up to their old tricks again. They mean to surround and raid the village at dusk. But here are *you* behaving like a gentleman of leisure. Your Uncle Chung's spoiling you."

Seeing that his grandmother was no longer angry, Ka-tse cushioned his head on her lap and toyed with a button on her gown. "Let 'em do their worst. Uncle Chung said that our district forces are ready for a big battle. If they dare come they'll get a licking!" he said. Then he opened his eyes wide. "Talking about

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<sup>1</sup> Chinese children address their adult friends as "Uncle" or "Aunt".



war, Gran, why don't you let me go back with Uncle Chung, so I can see a bit of the fighting? Eh, Gran?"

The old woman seemed not to have heard him. She glanced up at the sky. The sun was slanting towards the west. She pushed his head off her lap, laid aside her sewing and rubbed her eyes lightly. "Another day nearly done! May the Lord of Heaven be with us. . . ." She smiled at Ka-tse and stepped down from the *kang*. "Now what was that you were saying about the snake slithering around a stack of slates? . . ."

## 2

The old woman groped her way into the kitchen to prepare supper. Ka-tse, whose mind was perpetually on his Uncle Chung, seized the chance to steal out again.

Uncle Chung, whose real name was Chung Liang, was head of the Reconnaissance Platoon. He had been laid up in Ka-tse's home for the last five days or so with rheumatism in his legs, but he was not staying in the same courtyard. Within the wall separating the grandmother's house from her neighbor's in the east was a small courtyard with a three-roomed building on the north, a small two-roomed building on the south and a pigsty against the wall on the west. The northern building had once been the ancestral hall of the Han family and the southern was once occupied by their hired hands. This was before the Hans had gone bankrupt many years earlier. Now the younger generation

of this family had bricked up the windows of the building in the south and used it to store straw in. Having been uninhabited for more than ten years the courtyard had become so overgrown with grass that it looked like an unfrequented temple. Since the Japanese mopping-up campaign, this place had quietly come alive again, and become a "guest-house" for Party functionaries and Eighth Route Army casualties. It was an out-of-the-way place and a padlock hung on the door of the ancestral hall all the year round. This placed it above suspicion to the enemy and even to the neighbors. People had been coming to and fro in steadily increasing numbers over the past year or so without raising any comment. The place had only one drawback. Being so near the lake, no tunnel had been dug to connect it with the other tunnels in the heart of the village, for fear of striking water. Besides, since any dampness would affect Uncle Chung's rheumatism and the place itself seemed perfectly safe, it was decided to leave well alone.

Uncle Chung was easy to get along with and had a child-like turn of mind, though he was well over thirty. He was always ready to sing, guess riddles, write cross-talk pieces and tell jokes. Besides he also knew many stories about heroes. He and Ka-tse quickly became inseparable friends.

Ka-tse dashed towards the foot of the wall in the east, against which leant several stacks of reeds like a screen. He moved aside the third stack and squeezed through the opening. Then he replaced it, crouched down and for a short two feet felt his way along the narrow space

between the reeds and the wall to a hole nearly three feet across. He crawled through the hole, moved aside a stack of bean stalks and found himself inside the pigsty. Happily poking out the tip of his tongue, he leapt out of the pigsty and stealthily made his way up to the small side door of the building on the south.

Apart from a few narrow shafts of light which broke through the cracks in the sealed window, the room was in complete darkness. Uncle Chung was seated on a pile of straw, carving something by this light. Ka-tse jumped for joy when he drew nearer and saw that Uncle Chung had made a wooden pistol.

"Oh, what can I do to thank you for it?" he exclaimed, kneeling down beside Uncle Chung and taking the "barker". It was well made, with a cylinder, a trigger guard, a standard-size chiselled butt and a barrel made



out of a shiny cartridge. It looked like the real thing. Smacking his lips over it, Ka-tse handled it fondly.

"You behave as if I'm going to give it to you," teased Uncle Chung.

"If you're not going to give it to me, then who are you going to give it to?"

"To . . . er . . . to a courageous and intelligent young hero who resolutely resists Japan!"

"Who is he and where is he?"

"You guess."

"I know! It's me!" he exclaimed, his eyes darting from side to side. Going through the motion of cocking the pistol, he closed his left eye, aimed at a chink in the sealed window and roared: "You dog of a traitor! Do you think you can escape? — Bang!"

"Sh . . . people in the street will hear you!" remonstrated Uncle Chung pointing to the window. A soft smile straight from his heart appeared on his face. "All right, I give it to you, but you must become a brave and resolute little hero."

"Sure!" said Ka-tse. He tucked the "barker" in his belt, marched around the room a couple of times counting "one, two, one, two!" and then suddenly flung himself upon Uncle Chung's neck. "Take me along with you to become a scout, Uncle Chung. Will you?" he pleaded.

Uncle Chung rested his hand on Ka-tse's head and smiled with pride. "So *you* want to be a scout too, eh, young Ka-tse?" He rubbed Ka-tse's head caressingly. "Anyone can become a scout, Ka-tse, but he must go through a certain amount of steeling and testing. A

scout not only must be courageous, shrewd and flexible, but must be calm and collected when trouble blows up. By calm and collected I mean if something comes on you suddenly, say for example, the sky falls down, you should not so much as flinch!"

"Huh! How can you be calm and collected when something like that happens?"

"That is to say, you must make up your mind to be a revolutionary to the end!" Warming up to his subject, Uncle Chung peered through the crack at the sky, took his Mauser and hand-grenades out of his belt and seated himself in a comfortable position. "All right, then! If you really want to join our scouts, I'll tell you a story."

This was just what Ka-tse had been hankering for. He put his "barker" away, sat down facing Uncle Chung with his legs crossed under him and listened avidly.

"Once there was a Communist," Uncle Chung began, "lodging in the home of one of our fort families<sup>1</sup> recovering from a wound. One day he was talking to a man — just like I'm talking to you now — when — Bang! Bang! Two shots suddenly rang out. . . ." Pop-pop-pop! At that moment, as if to illustrate his words, three rifle reports came from somewhere beyond the village.

Uncle Chung sprang to his feet and released the safety catch on his Mauser. An alert expression replaced the good-natured look on his face, and a fighting light came into his eyes. Pop-pop-pop! Another volley of rifle shots, fired from nearby, was followed by the thud

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<sup>1</sup> Peasant families which covered underground workers of the Communist Party.

of horses' hoofs and the sound of people accosting others to stop. "The enemy has caught us napping!" whispered Uncle Chung slowly as he threw a glance at Ka-tse and picked up his hand-grenades.

### 3

It was dusk. The enemy troops in the county seat had suddenly swooped down on Kuei Pu Ling and surrounded it.

After firing a couple of rounds, the White Necks, followed by the Japanese, tramped into the streets shouting orders. Some of them climbed upon roof tops to cover the street entrances, while another group charged into the village "Administration" to arrest the functionaries. The rest of them broke up into small parties and made a house-to-house search. Barking dogs snapped at their heels, chickens fluttered to one side squawking. Men and women, young and old, huddled together in the houses preparing themselves for the coming disaster.

Two White Necks were hammering at the padlock on the door of the ancestral hall of the Han family.

It was at this time that Uncle Chung opened the little side door, with the idea of fleeing to the west courtyard. On the roof of the grandmother's house, he saw two Japanese soldiers keeping watch on all around them. The enemy had every place covered. Uncle Chung drew back his head and secured the door with

a cross-beam. He looked about the room several times. Ka-tse was shivering with terror.

"Now just relax and don't stir, Ka-tse!" he commanded. "Just do as I tell you. There's no need to be afraid. . . ."

C-r-a-c-k! The padlock on the door had been broken. From that direction came the tramp of footsteps.

"They've broken in, Ka-tse. Do you dare let 'em have it with this?" asked Uncle Chung, picking up the sickle he had been using a few minutes before to carve the "barker".

"Sure!" replied Ka-tse taking the sickle.

"That's the boy!" said Uncle Chung. "Come, let's guard the door." They took up positions on either side of the door, their feet planted apart.

The crunch of footsteps was heard in the yard and the shadow of two men flickered across the crack in the door. Uncle Chung flattened himself against the wall and motioned for Ka-tse to stand clear of the crack. No sooner had he stepped back against the wall than someone pushed against the door from the outside.

"Huh! The door's bolted from inside." Rifle bolts clicked. "Come out! You Eighth Route Army men!" barked a voice.

Ka-tse shivered with fright and threw a quick glance at Uncle Chung. The Eighth Route Army scout was standing stock-still, Mauser in hand. His lips were tightly compressed. "That's the spirit!" Ka-tse thought to himself. He too froze into immobility.

"Come out!"

A loud kick resounded against the wall, bringing a shower of dirt down from the rafters onto their heads. Uncle Chung blinked the dust out of his eyes and remained motionless.

"What an example!" thought Ka-tse, his courage rising. He compressed his lips and stood still.

The shadow of something round flitted across the crack in the door. The White Necks were apparently peeping into the room. Uncle Chung trained his Mauser at the crack. A squeeze of the trigger would blast the brains out the peeping head. He nevertheless withdrew his Mauser. It was evident that he was racking his brains for the next course of action.

"Ha! Ha!" came a laugh. "I see you! Don't play the fool! Hurry out of there, or I'm going to shoot!"

Ka-tse turned pale. He shuffled back, pressing himself hard against the wall. Uncle Chung gave him a look, imploring him with his eyes and a shake of his head not to stir. Ka-tse understood and froze to the spot. Sweat beaded his forehead.

Following this maneuver to intimidate, the footsteps outside quietened down. But before the two had time to catch their breath, several bricks fell away from the sealed window. The White Necks had made a hole in it. Uncle Chung felt his way quietly along the base of the wall towards the window. No sooner had he reached it than a shining bayonet shot in through the hole there, almost striking him on the head. Uncle Chung remained steady.

Ka-tse's spirits rose. Gripping his sickle firmly, he stood with his eyes fixed on the crack in the door. Now



that he was guarding this door alone, he felt a great sense of responsibility. He was ready to chop heads off like grass if the enemy ventured to stick them inside the door!

The silence in the room threw the White Necks into a quandary. "Is there anyone inside after all?" one asked.

Another cursed loudly. "I'm going to climb up on the window sill and see," he said.

"Don't! It might be a tunnel! There may be an ambush behind the door."

"Then . . . then we'd better call up a couple more to help us. There may be mines inside too," said the other, clearly shaken by the mention of the word "tunnel".

They gave up the attempt to break in and left. Uncle Chung peered out of the window. The yard was deserted and the Japanese on top of the grandmother's house had gone too. "Follow me!" he said softly, unbolting the door. He took Ka-tse by the hand and led him to the pigsty. They moved aside the bean stalks and crawled through the hole. Uncle Chung took cover under the reeds and drew in a deep breath. Sounds issued from the west courtyard. Listening intently, Little Ka-tse heard someone jabbering in Japanese in the north building and then his grandmother's voice.

"I don't understand a word you say. I'm a lone old woman and have nothing to offer you," she was heard to shout. This was followed by some bumping and scraping, mingled with shouts.