THE BUILDERS

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Prelude

1929 was one of the worst years in Shensi Province's long history of famines. During the first snowfall in November, famine victims, moving down from the plain north of the Wei River, filled the streets of Hsiapao Village. The temple, the clan halls, the grain mills, the grinding sheds were jammed with refugees, men and women crowded together, all speaking in rough up-country accents. For several days after the snow stopped falling, villagers had to go out every morning with spades and mattocks and bury the nameless sufferers who had died by the roadside during the night.

Tillers! In those years, whenever there was a drought they were like blades of grass stricken by frost. They simply had no resistance.

Hsiapao was a fine place. It lay south of the Wei River in the fertile rice paddy area that runs for hundreds of *li*[1] along the foot of the Chinling Mountains. Opposite Hsiapao, in the distance, rose the darkly menacing Mount Chungnan. To the rear of the village was a bluff where a high plateau of yellow soil ended abruptly.

About eight hundred families occupied Hsiapao's thatched cottages and tile-roofed houses, strung out in neat lines on the

[1]One *li* is equal to half a kilometre or roughly one-third of a mile.

north bank of the green Tang Stream. The villagers had gathered little from the dry land on the northern side. But in the paddy fields on the southern shore that summer they had cut barley. In the autumn they had crossed narrow foot-bridges all along the stream with load after load of rice, the bound stalks dangling heavily from the ends of their shoulder poles. It was this modest harvest which attracted the droves of famine sufferers.

Every day from morning till night, tattered refugees, shoulders hunched, huddled in gateways of the village compounds. Each held a stick beneath his arm—a weapon against wild dogs, made of a branch he had pulled down from some tree along the road. The refugees told essentially the same tragic story, and all pleaded to be saved. Some, large hot tears rolling down their wizened faces, asked whether anyone wanted to adopt a small child. It made the villagers very unhappy. Many tried to avoid the famine victims. People who heard their plaints felt so badly that they were unable to eat when they got home.

But Liang the Third,[1] a former tenant-peasant who lived on the paddy land south of the Tang Stream, was a man of tougher fibre. All day long, carrying a short pipe without a mouthpiece —he couldn't afford one—Liang wandered in and out among the refugees. He seemed to be looking for someone. A large powerful fellow about forty, Liang wore an old cotton-padded jacket that hadn't been washed in years. It was a mass of rent cloth with strings of dirty cotton hanging from the sleeves. On his head was a towel cloth that looked as if it had been picked out of a cinder heap, it was so black. But in spite of his appearance, from his lively step and alert manner you could see at a glance that the big fellow was seething with energy. The people of Hsiapao began to get suspicious.

A few days later, they observed that his activities followed a regular pattern: He sought out only women in their thirties, with or without small children. Some of the villagers wondered whether Liang, who had lived alone for so many years, could be intending anything improper? But he behaved with complete

[1]Meaning here the third child born in his family.

propriety, listening to the tales of misfortune of the women refugees, meditating on their words and nodding sympathetically.

Then one day, when Liang again came across from the southern side of the Tang Stream, he was a changed man. His head was freshly shaven, the stubble was gone from his face. A round skull-cap borrowed from his brother, Liang the Eldest, who ordinarily wore it only when visiting relatives, replaced his dirty towel-cloth headgear. His old padded jacket obviously had been mended and patched. People hardly recognized him. Grinning broadly, Liang the Third tenderly wrapped in his brawny arms a three-year-old boy who was standing in the snow dressed in a torn padded jacket left to him by his deceased father. Then Liang turned to a widow in her thirties whose ragged garments were nothing but patches, and led her to live with him in his thatched cottage on the southern side of the Tang Stream.

Liang's dwelling was across the stream from Hsiapao Village at the eastern end of a small settlement of thatched cottages. There were no villages in the paddy area, only scattered groups of four or five families, people whom poverty had driven from neighbouring villages. Forced to take up their abode here, they eked out a bare existence on rented paddy fields. A few of the lucky ones prospered. Their family fortunes grew; they built homes and compounds. But the paddy fields as a whole, from where the Tang Stream flowed out of Mount Chungnan to where it joined the Lu River on the northern plain — an area, roughly thirty *li* long by three *li* wide — were an impoverished region known as "Frog Flat". On summer nights the thrumming of frogs in paddy fields could be heard on the plain a dozen *li* away.

When his grandfather brought him to this land of frogs, seated in a wicker basket suspended from one end of a carrying pole, Liang the Third was only a little tyke. His father, as physically powerful a man as Liang the Third later became, had been one of the most "reliable" tenants of the wealthy Landlord Yang of Hsiapao Village. He actually managed to build

a three-room house beside the thatched cottage they had originally settled in, and found Liang the Third a wife. Having expended his last bit of strength, and full of hope that Liang the Third would continue to improve the family fortunes, he left the world of men, quite satisfied.

But Liang's luck was bad. Two draught oxen perished in succession. Then his wife died in child-birth, and the baby with her. Not only could he no longer rent paddy fields, he was forced to dismantle the three-room house his father had erected so laboriously and sell the timbers and tiles. He himself went back to living in the old thatched cottage. The elm tree which had grown up on the spot where the house used to stand was higher than the crumbling earthen compound wall and as thick as his thumb.

After the death of his wife, how desolate and lonely the compound was! Facing west, the thatched cottage squatted there like a doddering old man. Part of the earthen compound wall had been eaten away by autumn rain, but the lone occupant had no desire to repair it. He kept no pigs or poultry. What did he care if marauding wolves or weasels decided to pay a call in the night? Weeds in the courtyard grew as high as the window-sill, but Liang didn't bother to cut them down. He never had any visitors anyhow.

But now that he had brought a woman home, the breath of life returned to his compound. The men of a neighbouring family named Jen had already helped him clear out the weeds; the women gave his low-roofed narrow shack a thorough cleaning. Everyone laughed and said that from this day forward Liang's table and little cupboard would no longer be covered by a perpetual layer of dust.

Forty-year-old Liang the Third was like a child. He couldn't conceal his joy. He gave the up-country woman some old garments his dead wife had left, insisting that she wear them and convert one of them immediately into a pair of padded trousers for her little boy. The child's bare legs, thin as hemp stalks, trembled with cold beneath his over-sized old padded jacket. Liang boasted to the up-country woman before his neighbours

that he was strong. He would go deep into Mount Chungnan and fell timber, burn charcoal, cut brushwood. With the earnings from their sale he would again buy a draught ox, rent some paddy land, improve the compound. He would raise the little boy as his own son. Together they would build up the family property. . . .

"I never lie, Little Treasure's Ma. Do you believe me?"

"I . . . believe you." The up-country woman looked at her new husband's powerful frame, saw his enthusiastic expression. Embarrassed by this emotional outburst in the presence of neighbours she had only recently met, she lowered her head. Probably because she had endured hunger and privation for so long, her thin waxen face was unable to register happiness.

Liang was disappointed by her reaction. "Well, you'll know me better as time goes on."

Although he guessed that the woman's feelings were complicated, at the moment he couldn't very well say much to her. All the affection he felt for her, he lavished on the child. When Little Treasure first entered this strange thatched cottage, he sat stiff and constrained on the *kang*[1] and gazed timidly around. It was all so new to him. His eyes avoided the troupe of kids who had gathered at the edge of the bed and were curiously examining their new neighbour.

"Little Treasure," said Liang warmly, walking over to him, "when your ma finishes that pair of pants, you'll be able to go out and play with them." He indicated the other children.

"I don't want to," Little Treasure replied in a low voice, head down, looking at his fingers.

"Why not? In the paddy field ditches there are cranes and blue storks and herons. Wild-geese, too. Did you have those in your old home north of the Wei?" Liang asked laughingly. He was doing his utmost to give the mother and child a good impression of the place, to make them feel at home.

"I won't go," the little boy replied stubbornly. "I'm scared."

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[1] A brick platform, heated in winter from underneath, and used as a bed and for other purposes in a northerner's household.

"Scared of what? Water fowl never hurt anyone, silly."

"I'm scared of dogs. . . ."

Liang burst out laughing. "In good clothes, what dog would bite you?"

With a big thick hand that was as roughly calloused as the bark of a tree, he fondly patted the small head resting on the spindly neck. Liang the Third loved the child like a father. Because the boy's face was so thin and sallow, his brows seemed particularly dark and his eyes especially large; they fairly flashed with intelligence. As the old saying goes: "In a child of three, at one glance you can see what the adult will be." Liang was very pleased with the boy.

For the first few days neighbours, men and women, dropped into Liang's shack frequently to see the new arrivals. These naturally included his brother, Liang the Eldest, a beancurd pedlar, and his nearest neighbours, the Jens. Even friends living much further away came. When this one left, that one called. Finally, there were so many people that they overflowed on to the threshing ground outside the compound gate, chatting and laughing. The men could not repress their animation. Several of them teased Liang with broad remarks. Of course this was rather disrespectful, but his freshly shaven face wore a proud smile that seemed to say: "So you thought Liang the Third was finished, eh? I'm still going to build a family."

After a few more days passed, there was no sign of Liang in daylight hours, either in Hsiapao Village or in Frog Flat. But on the sunny side of compound walls that enclosed thatched cottages, on street corners, wherever people gathered, peasants were discussing with interest Liang's up-country woman.

"Ah, now there's a wife for you," some cried approvingly. "Slow to speak but a fast worker. She's a woman who knows her mind. Her parents died in the famine, her brother and sister-in-law ran away from it. With her husband dead, she had no one to turn to. She set out alone with the child from north of the Wei and came all the way down here, the foot of the southern mountains. It wasn't easy."

"Liang and she must have been fated to marry, so the Old Lord of the Sky drove her down to the banks of the Tang Stream. Does she have only this one child?"

"They say she had a little girl also, but the cold and hunger were too much for her, and she died on the road."

"Oh! The poor woman. How her heart must ache. How old is she?"

"She says she's thirty-two, but she looks at least forty."

"What are you gabbling about? She's so thin, and all those days on the road in the wind and sun — naturally it put ten years on her. Wait until she's fattened up a bit and gained her strength back, then you'll see."

"I hear she's wearing Liang's big padded pants. Is that right?"

"Sure. Maybe they're big, but what of it? That padded jacket she came in is so torn, it's pitiful. That's why Liang keeps going up to Mount Chungnan. That mother and son aren't pictures you can hang on the wall. They've got to be fed and clothed."

All of Hsiapao became involved in a debate as to whether Liang should have picked the woman up the way he did. Some said that although fate had bowled Liang over, he had struggled to his feet. Maybe he could build up the family fortunes again. In a few years the boy would be old enough to help him. If the up-country woman could bear him another couple of kids in his old thatched cottage, his chances of recovery would be even better.

But others didn't believe that you got anything so cheaply in this world. Who ever heard of getting a wife without spending a single copper? They were willing to stake their heads on it: After the New Year the woman's brothers would come for her and take her home, or someone from her former husband's family would demand the child, or the woman herself would become moody and demand to go back to her village north of the River Wei. In a word, Liang's thatched cottage would never know peace.

"Wait and see," was the advice of the holders of both points of view.

Making the rounds of Hsiapao every day with trays of bean-curd hanging from the ends of his carrying pole, pedlar Liang the Eldest was quite concerned over people's opinions of his younger brother. His big ears took in every word. Late one night, Liang the Third came back from Mount Chungnan with a load of charcoal. He burned charcoal in the mountains and sold it in the city, rising at cock's crow and returning long after dark. Liang the Eldest went furtively to his brother's compound gate and called him out. Then the two walked through the darkness down a path dotted with grass roots in the direction of the paddy fields.

The next day, Liang the Third did not go into the city with his charcoal. First thing in the morning he set out for Huang-pao Town, five *li* upstream. When the peasants paused in their morning's labour for breakfast, someone saw Liang returning home, a basket of bean sprouts, cabbage and bean noodles in one hand, and a jug that must have contained at least a catty of wine in the other. All morning, Liang bustled about the village streets. One moment he was here, the next moment he was there, his big agile body practically flying. He looked very busy, very tense, and very mysterious. When someone called to him, wanting to ask how the up-country woman was faring, he shouted over his shoulder:

"I'm in a hurry. Some other time."

Night fell. On the gravel and round stones of a bank of the Tang Stream, a lantern flame no bigger than a bean gleamed eerily. Five men, one woman, and a small child, shivering with cold, were gathered around the lantern.

Liang the Third carefully proffered in hands as rough as bark the foot of machine-made red cloth he had bought in town that morning. In a moved voice he said:

"Fellow villagers, for our sake you're suffering cold and chill."

"It's nothing. Say no more. What's a little cold?"

"We hope that you two will live together till you're old and grey. That's all we neighbours want."

"That's it exactly. Right. You've said it right," cried Liang. "All the stars are out. Let's get started."

Then the poor scholar, who was busy all winter writing deeds for people who had to sell their land, put on his spectacles. He spread the red cloth on a flat rock as large as a millstone. According to local superstition not even grass would grow on a spot where a contract for the remarriage of a widow was written. That was why the sandy bank of the stream, already barren, was chosen for this ceremony. Liang the Third cautiously held the lamp while the other men squatted down in a circle, their eyes fixed on the brush pen moving over the red cloth.

After the brush pen was capped in its slim bronze tube, the bespectacled scholar solemnly raised the red cloth with both hands and read slowly the words he had inscribed:

> The contractor of this marriage covenant, née Wang, was a native of Liu Village south of Fuping. Because her first husband died and her village was stricken by famine, mother and son were forced to wander from home, with no means of support. Today, plagued by hunger and cold and in danger of losing her life, she is willing to remarry and become the wife of her benefactor, Liang Yung-ching. She makes this contract of her own free will, with no obligations to any third party, and will never revoke it. The male child she has brought with her, known by the infancy name of Little Treasure, also a famine refugee, shall use the surname of his step-father when he grows up. Word of mouth being unreliable, this covenant is made as written proof of the marriage.

As these final words were intoned, all eyes turned to the long thin face of Little Treasure's Ma, who was listening carefully.

"Agreed?" asked the scribe.

"Agreed," she said quietly, in her up-country accent.

Her thin hands tenderly stroked the head of Little Treasure. The boy was standing in front of her, very close. She looked at the freshly-shaven seamed face of Liang the Third, goodness, devotion and determination shining in her eyes.

"This is a starvation year, Little Treasure's uncle. Why must you go to this expense? As long as you're good to my son, it'll be the same whether we have a marriage contract or not. No matter how hard our life is together, if my son can grow up . . . become a man. . . ."

She broke down and sobbed. Catching her sleeve in withered fingers, she wiped her eyes. The others sadly lowered their heads. They didn't have the heart to view her stricken countenance.

Masculine valour surged up in Liang's bosom. Standing before the widow and her son, he suddenly felt that he was one of the strongest men in the world.

"Our son," he corrected her decisively. "Let's have no more talk of 'your son' and 'my son' after this. He must call me 'pa', not 'uncle'. That's all I have to say."

After the parties to the marriage, the witnesses and the scribe each put an "X" beneath the place where his or her name was written on the red machine-made cloth, everyone went to Liang the Third's thatched cottage where they ate a meatless meal the beancurd pedlar Liang the Eldest had been preparing the whole day, and spoke many auspicious words. Then the guests departed.

The following spring, the famine victims who had spread out in the paddy region along the Tang Stream all disappeared in a few days, like a flock of seasonal birds. People kept an eye on Liang the Third's woman to see whether she would begin gazing off into the distance in the direction of the northern plain. Women neighbours, bringing their sewing, called on her in Liang's thatched cottage. They chatted with her, probing for any remark that might indicate she still thought of her old home north of the River Wei.

But, no. Unless it was necessary, the woman seldom left the compound gate. She sat at home, mending the torn cloth shoes and socks of her man, who was working all day in the mountains. Liang was very poor. Even including the paths and what used to be the threshing field outside his gate and which he now planted with vegetables, he had just one and one-fifth *mou*[1] of ground. Only by strenuous labour could he make ends meet.

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[1] One *mou* is equal to one-fifteenth of a hectare or roughly one-sixth of an acre.

In the spring, when the city dwellers stopped burning charcoal for warmth but while the paths that went into the mountains were still too icy to permit Liang to go in and fell timber, he cut brushwood on the slopes and sold it as fuel for kitchen stoves in the city or in Huangpao Town. Often the woman would have to wait for him to bring home grain before she could cook. But she didn't mind his poverty. She liked him because he was warm-hearted, because he loved her child, because his neck was iron-stiff and refused to bend under the weight of hardship.

The couple neither quarrelled nor sulked. Hard-working, patient, they reposed all their hopes in the future. Their neighbours, the Jens, often strolled outside Liang's compound wall after the evening meal, cocking an inquisitive ear when they passed the tiny rear window, blocked with dried branches, of Liang's thatched cottage. But except for Liang's weary sighs, all they heard was husband and wife discussing how they must build up the family fortunes, come what may, for the sake of Little Treasure and for their own old age.

Ten years passed.

On the site of the razed three-room house, the elms were as thick as rice bowls. Their leaves and branches interlaced dozens of feet above the ground with the foliage of trees which Liang the Third's father and grandfather had planted outside the earthen compound wall. Liang's courtyard, like the tree-lined dwellings of his neighbours, had also become cool and shady. But the family's progress was far behind the development of its natural surroundings. Within the compound walls, the only dwelling was still the dejected-looking old thatched cottage.

The family fortunes had not improved.

Liang the Third was past fifty and his back was bent. Where his neck met his shoulder, years of heavy carrying poles had formed a callous as thick as a fist. Liang had also developed a chronic cough which came back every winter and

spring. He no longer had the strength to wrest an income from long treks into Mount Chungnan.

At thirteen Little Treasure had a ruddy face, dark brows and large eyes. He was a good height, and you could see at a glance that he was going to make a fine sturdy peasant. After having been sufficiently instructed by his mother and stepfather on how a person should behave, the thirteen-year-old boy confidently began to work. He took a job as a half-pay hired hand for a wealthy landlord named Lu, in Hsiapao Village.

Little Treasure started on the twelfth day of the first lunar month. On the fifteenth at dusk, crossing the stream, he returned to the thatched cottage. Without a word, he flung himself sobbing on the *kang*.

His mother, now in her forties, patted him gently on the shoulder.

"What's wrong, Little Treasure?"

The boy only sobbed more bitterly.

"Don't cry, child." His mother stroked the towel cloth that covered his head. "Tell ma, don't you want to be a hired hand? If you've changed your mind, your pa can call it off. In another year or two—"

Still weeping, the boy sat up and shook his head.

"What happened? Was the landlord bad to you?"

"I was . . . in the courtyard . . . eating. . . ." Little Treasure sobbed.

"Speak up. Stop crying."

"The landlord's son . . . crept up . . . and took a handful of dirt. . . ."

"What about the handful of dirt?"

"He threw it . . . in my rice bowl."

"Why? Did you tease him?"

"I . . . no. . . . That rich kid . . . picks on people."

Liang who had been listening to all this, his face dark as iron, asked angrily: "And your bowl of rice? What happened to that?"

"The landlord . . . dumped it . . . in the pigs' trough."

"What did he do to his son?"

"Nothing . . . just scolded him . . . a little."

Husband and wife, who both had been furious, calmed down and talked the matter over. Since the landlord had scolded his son, they might as well forget it. When you worked for other people and ate their food, all you could do was bow your head and get along as best you could.

"Child." The mother stroked the boy's head. "You don't understand much yet. Poor families are a grade lower than others. If we want to stop being put upon, we have to build up the family fortunes, raise our own cattle, till our own land."

"Right. That's it exactly," Liang inserted. "First get a draught ox, then rent some paddy fields from the landlord, then . . . just like your ma said. Understand?"

And so, that was how Little Treasure began his career as a hired hand at the age of fourteen. By the time he was eighteen he was skilled in all things a peasant needed to know and was earning as much as the best paid hired hand in Hsia-pao Village. Studying every move of the chief hired hand, Little Treasure learned all about farm work, including the most difficult kinds of sowing.

The third summer after he joined Landlord Lu's employ, he returned home one evening at twilight, leading a little yellow ox calf at the end of his sash. He forded the stream and led the ox into their courtyard.

"What's this?" was how his bow-backed step-father greeted him. There was premonition of misfortune in Liang the Third's bones.

"Lu's old cow has died," the boy reported with a satisfied smile, tying the calf to one of the elm trees. "This calf is too young. Lu was afraid it would die if it didn't get any milk."

"He's given it to us?" The wrinkled face of Little Treasure's Ma lit up.

"Lu give anything away? Think again. That pig wouldn't give you a broken needle—unless you paid him for it. Isn't his nickname Lu the Miser?"

The boy's parents stared. They asked in unison: "Then what's this all about?"

"I bought the calf for five silver dollars. He's taking it out of my pay."

"*Aiyayaya*! You stupid child. How could you do such a thing?" Liang groaned, his face blanching. The blow was too much. His bow-back scraping the wall, he dropped to his haunches, his grey head sinking despondently on his chest.

He was such a picture of misery that Little Treasure's Ma was on the point of tears. She upbraided her son.

"You! You're not a child any more. How could you be so foolish? If rich old Lu was afraid the calf might die, what chance have we to keep it alive in a place like ours? Anyhow, you should have talked it over with your pa first. You're much too cocky. That dirty Miser Lu. Cheating our young boy like that."

Liang rose to his feet and took two steps closer to Little Treasure. On trembling fingers he calculated for the boy what they could have bought with the five silver dollars — How much corn and how many days it would feed them, how much cloth and how many garments they could make of it, how much charcoal and how many months they could burn it. And now. . . . Pointing at the frightened calf gazing uneasily at its new surroundings, Liang cried in great agitation:

"What are we going to do with that puny little thing?" He shook his thin hands hopelessly. Life was just too much.

Little Treasure's Ma sat down on the stone step, which was all that remained of the razed three rooms, and began to weep, dabbing her eyes with the hem of her tunic. When she thought of how poor they were, and how the son she had brought with her had hurt his step-father, and how brashly this boy who was just coming out in the world had behaved, she couldn't help shedding tears for her own unhappy fate.

But Little Treasure was unruffled. In fact he smiled at their worries. When Liang started to untie the calf from the elm tree and wanted to lead it back to Miser Lu, the boy stopped him.

"That's just giving in," laughed Little Treasure, putting one hand on the knot. "We'll never build up the family fortunes

at this rate. How many years does a hired hand have to work before he can save enough for a full grown draught ox? The calf only cost a few dollars. Ma can feed it on thin rice gruel. When it gets a little bigger you can cut some grass for it on the stream bank. In a few years, we'll have a big ox of our own."

Liang released the lead rope. So the boy was planning to till their land.

"Will it live?" Liang asked timidly.

"What if it doesn't? It only cost a couple of dollars. Didn't you have two big oxen die on you when you were young?"

The old man dropped his head and walked away, embarrassed beyond words. He felt ashamed. All his life he had worked hard, like an animal, relying solely on his physical strength. He didn't have nearly the brains of this youngster.

Little Treasure's Ma, seeing that Liang was no longer angry, dried her tears and smiled.

Another three years passed. Little Treasure actually made all the necessary preparations for them to farm on their own. One by one, he bought implements cheaply from Hsiapao peasants who had gone bankrupt. In the compound he built another thatched cottage, this one with two rooms — one with a *kang* on which he slept, the other with a trough for the ox, now fully grown and the object of much envy and admiration. Liang was brimming with joy.

He kept his word. The baby girl Little Treasure's Ma gave birth to five years after coming to Frog Flat was already past ten. Liang made an engagement for the girl and with her gift money bought a child-bride for Little Treasure — the eleven-year-old daughter of another poor tenant-peasant. From then on, Little Treasure adopted his step-father's surname. Since Liang the Eldest's two sons both had "Sheng" as the first part of their given names and Little Treasure was of the same generation, his given name became officially "Sheng-pao". He was now a man.

Sheng-pao's eagerness to build up the family fortunes was a hundred times keener than that of his step-father. The first

year, he rented eighteen *mou* of paddy land from Miser Lu and borrowed enough from the landlord to spread liberal amounts of fertilizer. Sheng-pao and the old man slaved in the fields all that year. In summer, the busiest season, when Sheng-pao came back at the end of the day he always ate his meals squatting on a quilt spread on the *kang*. Otherwise, when he fell asleep in the middle of eating, the bowl might drop to the floor and break.

Liang the Third didn't have the strength to go home. He would crawl out of the paddy, his hands and feet plastered with mud, and lie in the green grass by the stream. Little Treasure's Ma would bring him his food. Poor old Liang. Afraid that people might steal his water and release it into their own fields, he slept every night on the bank. The mosquitoes stung his face, arms and legs mercilessly. But the old man worked on without complaining. At times he even smiled happily. Once again he had achieved the incomparable glory of raising his own crop.

To keep their debts down the family tightened their belts. For a whole year they ate no salt and burned no oil in their lamps.

That autumn the stack of rice straw on the site of the three razed rooms was higher than the old thatched cottage. Unfortunately, they never did get a chance to store the rice in the hampers they made from mats bought specially for the purpose in Huangpao Town.

For after paying the rent share to the landlord and returning his loan for the fertilizer—plus forty per cent interest, they watched the rest of their harvest being carted away by the village tax office. Little Treasure's Ma threw herself down on the stone roller on the threshing space outside their compound gate and wept aloud. Sheng-pao's sister and child-bride joined her in loud howls of grief. The last of their grain was sent off like the corpse of a member of the family. Sheng-pao knitted his black brows in a frown. For several days afterwards he did not speak, mute to all questions.