



THE NIGHT
OF THE SNOWSTORM

WANG WEN-SHIH

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Contents

The Night of the Snowstorm	I
The Shrewd Vegetable Vendor	21
Life in the Adobe Hut	50
Around the Spring Festival	82
Grannie Wang	110
The Master Carpenter	137
Down the Well	164
New Companions	197
<i>About the Author</i>	215

The Night of the Snowstorm

It was the last day of 1955. I was on my way to a small village near the Weishui River, together with Yang Mingyuan, the secretary of the township Party branch.

It was an exceptionally nasty day. The sky was completely overcast with low-lying, pea-soupy clouds. A thick mist hung over all, obliterating the usually beautiful Chinling Mountain and the terraced fields of Nanyuan. The picturesque plain of the river valley looked suddenly old and ugly.

A northeast wind was blowing up, whisking the fallen leaves and bits of dead grass into little eddies. Soon the air was filled with yellow dust. The earth merged with the sky. Even the hawks did not dare to try their wings in such weather.

Along with the wind came a whiff of the sea — a forewarning of blizzard.

When we reached the village, it was past breakfast time. The co-op members were hard at it building a compost pit. Some were pulling carts, some pushing wheelbarrows, some carrying water and some unbinding sheaves of grass. Everyone was on the go. In spite of the cold, many of them were in their shirt-sleeves. Wang Chen-chia, who was in charge of production in the co-op, was working with his shirt-front open and his chest laid bare to the wind. Even so, beads of sweat were rolling from his forehead.

People greeted us warmly. "Comrade Yang!" cried Wang Chen-chia, as he spotted us. "Look! How d'you think we're doing? Not bad, eh?"

"Not so badly!" called the branch secretary, with a broad smile. "But what about putting your coat on? You'll be catching your death otherwise."

"We can't stop for that," said Wang Chen-chia. "Not with a sky like this. We'll be lucky if we're through with the job before she comes down!"

"You see?" Yang Ming-yuan whispered to me in an aside. "It's far the best way to inspect a co-op. Come while they're working."

Inspecting the new co-operatives had not always been the work of the township Party branches. But this winter, the growth of the agricultural co-operative movement had caught them all by surprise — within a little over a month, practically all the peasants in the district had flocked to join co-operatives, and many of the older co-ops were pressing for permission to become advanced co-ops. The district Party committee had more on hand than it could cope with and had to call on the township branches for assistance. Even so, there were so many new co-ops that, there was hardly time to get around to them, let alone making thorough inspections. Time was the big question. As the district Party secretary, Yen Ke-chin, had said, "Time will run short on us unless we work things out properly in advance." So the district committee had called the township branch secretaries together and asked the district secretary to demonstrate how to inspect a co-op. Afterwards, a pamphlet containing detailed instructions was issued to the township branches.

The district secretary was known among all the functionaries for his strict attitude to work. He made no ex-

ception of this occasion. Only when the night had worn itself away in seemingly endless discussions on the outstanding problems of the co-ops, did he allow the township secretaries to disperse. "If we don't do the thing properly," he warned, "it means we are in debt to the people. We must aim to pay all our debts before the New Year. The district committee will check up on a few of the co-ops you've inspected." At the end of the discussion, he asked if there was anything else they wanted to know. Some of the secretaries smiled and said, "Everything seems fairly clear, except the time element. How can we do it in time?" He shook his head. "I can't give you any more time," he joked. "I don't have enough for myself. You'll have to work it out for yourselves. I can't help you. You'll just have to keep on the run!"

Yang Ming-yuan had lost no time in setting out for the village by the Weishui River.

He made a careful inspection of the co-op. First he called a meeting of the poor peasants, and then of the middle peasants. After this, he visited some of the members in their homes. All day he kept on the go, never resting for a minute. It was already dark when he had his meal, after which he called a meeting of the co-op committee, and fired all sorts of questions at the members, as though deliberately trying to pick holes in their work.

It was nearly midnight when he at last pronounced the inspection completed. The roosters were beginning to crow here and there in the village. The snow that had been falling since dusk was now falling more heavily.

As he stood up to go, Wang Huai-wang, the co-op chairman, protested. "You can't go back in this," he said. "It's as black as pitch outside and there's a blizzard raging!"

I knew that Yang had not slept a wink the previous night, for he was working from dusk to dawn. Now he began to waver.

"Better stay here tonight," I advised.

He hesitated for a moment. "But the district secretary may come back tomorrow or the day after and there'll be other work to do," he said. "Anyway, let's see what the road looks like first."

Outside the house was another world. The trees were groaning and creaking. The wind rushed along the street, rolling up great flurries of snow. It looked as though the whole village would soon be buried. The road was completely obliterated and it was even difficult to keep your eyes open. After a few moments' hesitation, Yang Mingyuan decided to stay.

At this moment, across the open field, we saw a torch. It was flashing this way and that, as though its owner were looking for something. But the remarkable thing was that the man carrying the torch was singing in an easy-going way, as though the blizzard was a mere nothing. Every now and then his song would be lost on the wind, but he kept the tune going. I wondered who it could be.

"This fellow seems to be making his way all right. That means we can go, too." Yang was still unsettled in his mind.

"It's somebody chasing away the wild geese," said Wang, the co-op chairman. "He'll only go as far as the wheat fields by the village. He won't dare go near the river."

Once back inside the house, we found that the owner had already arranged the *kang*¹ for us to sleep on. The

¹ Heated brick-bed.

charcoal in the clay-stove was burning brightly. But Yang Ming-yuan was still uneasy. As he sat down by the fire, he asked anxiously, "Could it have been the district secretary, do you think?"

Wang Huai-wang burst out laughing. "Relax!" he said. "Don't let your imagination run away with you. How could the district secretary get here on a night like this?"

It certainly seemed unlikely. The meeting in the county would last at least two days. And even if he decided to work on New Year's Day, the earliest he could get back would be the next afternoon.

The co-op chairman gave a little smile. "His wife works in the county hospital and they don't see each other very often," he continued. "If he does get free of the meeting, he's more likely to leave it tomorrow, I'd say, than come dashing away tonight!"

"Yes, you're right," Yang said, nodding his head. "It's New Year's Eve, and, moreover, it's Saturday. All the offices will be closed."

The chairman let down the door-blind for us and went home.

Yang Ming-yuan and I again fell to talking about the district secretary. This was Yang's favourite subject. As he talked, the tiredness began to disappear from his eyes. He told me something about Yen's childhood, of what a tough time he had as an orphan, of how he had run away from a tannery where he was apprenticed and walked all the way to Lochuan where he joined the revolutionary ranks, of his extraordinary tenacity in work. . . . Yang described all this in such detail and with such heartfelt sincerity that it seemed as though it was his own personal experiences he was talking of. "Yen bought himself a new quilt in 1949," he continued, "but it's still as new as

the day he bought it, for he hardly ever uses it. He works late into the night, and when he's tired, he just dozes off at the table."

This seemed a bit far-fetched, but I had heard the same story from others.

I knew that Yen Ke-chin had always had a soft spot for Yang. But this did not mean that he was less strict with him than with others. On the contrary. He rarely praised him, and when he criticized him he did so without reserve. On one occasion, when Yang had to make a report at a meeting, Yen made him put it all down on paper beforehand — no light task for one who had been a labourer since childhood and who had only recently learned to read and write. When it was done, Yen spent a whole afternoon working through it with him, pointing out the errors in content and marking the slips in grammar, punctuation and the like, even to the division of paragraphs, saying that he was too lazy to set his mind to it. He then sat by him and helped him make all the corrections. Although it was winter, Yang Ming-yuan was pouring with sweat. When he left the district secretary, he found that his cotton-padded coat was soaked through.

"But your township's not doing so badly," I said. "As a matter of fact, it's quite outstanding. So why was the district secretary so dissatisfied?"

"He doesn't want to see us fall down on the job," said Yang. "He's afraid we might get swelled-headed. He means well, it's just that he doesn't want us to get too cocky."

After a while he continued. "He's always been this way with me," he said, "ever since he was Party branch secretary and I was chairman of the peasant association. And it's lucky for me he was. If he hadn't been so exact-

ing, I'd never have been able to cope with the job I'm doing today."

The wind had died down for the moment but the snow was falling even more heavily than before. We talked on and on, forgetting all about the clock. Only when the roosters crowed for the second time did we drag ourselves away from the fire and make towards the *kang*. Just as we were turning in, however, I felt a cold draught coming into the room. Turning around, I saw a man standing at the door, completely covered with snow. His sallow complexion heightened the impression of a broad forehead. Under the unaccustomed glare of the lamp-light, his eyes became deeply etched lines beneath a pair of heavy, twisted brows, as though he were afraid that the light would melt his face. As he looked at me, the corners of his mouth lifted. "So you're here, too!" He said in a gentle voice.

It was Yen Ke-chin, the district Party secretary.

"Oh, it's you!" I said in a surprised voice, and hurriedly stepped forward to shake hands with him. His hand was as cold as a melting snowball.

He took off his overcoat and shook it outside the door.

Yang Ming-yuan drew close to me and said softly, "See? Wasn't I right?" I nodded.

But the district secretary overheard us. "What did you say?" he asked.

"We were just talking about you when you turned up," I said.

"And what were you saying? Or is it a secret?"

"Luckily we weren't saying anything too bad about you," I smiled.

"It's better to run a man down than to praise him sky-high, provided you let him know what you've said about

him." The unhurried way in which he spoke and the gentle smile on his lips reminded you of an unaffected young girl.

Yang Ming-yuan took Yen's overcoat and hung it on the wall. "Take off your shoes and socks," Yang said. "We'll dry them over the fire for you. Warm yourself up on the *kang*. It's heated."

"Don't you bother, I'll look after myself." Pulling a stool to the fire, Yen sat down.

"Why didn't you go and see your wife? I didn't think you'd be back tonight," said Yang, as he added some charcoal to the fire.

"I'm not like you, a family man!" retorted Yen, jokingly. "I know you! You'd fall ill if you had to go without seeing your wife for a fortnight."

Yang laughed. "What a slander!" he scoffed. "Come on, Comrade Wang, don't let him get away with that. Speak up for me!"

"Perhaps he'd slipped along and seen his wife before he came?" I said.

"No, nothing of the sort," said Yen, smiling. "But she's given me leave of absence." We all burst out laughing.

"It's nothing to laugh about! That's our family discipline!" said Yen, keeping a straight face and assuming an air of dignity.

He began to take off his soaked shoes and socks. His shoes were caked in mud, and looked as though they weighed ten pounds each. When he put them near the fire they started hissing and giving out little puffs of steam. He watched the mud dry gradually as though he found it fascinating, then said cheerfully: "The snow's really lovely. It was falling so heavily that it came round you like a whirlpool. You felt you'd never get out of it again."

At this moment, Yang Ming-yuan began to fiddle with his notebook, waiting for the district secretary to start asking questions about the co-op.

But Yen did not ask any questions. He simply went on chatting. "They've made a good job of repairing that stable," he commented. "It's as cosy as you like inside. The beasties'll be snug enough there for the winter."

Yang took this as one of the district secretary's rare praises, and asked cautiously, "You saw it on the way over, eh? Was the stockman still up?"

"Indeed, yes! There's quite a crowd over there. They went straight there from the meeting," said Yen.

"So, you had a good look round before you came here?" I said.

"Only out of habit," he smiled. "As a matter of fact, I heard voices over there and dropped in to see what was doing." Then he turned to Yang Ming-yuan and asked, "How's the inspection going?"

"Nearly over. In general, the co-ops formed this winter are better than last year's. Comrade Yen, are there any other points I should look into?"

Yen paused a moment before answering. "The question that we have to face," he said thoughtfully, "is what are the next steps? Socialism is coming on us so quickly that unless we're pretty sharp, we're going to find ourselves lagging miles behind the real situation." Then he continued in a firmer voice. "The thing is, we've always got to think ahead, so that we can do things in good time."

At this point Yang Ming-yuan threw me a quizzical glance.

Resting his chin on his hand, with his eyes half-closed and his face calm and reposed in the glow of the charcoal fire, the district secretary continued: "The peasants are

keen to join the co-ops, and the co-ops are forging ahead. Everyone is very excited. But there are some who just keep on congratulating one another for their successes, and forget that there's a lot more work to be done. They're like people who've had a drop too much and keep circling around the table laughing and chattering about nothing." He glanced up at Yang Ming-yuan. "We mustn't get dizzy," he continued. "There's a lot to be done yet. We've got to get ahead."

He was interrupted by the sound of the front gate opening and steps entering the courtyard. Cocking an attentive ear, he hurriedly pulled on his still steaming socks and shoes.

Presently the door opened and in came Wang Huai-wang and Wang Chen-chia. With his cotton-padded coat flung loosely over his shoulders, Wang Huai-wang was carrying a toasted steamed roll in his hand. When his eyes lit on the district secretary, he laughed. "I saw your torch," he said, "and I thought it was someone chasing away the wild geese. Ha, ha. . . . Come on! Have some toasted roll, Comrade Yen!"

"No, thanks very much," Yen replied.

Wang Chen-chia laughed aloud and said, "How can you offer Comrade Yen some toasted roll when you've only brought one and have eaten half of it yourself!"

"Oh, that's all right!" said Wang Huai-wang. "I'm not like some people I know who invite the guests to eat only when they are halfway out of the village." So saying, he pulled from under his coat a plate of fried peppers and several pairs of chopsticks. He then fished down into his pocket and produced four or five toasted rolls. Laying them on the table, he turned to Wang Chen-chia and said, "Now, let's see what you've got for the guests!"

"Who, me?" said Wang Chen-chia. "Why, you lugged me out of bed without even asking my wife's permission. Look! I didn't even have time to button my shirt." Pulling his coat open, he showed us his muscular chest. Yang Ming-yuan threw him a humorous glance. "Never seen you button your shirt in my life, winter or summer!" Yang said.

"Well, that's just one of my habits," said Wang Chen-chia naively and he couldn't understand why we all laughed.

Yen invited them to sit down and then pulled out his notebook from his overcoat pocket. Yang took this as a signal that the district secretary was going to check his work and made ready to give his report. But Yen stopped him. "I can trust you all right," he said. "You've inspected the co-ops, so I'll leave that to you. What I want to go into is the question of output."

Later I learned that the county Party committee was also racing against time. The meeting that was scheduled to last two days had finished up early, at nine o'clock that evening. After the meeting, the district secretary put through a phone call to his deputy, arranging for him to call a meeting of all the district functionaries on the following day. That done, he braved the weather and made directly for the township. He wanted to go into the production plans of the old and new co-ops and to gather the opinions of the co-op functionaries in preparation for the next day's meeting. On his way to our village, he had already dropped in on one of the older co-ops of the township.

While Wang Huai-wang made his report on the work of the co-op and Yang Ming-yuan added some supplementary points, the district secretary leaned back against

the wall and listened, one foot on the edge of the stove. Now and then he would jot down something of importance in his notebook. He was mainly interested in the production targets, and the specific means and measures to meet them. These sometimes had to be repeated several times over.

Yang Ming-yuan finished his report and closed his notebook. But it was some time before Yen spoke. He sat bending forward with the poker in his hand, toying with a piece of charcoal in the fire. Finally he straightened himself up, folded his arms, leaned back against the wall and began speaking in an extremely low voice, as though afraid of frightening someone.

"We've often said that the co-ops must be vigorously run. Production must increase. The movement has unleashed productive forces and awakened the enthusiasm of the peasants. We must channel these in the correct direction."

Yang Ming-yuan nodded his head.

"Now that all the peasants in your township have joined the co-ops," Yen continued, "what is the key to guiding the co-ops forward?"

"To devote our attention to raising output, of course," answered Yang Ming-yuan after some deliberation.

The district Party secretary shook his head. Yang gazed at the secretary in bewilderment. Then Yen said: "The most important thing is the political side of work of the co-ops." In detail he analyzed the class struggles within and without the co-op movement and various other problems which might arise, stressing again the importance to the political work. Only then did he talk about production and output, saying that Party branches must control production.

Looking at Yang he asked him: "Just now you mentioned raising output. How are you going to do that?"

Yang was silent.

"It means we must pay special attention to production plans and quotas," explained Yen. "The Party branch should never approve the production plan of a co-op if it's not properly drawn up. And once you've approved it, you must check, check and check again, to see that it's properly carried out."

"That's right!" Wang Chen-chia broke in. "The Party branch must check again and again. If a co-op fails to fulfil its production plan, it has to give reasons for it."

"No! Reasons are not enough! People who fall down on their job can always find plenty of reasons." The district secretary smiled at Wang Chen-chia as he spoke.

Wang Chen-chia smiled back to show that he had grasped the point. Wang Huai-wang whispered urgently into his ear, "Isn't it that our production targets are too low?" But Wang Chen-chia shook his head. He could not agree with this.

"Could we do a night shift tonight, to go through your plan?" suggested Yen.

"Of course! Why not? Can't expect to get socialism without burning a bit of midnight oil now and then," said Wang Chen-chia proudly.

The wind had blown up again. Morsels of snow were now finding their way into the room through the cracks of the door.

The production plan was laid out on the table. Wang Huai-wang and Wang Chen-chia sat opposite each other, and Yang Ming-yuan on the edge of the *kang*, half leaning on the table. They discussed and argued, worked the abacus, and counted on their fingers. With pen in