

**Tracks in the  
Snowy Forest**

# **Tracks in the Snowy Forest**

*BY CHU PO*

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FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS PEKING  
1965

*To Yang Tzu-jung, Kao Po and all my  
other comrades who have taken part in the  
battles in the snowy forest*

First Edition 1962  
Second Edition 1965

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*Printed in the People's Republic of China*

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## I. *A Bloody Debt*

IT was dawn in late autumn. White frost covered the ground. The air was icy, bone-chilling.

A bugle call broke the morning stillness. Whistles shrilled; commands, footfalls, shouts rang on the drill fields — noisy but not disorderly, bold, bright, impressive.

Shao Chien-po, his uniform neat and spruce, a smart little automatic in the holster hanging from the brown belt around his waist, strode briskly towards the drill field of First Battalion. He was the regimental chief-of-staff, a brilliant, handsome young officer of twenty-two. When he appeared on the metre-high earthen platform inside the stockade, the company officer of the day shouted, "Attention!" Instantly, the clamour of the drill field was stilled. The men stood motionless.

The officer of the day trotted up to the earthen platform and reported to Chien-po the exercise being practised and the number of men taking part, then turned and gave the command: "Resume the exercise!" The order was echoed down the line. Again the field was plunged into feverish activity.

Chien-po walked over and watched the bayonet practice of the Heroes Platoon commanded by Liu Hsun-tsang, otherwise known as "Tank." With the eyes of a superior officer on them, the men outdid themselves. They attacked lustily, their blades flashing, their shouts echoing through the air.

Half an hour later, a red sun began to show itself over the rim of the southeast mountains. The officer on duty at regimental headquarters, Chen Ching — a staff officer for communication and liaison, came running up to Chien-po. Panting, he saluted.

"Deputy Commander-in-Chief Tien telephoned us at five thirty-seven. He ordered us to prepare one battalion and a

troop of cavalry for immediate action. They are to be lightly equipped and able to move fast. Detailed written orders will arrive soon. They are to set out as soon as they receive the orders. He stressed that they're not to delay a single minute. I await your commands."

Plainly taken by surprise, Chien-po thought a moment. "Deliver the message at once to the regimental commander and commissar. I will get a force ready to send out in accordance with what you have told me."

"Right." Chen Ching turned and ran from the drill field.

To the chief bugler standing by his side, Chien-po said, "I want the cavalry troop to muster immediately and come to the drill field of First Battalion. The entire battalion, in full battle outfit, is also to fall in, ready to march. Tell the commanding officers and political instructors of the battalion and the cavalry troop to report to regimental headquarters and wait for orders."

The chief bugler blew the appropriate signals. Other buglers, near and far, replied acknowledging receipt, their calls blending and overlapping. The chief bugler mentally checked them: Company One . . . Company Two . . . the cavalry troop. . . .

As the last notes died away, the chief bugler reported to Chien-po, "All units have received your orders, Commander 203."

Anxious to know the reason for this sudden development, Chien-po walked towards the bridge at the east end of the village that led to military zone headquarters.

We put tens of thousands of Kuomintang soldiers out of action in the Peony River<sup>1</sup> region more than six months ago, he mused. All that is left of them are five brigades, and these are brigades in name only. They have no soldiers — just a few officers who've gone into hiding. Land reform work in the countryside is proceeding steadily. Everywhere, in the villages, in the fields, people are busy — dividing the landlords'

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<sup>1</sup>Mutanchiang, Heilungkiang Province.



land, issuing new title-deeds, opening granaries and distributing the grain, accusing landlords at mass meetings and settling scores for the oppression, exploitation, injury and humiliation the land-owning tyrants inflicted upon them for years, for generations. The peasants have grain in their granaries, and own land of their own to till. Everyone is happy. They're singing, *The ten thousand year iron tree has blossomed at last, branches withered for centuries are beginning to bud.* Life is peaceful for the people. Our troops are busy drilling, preparing for the day when we go into action against Chiang Kai-shek's main forces. . . .

Yes, the tension was unexpected. But Chien-po was a soldier, and his mind instinctively sifted through the possible trouble-makers: Kuomintang spies, puppet police and officials who had collaborated with the Japanese occupation army when it ruled "Manchuria" — China's northeastern provinces, big landlords, bandits. . . . Although the armies of these fiends had been destroyed, they themselves were still alive. They would struggle against annihilation, they would fight to make a comeback.

"Of course, that's it," Chien-po said to himself. Standing on the bridge, he gazed at the eastern hilltop and muttered, "We've got to wipe them out clean, or there'll be no end of disasters."

A cloud of dust rose on the hilltop, two men on horseback galloping before it.

His clever young guard, Kao Po, ran to intercept them. Waving his hands, he shouted, "Messengers. Commander 203 is over here. Dismount."

The two messengers reined their horses to a halt and leaped from the saddles. One of them held the animals as the other ran up to Chien-po, saluted, and handed him an order.

Chien-po opened it and read hastily. His face grew taut. He turned and hurried to regimental headquarters.

The curtain had already been pulled back from the tactical maps on the wall. Regimental C.O. Wang, Commissar Liu

and the officers of First Battalion and the cavalry troop, waiting for the written orders, were trying to guess what was wrong.

"The order has come," cried Chien-po as he entered the door. The officers quickly surrounded him.

Chien-po held out the envelope to Commander Wang. "Read it to us," said Wang with a nod.

Chien-po unfolded the order. All eyes were upon him. He read:

Last night (the 12th) at 24:00 hours, over two hundred bandits hiding in the mountains suddenly raided Pine Tree Station, burning and killing. County Head Chu and the land reform team led by her are surrounded.

Your regiment shall rush a battalion and a troop of cavalry, lightly equipped, to their rescue. The cavalry troop shall first cut the bandits' retreat route to the mountains so that we may destroy them to the last man. This is an order.

When he read "...County Head Chu...surrounded..." Chien-po's voice trembled. The other comrades looked at him uneasily. The gaze of Commissar Liu was particularly concerned.

"Regimental Commander. We can't delay a minute." Chien-po composed himself with an effort.

"Right. Have them set out at once," the commander ordered.

"Please let me lead the cavalry troop and cut off the bandits' retreat." Chien-po was plainly very upset.

Commander Wang thought a moment. "I really shouldn't, but under the circumstances—" he looked at Commissar Liu, who nodded, "—it's the only possible decision."

"May I leave?" Chien-po requested tensely.

The regimental commander nodded. Chien-po strode through the door.

Commissar Liu hastened after him. "Comrade Chien-po. I know County Head Chu is your elder sister and she's very dear to you. If anything unfortunate has happened, you mustn't give way."

"Don't worry, Commissar." Chien-po grasped his hand. "You can rely on me. . . ."

Chien-po's horse was at the door, ready and waiting. His young guard, Kao Po, always made all necessary preparations for him in advance whenever he had to go into action. Although only eighteen, Kao Po was a veteran of many battles. People called him the "Little Old Warrior."

Vaulting into the saddle, Chien-po raced to the First Battalion drill field and waved his arm. . . .

"Mount. Forward," shouted the troop commander.

Hoofbeats pattered like a squall of rain. The troop surged into the mountain road leading southwest. Dust flew as the two hundred mounted men galloped towards Pine Tree Station.

Chien-po's heart was as rapid as the flying steeds. He thought of the battle that lay ahead, he thought of the victory they would win. Then fear gripped him as he remembered County Head Chu, the sister who had raised him from childhood.

Can anything have happened to her? No, impossible! Sister was a very alert person. During the War of Resistance Against Japan, she had escaped many a danger, right under the knives of the Japanese and traitors. Once, in a situation that seemed absolutely hopeless, her cleverness had saved the people and herself.

He tried to drive the terrors from his mind, but one thought kept forcing itself upon him: Can she have lost her vigilance because the enemy has been quiet for the past six months? Her people don't have much in the way of weapons. They'd be an easy mark for raiding bandits.

Chien-po was very worried. But he told himself: Once a battle is joined, it's no use hoping for a lucky break. Only intelligence and courage can bring you through to victory.

His heart beat harder than before, and he urged his horse on, "Faster, faster, faster." Speed meant everything. Only if they got into the fight quickly could they save Sister, the land reform team comrades and the people.

Two hundred battle steeds galloped up the hill west of Pine Tree Station. There, the troop cut the main road leading into the mountains. Wild flame and smoke rose from the

village lying before their eyes. Chien-po guessed that the enemy was fleeing, or had already fled. There wasn't a moment to spare. At his command, the men spurred their horses and plunged directly down the broad slope, waving their sabres. Rushing across a hay field, they charged into Pine Tree Station. In an instant, they were immersed in a sea of flames and thick smoke.

Too late. The bandits had left four hours before. The birds had flown.

Pine Tree Station was a heart-rending scene.

In some places the flames were dying, in others they were still leaping high. The whole village was burning, the haystacks, the buildings. An acrid stench of scorched cattle and pigs assailed the men's nostrils. From time to time, houses collapsed in a shower of sparks and smoke. Burned dogs and pigs cried pitifully.

None of the villagers tried to quench the fire, no one wept. Everyone was rigid as stone, fists clenched, eyes staring furiously at the merciless flames that were devouring their homes.

Chien-po jumped down from his horse. "Put out the fire," he shouted to his men.

Two hundred cavalry troops quickly tied their mounts and rushed to battle the blaze.

Pushing through the flames, Chien-po inspected the damage. In the centre of the village, on the clearing in front of the Hsu Family Inn for Carters, stood a big blood-stained chaff cutter. Beside it lay a heap of dismembered bodies. Some were without legs, some had been cut in half at the waist; several had been decapitated.

In a circle around these bodies were strewn the corpses of about twenty more people, including old men and children. But most were women. Obviously, they had tried to rush to the rescue of their dear ones under the chaff cutter, to offer to die in their place, or to fight their killers, when they had been shot down.

Among them was a young woman, clad in only short under-pants. She had been disembowelled. Her hair was wildly unkempt, her fists tight, as if she had fought fiercely to the end.

Thirty metres away, beside a well, was the body of an infant. It bore no marks of gun or knife. Evidently it had been killed by being flung viciously to the ground. Where was the baby's mother? What had been her fate?

Chien-po walked on. Rounding a corner, he was confronted with a more shocking sight.

From a big willow tree next to a horse trough hung nine grisly heads, suspended by wire strung through their ears. All had clenched teeth and glaring eyes; even death had been unable to quell their furious hatred.

A crude board attached to the tree bore the inscription, "This is what happens to pauper trash who take land from their betters."

Rigid with rage, Chien-po strode back to the chaff cutter.

Beside the heap of cruelly murdered victims was a large pile of embers. The body of an old woman lay partly in the remains of the fire; it had been consumed to ashes from the waist down. The old lady's chest and white hair were flecked with blood. She must have been burned alive.

Close observation of the embers also showed the charred outline of what had been a small child. A thin whisp of blue smoke still rose from the ashy heap. Only a little leg remained. From the size of it, the child couldn't have been more than five or six.

Some twenty shoulder poles lay near the fire. The heat had hardened the blood with which they were smeared into scaly patches. What cruel torture had they inflicted for the bandits? . . .

The flames were now extinguished. Nothing remained but ashes and charred wood. Acrid smoke and foul odours hung like a pall over a rubble of bricks and tiles.

Villagers emerged. Women numb with horror, or driven insane. Men grinding their teeth, glaring, spewing out their limitless rage.

The People's Liberation Army soldiers collected the bodies. They couldn't leave this task to relatives, friends and neighbours — it would be too awful for them to view the agonized remains of their dear ones. The PLA men were the sons and brothers of the people, and these poor victims were their own parents, their own sisters and brothers, their own nephews and nieces. Handling the bodies with the utmost tenderness, as if fearful of causing the least pain to the wounds of the deceased, they wrapped the victims in their army blankets.

Standing at attention in a circle around the massacred villagers, the soldiers paid their last silent respects. Even their horses lowered their heads as if in mourning. Then two hundred iron fists shot furiously into the air, and two hundred voices cried:

"Forgive us, beloved countrymen, we came too late. But rest in peace. We swear to collect this bloody debt! We swear to avenge this heinous crime."

Kao Po, rubbing his weeping eyes, approached from the western end of the village. A peasant of about fifty staggered along ahead of him. Kao Po came up to Chien-po — already nearly frantic because he couldn't find his sister or any of land reform team — and pointed at the mountain to the west.

"203, County Head Chu and the land reform comrades are dead. They —" Kao Po sobbed so hard he couldn't continue.

Bending forward at the waist and stamping his feet in grief, the peasant wept, "County Head Chu, County Head Chu. . . ." Speechless with sorrow and anger, he could only point in the direction of the mountain.

Chien-po turned pale; his heart sank. In a hopeless voice, he asked, "Where are they?"

"The western mountain. . . ." Kao Po was after all still a youngster, with none of the adult's self-control. He wept aloud, like a child.

Something seemed to burst in Chien-po's brain. His body felt paralysed. He stood woodenly for a moment, his eyes blank. "Let's go," he said finally. His voice seemed to belong to someone else.

The peasant cursed as he led the way. "Demons. Murdering brigands. Everything's gone. They gutted us clean. Heaven. Heaven."

Were his legs moving? Chien-po didn't know. He was devoid of all sensation.

Nine bodies were hanging from a big old cypress on the slope of the western mountain. Six men and three women. The bandits had disembowelled them and cut off an ear from each.

"The land reform comrades and County Head Chul" wept the peasant. Not daring to look at them, he covered his face with his hands, dropped to his knees and lowered his head until it touched the ground.

For a moment, Chien-po could see nothing, feel nothing. His head whirled. He began to fall. The weeping Kao Po grabbed him and cried in alarm, "203. 203."

With an effort, Chien-po opened his eyes and took a grip on himself. Before he turned to look at his sister again, he heard a gentle voice saying, "Comrade Chien-po . . . if anything unfortunate has happened, you mustn't give way." He could clearly see in his mind the kindly Commissar Liu. Chien-po gritted his teeth. His eyes were dry. The grief in his heart became a towering rage.

My mission, the men, are waiting for me, he thought. Taking a last look at his sister's body, he walked quickly down the hill. Mechanically, he seated himself on a large rock and wrote a report to the regimental commander and commissar.

201, 202:

The bandits fled the village four hours ago. They were gone when we arrived. I am sending out scout patrols. We will await your orders here. Please decide our next step immediately.

Messenger Little Li took the note, jumped on his horse and galloped away.

The PLA fighters were furious. While waiting for orders, they wrote battle pledges, requesting to be sent into the Aristocrat Range to wipe out the bandit lairs and capture the brigands' leaders.

While the scout patrols which Chien-po had sent out were searching for the enemy's trail, in the village, the entire population gathered around the PLA men. "Dear ones, dear ones. Hear our woes, hear our accusations. . . ." Tears flowed from a thousand pair of peasant eyes. The villagers began to relate the horrors they had endured.

Seeing the suffering people, Chien-po tried hard to suppress his rage. His love for his sister, especially, threatened to conquer his objective reasoning power. He felt giddy. He seemed to see his dear sister before him, relating her own tragic tale amidst the peasants. Raising his head, Chien-po looked around. But she was nowhere among the sorrowing, angry crowd. Chien-po seemed to be living in a nightmare; he wished that were all it was.

A grey-haired old lady, clad in a thin tattered garment, eyes staring, her hands spread wide, was muttering insanely, "My son. He's gone. My daughter-in-law. She's gone too. . . . Heaven. What shall I do? I'm old and alone. . . . Tell me, what shall I do? . . ."

Holding a two-year-old child, a woman stood, tears streaming down her cheeks and dropping on the red frozen face of the infant, who was gazing up at his mother with large innocent eyes. Three older children knelt at her feet, tightly embracing her legs. From time to time, they looked up at her, rubbing their eyes and weeping softly, as if not daring to cry aloud.

Chien-po tore his gaze away, only to find himself looking at a girl standing right beside him. With mournful visage, her hair awry, she seemed to be frozen. She had her coat wrapped around a five or six-year-old child who was pressed against her. The child was sobbing, "Sister! Sister! Papa and Mama are gone. . . ." The girl mechanically wiped his



eyes. But her own tears continued to rain, uninterrupted, on her brother's head and face.

This miserable picture recalled to Chien-po his own unhappy childhood.

He had lost both his parents when he was six, and he and his sister were left alone in the world. Only eighteen, she kept him and herself alive by teaching primary school.

Sister got up very early every morning to cook their food. After breakfast, she would take him with her to school. He listened as she taught class all day. In the evening, they would go home together, and Sister would again prepare a meal. After supper, she did the washing, the mending, the sewing, the darning, and helped him with his homework. She tried her best to bring up her poor little brother properly.

After Chien-po went to bed, she would begin correcting the students' papers, working far into the night, sometimes until dawn. The youthful bloom faded from Sister's girlish face. She developed a tired cough and a soft little sigh. Often, when she looked at the sweetly sleeping Chien-po, there was a catch in her throat.

Chien-po clearly remembered one night, very late, when that tired cough and soft little sigh awakened him from his slumbers. Peering sleepily at Sister toiling in the lamplight, he felt a pang of pity. Chien-po crawled from the covers, walked over to the table and gazed up at Sister's weary face. Tears welled up in his intelligent little eyes.

"Sister, come to bed."

Startled, the girl turned her head so quickly that she saw stars. When she found little Chien-po regarding her with tear-filled eyes, she forced a flurried smile. Stroking his hair, she said tenderly:

"Sleep, Little Po. Sister's not tired."

"No, Sister. I won't sleep unless you do too."

"Be a good boy, now. Go back to bed."

"But you're so tired, Sister." Chien-po lowered his head. Tears fell from his eyes.