WILD BULL VILLAGE

CHINESE SHORT STORIES

BY AI WU AND OTHERS

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Luxuriant green trees covered the hills. All day long we had been trudging through the forest. The sun shone brightly in a cloudless sky. It was like summer. Occasionally a few trees with golden leaves reminded you of late autumn, yet some birch trees were just budding, as if it were spring. North China was in the grip of icy winter. But here in the south the borderland was a scene of wonderful freshness and joy.

Late in the afternoon we came to a stretch of level ground. Scores of thatched cottages were bathed in the golden light of the setting sun. Each was enclosed by a bamboo fence. Inside the fence the leaves of banana trees, palms and calami could be seen, green and glistening, and fat pigs lay with lazy half-closed eyes. Chickens scurried off as we approached, some flying to the tops of the fences. Comrade Chang Hua of the district office took me to one of the cottages.

"This is the chairman's house," he said.

We entered the gate. The cottage door was padlocked. Putting his shoulder bag down on the ground, Chang Hua took out a handkerchief and wiped the sweat from his forehead. "You rest here a while," he told me, starting to leave. "I'll go look for her."

A fragrance filled the air. I looked around. An orange tree by the hut was blooming with little white blossoms. There was also a pomegranate tree with attractive crimson flowers. The calamus entwining round a trunk was overgrown with fruit, all very small. The bananas were not big either. Probably it took more time for fruit to ripen in the hills. A green valley in the sunshine beyond was flickering with a golden light. At the end of the slope flowed a river, shimmering silvery bright. Fascinating peaks on the other side were tinged with a blue haze. I took out my camera ready to take a picture of this valley and river. But I was standing towards the sun. Starting to shift my position, I heard people laughing and talking, entering the garden. I turned to look. Comrade Chang Hua and a woman in her late forties were walking toward me, chatting in a lively manner. "This is the chairman of the commune," said Chang.

The woman had a brown complexion, rather plump cheeks and lively eyes. She looked very capable. Greeting me with pleasure, she held out her hand. As I followed her into the hut, I was thinking, "Where have I met her before?" Then I remembered — in the scrubland. Only then she wore clothes with many patches. Now she was neatly dressed in new clothes. Then her face wore an expression of worry and sadness, now she looked happy. Then there were wrinkles around her eyes, now there were none. This puzzled me. She couldn't be the same person. That woman would be over seventy now. Besides, this one was called Aunt Chao. The other woman was called Mama Hsu. They obviously were two different persons. Yet that friendly look, that gentle way of talking, the smile hovering about her lips — how she resembled that other woman!

She was now saying, "I can put you up in our house. Don't be in a hurry to leave. I'll take you to see anyone

you want to interview. If you want to write at night, I have a bright kerosene lamp. Our neighbour's children are very quiet they won't disturb you." I recalled what Mama Hsu had said years ago: "Come with us to the precious stone mine. We'll dig for precious stones together. Have your meals with us. Our house is much cleaner than the foodstalls. Ah-hsiu and I can mend your clothes in our spare time."

But why should I dwell upon the past? It had nothing to do with the present.

To keep my mind from wandering I asked Aunt Chao some questions: How many people were there in this village before liberation? How did they live? How many were there now, and in what way was their life different from the past?

I also asked if she was a native of this place. She smiled and replied that she was not born here. Nobody in the village was born here. Many years ago it was an uninhabited forest. Then, no one knows exactly when, people came and cut down the trees and burned off the brush. A broad stretch of land appeared in the forest. The people planted opium poppies. More settlers came. All grew poppies, very few planted grain. It was true that opium poppies were worth money. But they brought no prosperity to the people. On the contrary, they ruined the men's health, since nearly every man acquired the opium habit. Death took a heavier toll of men than women. Even today women outnumbered men in this village.

"This is a women's kingdom and she is the queen," Chang Hua interrupted Aunt Chao jestingly.

"Does anyone still smoke opium now?" asked I.

"No," Aunt Chao made a negative gesture. "After liberation the government persuaded the people to grow grain." She sighed. "If only liberation had come a few years earlier!" Her eyebrows knit and her head

bent, she looked the very image of Mama Hsu. I had stopped wondering whether I had met her before, realizing that there was just a chance similarity between her and someone I used to know. At dusk a girl of about 18 came in. Her sun-tanned face flushed with walking, her big black eyes lively and intelligent. Greatly surprised, I almost cried out, "Ah-hsiu, where have you been? I haven't seen you in years!"

She on her part merely shot a brief glance at me and greeted Chang Hua pleasantly. The chairman took the medicine kit from her, saying, "Put this down first. You've walked quite a distance. Aren't you tired?"

She let the chairman take the kit and smiled. "I'm not a bit tired, ma."

Chang Hua smilingly told me, "She is the chairman's precious daughter and our village's chief physician."

"Do you want a punch in the nose, Comrade Chang Hua?" The young doctor shook her fist in mock anger and smiled. "Only a month since we last met and you've learned to be so wicked. How can you be so sarcastic?"

Heavens, her girlish smile and the way she feigned anger, were all so like Ah-hsiu! I nudged Chang and asked in a low voice, "What's her name?" I knew her name could have nothing to do with Ah-hsiu, but still I wanted to know.

"Ah-ming," Chang Hua replied, laughing.

"Ah, you shouldn't tell people my baby name." She looked at Chang reproachfully and then, turning to me, said with a smile, "My name is Chao Shu-ying."

Again, it was a case of a person's features and expressions reminding me of somebody else. Nothing extraordinary actually, when you come to think of it. But in this case, the strange thing was that both the mother and the daughter should be so like another mother and daughter.

It happened many years ago. During the monsoon, it rained every day in the scrub-land. The trees were constantly dripping water. Only teams of pack horses and Tai traders, baskets of goods slung from their carrying poles, came to our inn. There were scarcely any Han customers. It was said that this was the season of the miasma. An outsider coming to the scrub-land was sure to fall victim to it. It was the first time I went there and as I had no mosquito net to protect me in the night, I soon became afflicted with malaria. Every afternoon I shivered from cold and fever. But once it passed I could work as if nothing had happened. One day just after an attack, I got up and saw a woman and her daughter entering the inn. I showed them a room. Looking around, the woman asked uneasily, "Isn't there a smaller room? We need only a small one."

In the scrub-land the inns usually had large rooms with bamboo walls. Bamboo shelves covered with bamboo mats served as beds. Each of these "beds" could accommodate twenty to thirty people. I took a good look at the woman and her daughter and told them, "We have no other guests. You two can have this room to yourselves."

The mother hastily asked, "Do we have to pay much? It's such a big room."

"Not much. We only charge by the person." I started to go.

The daughter came quickly forward and asked softly, "Is there any work I can do here?"

Looking at her in surprise, I was about to reply when her mother walked over and pulled her away. "Come and lie down for a while. You've walked so far today. Aren't you tired?"

The girl smiled. "I'm not a bit tired, ma." She looked at me, waiting for a reply.

I thought for a while and said, "We need an extra hand to sweep the horse manure out of the yard. But it's a

heavy dirty job. A mere slip of a girl like you won't be able to do it."

"I'm not useless. Try me and see," the girl exclaimed, somewhat resentfully. Her face was radiant. She was plainly happy at the prospect of getting a job.

"Hold your tongue, Ah-hsiu," her mother chided. "Don't be so rude."

"Ma, why shouldn't I take a job when I've got the chance?" Ah-hsiu could not conceal her joy. She continued, "I don't like to hear people talk like that. He shouldn't assume I'm no good before seeing how I work."

I said nothing but smiled. I'll see how you work tomorrow, I thought.

That night, when the day's work was done, I told my master, the innkeeper, about the mother and her daughter who was looking for a job. The innkeeper was in bed smoking his opium pipe. He acted as if he hadn't heard me. That was his way; he wouldn't answer at once. I sat down on the edge of the bed and waited. The innkeeper's wife came in from an adjoining room and said to her husband, "Mama Hsu has been talking to me. There has been a drought in their place and many people have starved to death. They are refugees. She begs us to let them stay. They'll do anything. They want only their keep."

The master seized upon this at once. "Refugees! I won't have them! They have been starved for so long, they are likely to eat up all we have."

When I first came to work at the inn I ate quite a lot. The master had sneered at me, "You're going to send the price of rice sky high." Now he was again afraid people would eat him poor. You want people to work for you, but you won't give them enough to eat! I thought angrily.

But the mistress smiled and said, "How can they eat you poor? At first they may eat a little more than average. But that doesn't matter. Look at him, he's got

fever every day. We have to hire an extra hand." Then she sighed, "It rains every day. It's no easy job to sweep that horse manure."

The innkeeper, eyes fixed on his pipe, demanded, "Can those two women do it? . . . It looks to me like the only thing they can do is eat."

When I heard they were poor refugees I wanted to say, "Let them have a try." But I did not speak out lest the master think I wanted to do less work myself. I looked at the mistress, hoping she would insist. If she gave up, I would have to speak.

The mistress seemed to have guessed my feelings. She nodded and said, "Give them a chance. Anyway, they don't want any pay. If they can't do it, they will go. From the way she talked I'm sure Mama Hsu is very sensible and will not force herself upon you."

"All right, let them have a try," agreed the master, looking at neither of us. His face wore an irritated expression.

The next morning it rained. The mountain villages nearby were all blurred in the misty downpour. The pack horses had gone, leaving the ground strewn with straw and dung. It was sickening to look at the brown, muddy water. I intended to clean the yard when the rain let up a little. But the girl who arrived the day before began sweeping the ground with a long bamboo broom. She had only a kerchief of printed cotton on her head.

The rain and mist in the hills were full of pestilential vapours. How could anyone afford to let herself be drenched? I hastened to fetch Ah-hsiu a straw hat and warned, "If you get soaked, you'll be sick."

She not only refused to accept the hat but retorted in anger, "What's there to be afraid of? It's not raining daggers." She even took off her cotton kerchief and let the rain fall on her head. Her long glossy plait, which had been swinging down her back the day before, was

coiled up on her head. Her zest for work filled me with amazement. But her defiant attitude made me uncomfortable. I cursed silently, "Damn the girl, she's still mad at me."

The mistress saw what was going on and took the straw hat to the girl herself. Only then did Ah-hsiu put it on. Usually it took me the whole morning to sweep the yard and carry the manure outside. With Ah-hsiu's help, it took much less time. I was very glad. At the same time I suspected she would do well only the first few days. Would she always work like that?

After we finished, she went to the river to wash her hands and feet. Then she went to the kitchen and, together with her mother, helped the master's daughter do various odd jobs. From morning to night, she kept herself busy. You never caught her idling. If there was really nothing to do, she helped the mistress take care of the baby. This pleased the mistress. Two or three days after Ah-hsiu and her mother had arrived, the mistress said to the master, "It's wrong not to give them a single copper."

The master pulled a long face and grumbled, "You squanderer. They're not asking for it, why give them money? You must think we've more money than we can spend."

"Stop talking nonsense," the mistress said angrily. "If you don't want to pay them, then don't."

In the afternoon when my attack of malaria had passed, I set up a table in the corridor and gave the innkeeper's son and two daughters a reading lesson. The master and the mistress had given me this spare-time job. I had agreed for the sake of the children. When Ah-hsiu was not busy, she would come around with the baby in her arms and listen. She learned some of the words too. When the younger daughter pronounced incorrectly, Ah-hsiu would put in, "There, you've got it wrong again." The elder daughter was already eighteen and was doing

all the kitchen work before Ah-hsiu and her mother came. She had been kept busy the whole day long. Consequently, she was not so good at learning vocabulary as her younger sister and brother. Sometimes she would point at a word and ask, embarrassed, "How do you pronounce it?" Ah-hsiu would giggle. The elder daughter would flush and look at her in displeasure. Sometimes she would snap at Ah-hsiu, "If you're so clever, let's hear you pronounce it."

If Mama Hsu was there mending, she would give Ah-hsiu a look, indicating that she should go away. But it rained day in and day out. Where could Ah-hsiu go? She could only go to the opposite room where the master was smoking opium. Or, if he was not smoking, he was lying in bed curled up like a lazy snake. When Ah-hsiu went in she might say: "Ah, the pipe is so dirty, let me clean it for you." Or perhaps she would tell him a story, like: A Tai girl carrying two baskets of eggs slipped and the eggs were smashed. Ah-hsiu talked in such a lively manner and laughed so boisterously that the master laughed too. Sometimes if she did not go in to see him, the master would come to the door in his wooden clogs and ask genially, "Where's Ah-hsiu? I want her to clean my pipe."

One night, the master said to his wife ingratiatingly, "I've thought it over. You're quite right. It's really wrong not to give them a single copper."

The mistress pulled a long face. "Squanderer!" she hissed and walked away.

The master cursed, then smiled, a little shamefaced.

Thereafter I noticed that the mistress' face had lost its former tranquil expression. She became quite touchy. Mama Hsu probably noticed it too. Every afternoon when Ah-hsiu was looking after the baby, her mother would say, "Ah-hsiu, why don't you go and visit a neighbour?"

Ah-hsiu looked outside and smiled. "Where can I go in this rain, ma?"

Mama Hsu insisted softly, "My good daughter, must you be so chatty and jolly? Better listen to ma, go somewhere else." The mother said this in a gentle tone, without any censure or reproach. But on her face was a look of infinite helplessness and sorrow.

Ah-hsiu looked at her mother, murmuring, "All right, I'll go, ma."

Most of the people in the scrub-land made their living by innkeeping. All the hired help were bachelors. They plainly welcomed Ah-hsiu very much. Before Ah-hsiu started going to their inns they never came to ours. But once she visited them they began to call on us in the evenings. Ah-hsiu was always glad to see them and would smile and bubble with cheer. Sometimes, they even dropped over in the morning or afternoon. If she was sweeping, they always lent a helping hand, never failing to draw her into conversation and make her laugh. The cook at Li's Inn, nicknamed Roaming Horse, was the kind who couldn't take his eyes off the Tai girls staying the night at the inn. Now he played the gallant to Ah-hsiu.

"If it doesn't rain tonight, I'll wrap you in a blanket and take you away like the Tais do." When a Tai young man visits his sweetheart in the cool of evening, he drapes his blanket cape over her shoulders, and they stroll and chat under the same covering. It is a common custom of the Tai youth. But to the Hans it sounded nasty. Perhaps our master had heard of Roaming Horse's remark, for he commented maliciously, "Damn it, they're turning this place into a brothel."

Peace and happiness had returned to the mistress' face. When she heard her husband curse like that she scolded him. "You're too dirty-minded. She's just a bit wild. How can you say such things about her?"

The innkeeper angrily threw down his pipe. "Wait and see, you'll soon be hearing something more!" he said wrathfully.

Before long, something more indeed was heard. The story was brought by the pack-horse teams. They said that a despotic landlord had made a young girl his concubine. The girl ran away but was soon caught by the landlord, After giving her a good beating he sold her to a brothel. She again ran away. The girl was no other than Ah-hsiu. Roaming Horse told the story to everyone he met. He talked as if he had seen her in the brothel himself. The bachelors of the other inns stopped coming. One afternoon Ah-hsiu went out with the baby. She returned very quickly looking quite distressed.

"Why are you back so soon?" her mother asked.

Ah-hsiu's lips twisted. "Ma, let's leave this wretched place."

Mama Hsu said tearfully, "This is the rainy season and we've got no money. Where shall we go?"

Hanging her head, Ah-hsiu said, "There must be some place where we can live in peace." Her tone was strong and indignant.

Before long, I heard the innkeeper say to his wife, "Now, you must have heard yourself. . . . Your ears are good enough, aren't they?"

The mistress did not argue. She sighed and said, "I've told our children not to play with her. And I no longer let her care for the baby."

"Away with them, both mother and daughter," the innkeeper roared. "They're dirtying our good name."

The mistress hesitated. "Wait until he gets over his malaria. Then we'll tell them to go." Again she sighed, "Without a single copper, how can they manage? Give them some money, however little."

The innkeeper laughed spitefully and sneered, "Why should it be difficult for such people to manage? The girl has ways to earn a living."

After that, the mistress took care of the baby herself. One day Ah-hsiu put on a straw hat and slung a crate on her back. An axe in her hand, she made for the door. "Ah-hsiu, what are you going to do?" Mama Hsu called after her.

"I'll cut wood to sell, ma. We can't just wait for death."

"How can you cut wood in all this rain and water?"

"There are burnt down tree trunks everywhere in the cultivated hills. Nobody wants them. I have only to cut them down," Ah-hsiu said confidently, looking pleased at the prospect. Rolling up the legs of her blue trousers she trudged out to the muddy wet road in the rain. Every day she brought back two loads of firewood which she sold to the neighbours. Sometimes the mistress bought her firewood in secret and paid her as much as the others. The gloom on Mama Hsu's face lifted somewhat.

One evening at about midnight I was wakened by the master. We had a bamboo pipe leading from the mountain gully to the horse shed. He wanted me to go into the hills to find out why there was no water coming through. The horses had no water to drink. Perhaps the pipe was clogged with fallen leaves. I jumped up and lit a lantern.

In the next room, Mama Hsu heard us and woke Ah-hsiu, telling her to go with me.

"It's dark and raining. She mustn't go," I protested. I put on a conical straw hat, took the lantern and was just going to pick up a spade when Ah-hsiu snatched it and walked out ahead of me. Raindrops drummed on our hats and danced in the beam of light from the lantern. Entering the mountain, we came to an overgrown path. Dripping leaves and branches brushed against us, wetting our clothes. Walking in front with the lantern, I turned repeatedly to urge Ah-hsiu, "You had better go back. You'll get sick in wet clothes."

"You are as worrisome as an old woman," she answered, irritated. She took my lantern and strode on ahead

of me. By the time we came to the gully a *li* away we were drenched to the skin. Nothing was clogging the bamboo pipe. Yet no water ran into it. Looking further up I discovered that the little stone dyke had been breached by the rising water and the water level had dropped so that it could no longer reach the pipe. I wanted Ah-hsiu's spade to repair the dyke. But instead of handing it over she jumped into the water.

"Look out for the leeches," I warned her. I had been here many times and knew that as soon as your feet stirred the water, the leeches attached themselves to your legs.

"What about leeches! I wouldn't be scared even if I stepped on a water snake." She looked at me with disdain.

Putting down the lantern, I joined her. I piled big stones on the dyke with my hands reminding Ah-hsiu repeatedly to pull the leeches from her legs. But she was shovelling stones, and paid me no heed. With the dyke repaired, the water level rose quickly. A small outlet had to be made or the force of the dammed water might breach the dyke again. I started making the outlet. Though there was nothing for Ah-hsiu to do now, she stayed in the water watching me.

I called out, "Why don't you come out, silly? Aren't the leeches killing you?" Only then did she climb the bank and pulled off the leeches. Blood dripped from several places.

"I never imagined that there could be so many of them," she said frowning, as I climbed up after her.

"You just won't listen," I reproached her.

She sighed. "You are the only one who hasn't changed," she said. She took the lantern and headed for home.

Following close behind her, I asked, "Who says I haven't? I admit now that you're very capable and stronger than a young man."

"I don't mean that," she said.

The rain was letting up. The only sound was the leaves brushing against us as we splashed through the muddy water. "Tell me: What did you really mean?" I urged again.

She turned around. Fixing her eyes on me she asked softly: "Haven't you heard the rumours about me?"

My head lowered under her gaze. "Naturally."

"Do you believe them?"

"Who would believe those bastards!"

She turned and walked on. When we were out of the hills she inquired again, "What if everything they said was true?"

Silent for some time, I said at last, "What of it? It was against your will. Besides you have run away."

"They don't look at it that way," she sighed. "I don't care. Let them talk." She sounded indignant. Then she said mildly, "Our clothes are wet. Let's go back and change, or we really will fall ill."

The next day when I was not doing anything, Mama Hsu proposed that we go and dig precious stones together. I wanted time to think it over. That night, a woman came and talked secretly to our mistress. Afterwards the mistress went to Mama Hsu and with tears in her eyes, said: "What an unfortunate lot you have!" She told her that the mountain chieftain had taken a fancy to Ah-hsiu and was going to send men down to kidnap her. His wife was jealous and had sent the woman to tell Ah-hsiu to run away. "This comes of her cutting wood in the mountain. You mustn't stay. You'd better leave tonight."

"How far away is the precious stone mine? Mama Hsu has been wanting to go there," I said.

"That won't do. They will go after you there just the same." The mistress waved her hand in disapproval. Then she said in a low voice, "You had better go back to your home town. They won't be able to harm you once you have crossed the mountain."