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Chapter I

WHEN LI CHAN-CH'UN could not stand the cold in the dormitory any longer he ran out and took the path to Chu Tzu-chen's small room. He found Chu Tzu-chen in the middle of mending a 1500 watt electric stove, his hands frozen. When Li Chan-ch'un saw him he could not help bursting out laughing, and said:

"You idiot! Haven't you seen the electric generator lying out of action? Haven't you seen the way it is frozen into a block of ice? Then whatever are you mending that broken electric stove for? If you are able you had better mend the machine first."

Chu Tzu-chen, quite unperturbed, continued coiling the wire of his stove with great enthusiasm,

and still with his head lowered over his work, replied: "What use are craftsmen whose hands are idle from morning to night? You say the power plant isn't moving, but does that mean it will lie idle forever? Does it?"

"Who knows? It's impossible to tell what will happen next. After the Soviet Red Army had turned out the Japs, plenty of Chinese came here; some called them bandits, and some called them Kuomintang. It doesn't matter what they were called, the main thing is that none of them cared in the least about electricity."

"Whatever they were, bandits or Kuomintang, since the Jap engineer is gone there won't be anyone to repair the machines."

"This is like hoping for snow in summer. Let's not talk about repairs which are impossible. Let's go out and get some sun and warm up a little. People say a bachelor has a hard time of it, but I say that's nothing compared with spending a winter without heat." Without giving Chu Tzu-chen a chance to refuse Li pulled him outside to walk toward the office.

Li Chan-ch'un had been a wood worker in the Materials Handling Department of the power plant. He was solidly built and strong, straightforward but sometimes a little stubborn. Chu Tzu-chen was a coolie. During the Japanese occupation he had swept the floor in the machine shed every day, and had secretly observed the machines; but he

never had a chance to touch them nor to watch their motion closely. Every three minutes the oil pump made a whirring sound, and this particularly attracted his attention. He kept thinking to himself, "I wonder if the Japs will ever allow me to look after this queer thing." He was the same age as Li Chan-ch'un, twenty-three this year; but he had a wife whereas Li had none. He spoke very seldom, being as shy as a girl, and could only get on with straightforward people like Li Chan-ch'un. In the distance now they could see Old Sun leaning against the steps in front of the office gazing fixedly at Dead Men's Ditch.

"Look, he's day-dreaming all by himself again. Have you noticed, Chu Tzu-chen, the last few days the old man seems to have something on his mind." Still watching Old Sun, Li Chan-ch'un nudged Chu with his elbow.

"Could it be that he's interested in that old widow in the village?"

"That's not what I mean. He keeps thinking about the generating plant down there. He's planning something, maybe — oh, well, he went down to the yamen to get the rations, and he's old and experienced."

Li Chan-ch'un's guess was right. Old Sun really was making plans regarding the generating plant these days. He sat in front of the office with lowered head looking at the generating plant at the foot of the hill, and could sit like that for hours at

a time. The generating plant had never before been so quiet. And the quietness was oppressive. Looking round one could see the mountain tops far and near buried deep in snow; but in past winters, in a snowy and frosty place like this, the machines made a great din. In summer, it goes without saying, the hills were covered with grey-green oak trees, wild apricots, wild haws, short brambles, vivid red wild lilies, lovely wild roses, purple holly hocks and innumerable other wild flowers. Birds sang, kites wheeled high in the blue sky; and at the foot of the mountain the generators roared. The north end of Jade Girdle Lake was as smooth and bright as a mirror; only the leaping of fish from time to time broke the level surface of the water. Now, however, the lake was frozen over, the wild flowers and wild grasses had withered and were buried under a coverlet of white snow; the wild creatures in the wood had gone into hiding, and all the people in the villages were taking refuge from the bitter cold in their thatched huts. Apart from the roar of the wind there was not a sound to be heard. Regarding the generating plant, it was really a shame: the machines had been broken by the Japanese when they evacuated. After August 15th the place was occupied by the Kuomintang who opened the inspection hole and let in water to flood the machines, so that they were now all a mass of thick ice. In the transformer station by the stream outside the generating plant

things were even worse: steel frames and insulators were jumbled together; O.C.B. were strewn left and right; screws, electric wire, iron plates and other objects were scattered everywhere. The four big cooled transformers stood idle. They did not generate electricity. They looked so much like scrap iron.

Seeing all this, Old Sun, who had been present when the power plant was started, felt thoroughly depressed. He stretched out his long legs in the sunlight for warmth. He was a tall fellow, well built with long limbs, long face and long nose, slow and deliberate in all he did. Because of this the young fellows often played tricks on him; they would take advantage of him, or give him a couple of slaps, and by the time he had got up to get his own back they would be already half way down the hill. But as a matter of fact all he ever did was to make threatening gestures, never losing his temper with the youngsters, whom he loved like his own sons. Old Sun, however, had one exasperating habit: when he met people under thirty whom he knew he would jokingly refer to himself as their father, particularly in the case of young women. Young people used all manners of friendly means to resist this:

"Who are you calling son?"

"Who wants a father like you?"

But whatever they said they could not make him angry, and he would laugh heartily. Only

once did he feel hurt, and that was when a middle-aged man, who knew his history, deliberately tried to wound him, saying: "Haven't you had enough of being a father?"

Old Sun was from Shantung. He had worked for people till he was nineteen when his father died. With his last breath his father said to him, pointing to the fields outside: "Land, peasants can't do without land. Work hard . . . work for all you're worth. Heaven . . . won't let down . . . good, good people." He did as his father had advised, and slaved away for five years, but he did not make enough to buy a single inch of land. Then his mother passed away, and then there was a famine. He lost patience, threw down his hoe, left his wife and son, and went to the district town to learn carpentry. He was industrious and clever, and in three years he came back having mastered his craft. By the time he came home his son Tiger was already nine, could light the fire and help his mother wind thread. His wife was a good hand at spinning, and for the past three years mother and son had been able to make ends meet. Sun was the best carpenter in the village because he worked quickly and was always on time. His business, naturally, was not bad. In that small family father, mother and child were all hard workers. They got on fairly well. Sun constantly repeated his father's deathbed words to his son, saying:

"If a man is industrious and works for all he's worth, he will be able to overcome all difficulties and won't be poor for ever." Sometimes when Tiger came home from school and was sitting on a stool winding thread, his father would sit down beside him, fanning him, and would say:

"How disgraceful it is not to work but just to eat and breed children. Then those children growing up wouldn't work either. They would just eat and breed children of their own. This is rich people's way!" Then he would catalogue on his fingers a dozen or more people: the son of this family cared only for food and drink and would take no responsibility; the son of that family was out to squander money; this one liked to dress well and go to brothels; that one thought because his family was rich he could do anything he liked.

Tiger would listen spellbound, looking up at his father and dropping his work. Then Sun would stop talking, put down his fan, smile slightly and guide the shuttle in the boy's hand, helping him to turn it. Tiger would feel embarrassed. Still, he would smile very shyly and get on quickly with his work, eagerly begging his father:

"Dad! Go on."

After two years had passed like this, when Tiger was nearly ready to graduate from primary school, his mother developed tuberculosis and had to stop working. She had to keep taking medicine which cost a good deal, so that the money they had

saved up with such difficulty during the last few years was all spent. After another two years she improved a little, but then came a year of great drought. It was a terrible drought. The earth cracked and split, the river bottom could be seen. As a result a grain of maize was as precious as a pearl. As far as Sun could see, if his family stayed there they would starve. So he decided to move his wife and son to the Northeast.

Gradually Tiger grew up. His mother was a confirmed invalid. Father and son put their hands to any work they could find, as tin-smiths, carpenters, machine cleaners, porters, coolies. Still good fortune did not come back to their family.

In the fifth year of 'Kang Te', the era of the puppet emperor Pu Yi of the so-called Manchukuo, the Japanese called for workmen to build a power plant at Jade Girdle Lake. Both father and son went there. Sun left his wife in Hsi Liang Chen and took Tiger to that desolate valley. Tiger was twenty-two then, a tall, thin, wiry young man.

Thinking of his son made Old Sun even sadder. If Tiger had lived, he would now be older than Li Chan-ch'un and the rest; he might even have married and had a son. Ah, it had always been a terrible place, that valley with its hills full of the dung of wolves. After the Japanese hired some twenty thousand workmen the wolves were driven away to Mo Ting Mountain opposite. First the wolves had been masters there, then the Japanese.

A temporary railway was built, rock was blasted, stone quarried, earth moved; little carts creaked to and fro filling the place with noise, building a terrace on the level river bank. Workmen excavating earth, pushing the little carts and carrying rubble formed a long column; and this column worked day and night, summer and winter, like prisoners kept under control by curses and whipping and the threat of death! Even now recalling that time Old Sun felt as if he were once again being beaten by the Japanese foreman's whip. He did not notice when Li Chan ch'un and Chu Tzu-chen came up, and Li gave him a hearty slap on the back. Sun was just thinking of the cruel ways of the Japanese, and feeling a blow on his back he started with fright; but when he looked round and saw it was only these two good, honest fellows he smiled at them affectionately and said:

"So it's you two. Come and sit with father."

"Who did you think it was?" asked Li Chan-ch'un smiling gleefully like a child. With Old Sun he felt as if he were back with his own uncle.

"I thought it was Kawajima," replied Old Sun smiling. Hearing this Chu Tzu-chen laughed, but Li Chan-ch'un was annoyed. They both spoke at once:

"So you were thinking of Kawajima, Old Sun," said Chu with a smile.

Li Chan-ch'un said crossly: "When the Soviet Red Army was helping us liberating Northeast China,

you were as happy as a laughing Buddha. You kept grumbling every day, saying you were a Chinese, a Chinese; and if anyone so much as mentioned Manchukuo you flew into a rage; and you often talked of your friend, that big-nosed fellow Seminov from the Soviet Union, who gave you a medal as a souvenir — yet today you remember only Kawajima, but forget your Seminov. You even mistake us Chinese for Kawajima."

"Well, that doesn't make you Kawajima, does it?" sighed Old Sun, patting him with his broad palm. "As to Seminov, I can't forget him and his comrades, either! They're gone, back in their own country. They've plenty of work to do; they can't stay with us! I can't help also thinking of Kawajima and Suzuki and those wolf dogs, and the tens of thousands of our mates who were killed unjustly by them. . . ." Old Sun was too depressed by his thoughts to go on. When Li heard this he not only stopped being angry, but was affected himself by the other's grief. He lowered his head too to look at the ruined transformer station at the foot of the hill. After a little while Old Sun said softly and gravely to the two youngsters:

"Ah, you workmen have nothing to do all day long. When you see the machines there not stirring, do you feel good?"

Li Chan-ch'un stood up and with a bitter but not unfriendly smile said: "Old Sun, what are you driving at? When the Japs were here I kept

noticing how you looked. You looked as if someone had offended you, going for hours without saying a word. When the Japs came you worked, but when only a few of us were left you would say regretfully, 'What else could we do? Everything over our heads was theirs, everything under our feet was theirs, all the food was theirs. When they came we had to work. Now that they've gone let's rest for a bit.' You taught us to be lazy. And when the Kuomintang officials came it was you who told us 'wait and see'. Now all the machines have stopped and nobody has any work to do, but you ask if we aren't tired of doing nothing — what on earth are you driving at? Take the case of that water wheel casing. It was you who tricked the officials into opening it, you who wouldn't let us close it. . . ." For the last few days Li, like everybody else, had grown tired of being idle and having nothing to do all day long. He had kept his feelings to himself, but now he vented his discontent on Old Sun.

Since it was a fine day with no wind, the sun was fairly warm, and more and more people kept coming outside. It was very natural for them to gather on the steps. Most of them were young men, but amongst them was Old Kuan, a man of fifty-six; Old Liu, who still believed in Buddhism; and Tung, thirty odd years old and a native of the place, who had been here ever since the power plant was built. Formerly the others did not like

tc have Tung with them because he used to report what they said to the Japanese. But wherever there was a group of people, he would push his way in. When the Soviet Red Army was here, he also managed to push his way in, his face with all smiles. But his tricks did not work with them. The few days that the Kuomintang officials came to the power plant none of the workmen understood them, they were afraid; but Tung went of his own accord to see the Kuomintang officials, using the same flatteries by which he had tried to ingratiate himself with the Japanese. As a result he was able to lord it over the rest of the workmen again, ordering this one to go to Hsi Liang Chen some dozen miles away for meat and wine, directing that one to do sweeping and cooking; telling one to present a chicken, sending another to get noodle. At this time, no one could have guessed that the officials had not come to rehabilitate the power plant, but just with the idea of making a little money and enjoying the scenery. Before long the Eighth Route Army recaptured the Lu Ming River, and the officials were frightened out of their wits, their only thought being to destroy the machines completely and then to fly. That day one of the officials found P'an Yü-shan and Old Sun alone in the machine shed putting things straight, so he asked the youngster and the old man what part of the machinery was most indispensable. P'an Yü-shan was timid, and since