



Yang Pei-chin.

THE DAGGER

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The long-standing friendly relations of mutual help between the peoples of China and Korea have been sealed by the noble blood shed in our common struggle.

Mao Tsetung

Contents

Chapter I	
Night Storm	I
Chapter II	
Blow for Blow	38
Chapter III	
Wings of Scouts	82
Chapter IV	
The "Seven-Starred" Dagger	141
Chapter V	
Leading the Enemy by the Nose	194
Chapter VI	
Meteoric Flashes	228
Chapter VII	
Co-ordinates Written in Blood	268
Chapter VIII	
Before the General Offensive	290
Chapter IX	
Epilogue	315

CHAPTER I

Night Storm

I

Liang Han-kuang, a first-class scout hero and the divisional reconnaissance leader, arrived with his scout group at the position held by the Eighth Company just after the enemy had given this Nameless Height an intensive shelling.

It was a sultry afternoon in early July, 1953. The hill was eerily still now after the shelling. Here and there on the slope, horse-tail pines and clusters of nameless shrubs with minute light-violet flowers were upturned by the roots. The branches severed by shrapnel were lying about the craters.

The entire position was shrouded in dark, greyish smoke. But the broad-leaf oak, which our men proudly called their "forefront sentry," remained intact, standing sturdily on a precipice to the left of the position. The tree, often taken by the enemy as a target, nevertheless emerged unharmed each time. As the thick smoke and dust stirred up by the shelling gradually dispersed, its vigorous, unbending figure would reappear in the field-glasses of the enemy's observation post. Now as ever, with a blue sky and white clouds above, and with hills and ridges beneath, the tree swayed gently in the wind heavy with the pungent smell of cordite, and gracefully showed off its straight trunk and thick foliage. It looked serene, undisturbed, like a fearless sentry sticking to his post, paying little or no attention to the enemy's wild attacks. Soon after the shelling stopped, a cicada flew over and alighted on a branch of the tree. Transparent wings shaking, it broke into a shrill chirping, as if to say:

“ ’Tis — nothing, ’tis — nothing!”

To the chirping of the cicada, Liang Han-kuang and four other scouts, clinging to the creeping plants, scaled the height via a steep path from the back of the precipice. Through a natural stone cave at the foot of the “forefront sentry” and along the switch trench, they headed quickly for the Eighth Company’s tunnel headquarters. With the co-ordination of the “Steely Eighth Company,” they were going to cross the enemy’s front line during the night and capture a “tongue” from the enemy’s rear position.

There was no time to lose in completing the mission. According to divisional command’s intelligence unit, the enemy had recently been sending out non-stop patrols to the buffer-zone, with a particularly noticeable increase in nocturnal activities. At the same time, different regiments had frequently noted that the enemy, apart from their usual fire-cover, had been making unusual test shellings. In conjunction with these shellings, reconnaissance planes had been making more and more sorties. More important, however, was that the command headquarters of a neighbouring Korean People’s Army division had reported that their wireless contact with the guerrilla band led by Kim Jong Man, which was operating behind enemy lines, had been cut off for several days. Most probably, the guerrilla band was being attacked. . . . It all added up to an extraordinary sign: the enemy, who at the negotiation table at Panmunjom were clamouring for an “argument with shells and bullets,” were making intensive preparations for a new offensive. So the divisional commander had sent for Liang Han-kuang that morning and personally assigned him a mission: to sneak to the enemy’s rear and capture an enemy officer.

“It must be someone who knows the ropes in some way or another,” the divisional commander had emphasized. Eyeing Liang steadily, he said, “Mind you don’t bring me an idiot. Can you do it?”

“I’m determined to do it.”

"The division's artillery will back you up. You can cross the front line from the Eighth Company's forward position. Get together with the comrades of the reconnaissance section to work out the concrete details of your plan."

The sun was directly overhead when Liang Han-kuang left divisional headquarters. Back at the reconnaissance unit, he set out at forced march with a picked group of scouts and arrived at the Eighth Company's position less than two and a half hours later.

Liang's uniform was soaked with sweat. Beads of perspiration rolled down from his face. He removed his cap, almost white now after so many washings, and camouflaged with an air-raid ring of leafy branches. He pulled a towel from his waist, dried himself off and then, with both hands, he replaced his cap, its shade covering his brows. He was 24, with eight years' battle experience already behind him. Medium to tall in height, he was well-built and had regularly chiselled features. Under his jet-black eyebrows flashed a pair of spirited, dark eyes, attesting to his insight and sharp wits. Like other young fellows brought up in the army, this reconnaissance unit leader was every inch a veteran, careful, far-sighted, resourceful and yet decisively resolute.

The four scouts following Liang were likewise camouflaged with air-raid rings, and held their tommy-guns upside down across their shoulders. Though hot with sweat, they looked alert, vigorous, without the least suggestion of clumsiness as they walked briskly through the switch trench.

The latest shelling had broken up the fire trench in several places, but once the shelling was over, the men of the Eighth Company immediately reappeared from the tunnel. Spades in hand, they set about repairing the breast-work. When they saw the scouts approaching, the soldiers called to them in bantering good humour:

"Look! They're out for 'rarities' again! What are you after this time, a 'can' or a 'cold rice ball'?"

Liang and his men were well-known and highly respected throughout the Eighth Company. On more than one occasion,

full of uneasy agitation, the soldiers had watched these scouts climbing out of the trench and quietly disappearing into the pall of dark night. Then, with a shower of firing, they would succeed in diverting the enemy's attention, covering the scouts safely across the enemy's front line. And on more than one occasion they had welcomed the triumphant return of their comrades-in-arms as they brought with them the "tongues" captured behind enemy lines.

Once last winter Liang and his men had made their way into the enemy's trench and returned with two "tongues." They had acted so swiftly in the trench that the two soldiers they captured, who were hurriedly eating their supper at the time, hardly had time to make a sound before they found themselves half in gunny sacks. Back at the Eighth Company, they removed the sacks and found that one of them was a U.S. first lieutenant and the other a private first-class of Syngman Rhee's puppet army. The sunken-eyed, high-nosed U.S. officer, smeared with the oil from the can of sardines which had overturned when he was being sacked, was shaking with fear. The dumb-founded private was freed from his sack and found clasping a hard-frozen rice ball in his hand. From then on, the men of the Eighth Company and the scouts referred to U.S. soldiers and the puppet troops as "cans" and "cold rice balls" respectively. Sometimes, a sniper would joyfully announce his exploits, "At Target Three, five killed. One 'can' and four 'cold rice balls.'" Now, whenever the scouts came to the Eighth Company's position on a new mission, they were always welcomed in this same way.

At the tunnel entrance, Political Instructor Wu Hsing-chou was pasting up a chart showing the snipers' successes in killing enemies. When he saw the scouts walking up, he hastened forward to meet them. Shaking Liang's hand, he laughed, "You boys are really something! So quick! First we got a phone call from battalion command and before we know it, you're standing right in front of us. So, going to stir up the hornets' nest again?"

"You seem to have messed it up pretty well already!" said Liang, scanning the statistical chart. "Another 20! You're really not bad marksmen after all! Got 113 in less than 20 days! That's almost a round company!"

"Scout Leader Liang," machine-gunner Sun, a big, tall fellow, called out. Banking earth on to the parapet, he mumbled, "When are we going to cut through the enemy's lines and encircle them? Day in day out always this same piecemeal way. That's not going to cause Clark* any pain."

Turning round, Liang smiled, "Sun, you're not Clark, are you? How do you know this isn't hurting him? We've bumped off hundreds of them in this piecemeal way. How many 'cans' and 'cold rice balls' does Clark have?"

The others burst out laughing. Sun, wiping the sweat from his face, gave an embarrassed grin, too, but when Political Instructor Wu had led Liang and the other scouts into the tunnel, he let fly:

"What the hell are you laughing at? I've been thinking about things. Now the divisional scout leader is out, it means we're going to cut through the enemy lines and encircle them, cut into their rear and launch a flanking attack. . . . Things are going to get pretty dramatic around here, and soon! Mark my words, just wait and see."

Down in the tunnel, Liang and his men were greeted by a cool, refreshing air. The sun, half way down in the west, cast its beams into the tunnel through the branches of the two pines at the entrance. Somehow, that made their "battlefield home," which was quite clean and tidy, particularly cosy. The company clerk — an exceptionally serious-looking young man — was facing the tunnel entrance, writing something on a cartridge case. He leapt to his feet at the sight of the scouts and handed them bottles filled with cold boiled water which he had been keeping for them. Unceremoniously he took the air-raid rings off their heads and hung them neatly on the tunnel wall. Then he made them sit on a pine trunk, rubbed smooth and shiny

* Then commander-in-chief of the U.S. forces of aggression.

from being used as a seat, and, smiling at them, returned to the cartridge case to go on with his writing. This young man was no stranger to the scouts. Without standing on ceremony, they drained the water down their throats. But for the presence of the commanding officers of both units, they might have been tempted, as a rule, to pull this serious-looking young man's legs.

Wu asked Liang to sit on a big stone slab near the tunnel entrance. They started discussing how the scout group should go about their mission that night. As a front-line commander, Wu had co-ordinated with Liang and his scouts many times and helped them go deep behind the enemy's lines to perform important missions. He was fully aware that the scouts would have to fight under very dangerous and trying conditions, and felt sorry for being unable to share their risky life. So he never left any stone unturned in co-ordinating both sides' actions as perfectly as possible, so as to reduce danger and difficulties to the minimum.

"As urged by the divisional reconnaissance section, battalion command has ordered us to get all the company's light and heavy arms well organized to give you all-out support tonight. Company Commander Chao is now making arrangements in the different platoons' positions. As to the route that you'll follow when you set out, we think it should be reconsidered." He cast a glance at Liang and continued, making no effort to conceal his uneasiness about it, "Because we've noted that the enemy are keeping an ever closer eye on the buffer zone and have sent out more patrols there. : : ."

Liang nodded slightly in agreement. He wasn't surprised that the enemy had been more on their guard or that their counter-reconnaissance had been strengthened. For the mission they were going to perform that night was to reveal the mystery of all this. On his way, he had thought carefully about the action they were going to take. He was a veteran scout, rich in fighting experience, and had got in and out of the enemy battle lines quite a few times. He therefore had a

better understanding than others of the situation there and the ways of the enemy. But he knew quite well that things are highly changeable in war time. Only those fighting on the burning land and carrying on the daily, life-and-death struggle knew best the slightest change on the enemy's side and were able to grasp every one of the enemy's concealed actions — only they had an inexhaustible store of wisdom and experience in conquering the enemy. So he always listened carefully to the opinions of the officers and men fighting on the front line.

In this regard, the grey-haired divisional commander who had served as a scout in the Red Army many years before was his most exacting teacher. On the day when Liang was appointed divisional scout leader, the divisional commander had invited the young man to his own shelter and asked him to sit down. He brewed him a cup of tea with leaves of finest quality sent to him by his old comrade-in-arms way back in China. Then he had sat face to face with his guest and looked into the eyes of the newly appointed scout leader, as if to say, "You were an eaglet but now you have tough wings. Are you sure you'll grow up into a full-fledged eagle soaring high in the sky?"

The old comrade's steady, searching gaze had made Liang somewhat uneasy. Standing up, he mumbled, "Divisional Commander, you've sent for me. . . ."

"Sit down. Have some tea." The divisional commander, with a wave of his hand, stood up in his turn. Pacing a few steps, he came to a halt and asked, "Liang, tell me, what's the mission of a scout?"

"Disclose enemy dispositions and be the eyes and ears of the commanders." Liang had answered without hesitation, somewhat puzzled at the simple question.

"Quite right. That's to say, a scout should have a timely grasp of any change on the enemy side. Liang, you must always remember this: a single man, even if he's made of iron, can only turn out a limited number of nails. Unless a scout learns well from the officers and men at the front and adopts as his

own the wisdom of the masses, if he relies solely on his own eyes and ears, he can't be good ears and eyes for his commanders."

So saying, he had picked up a small diary with a Tien An Men design on its brown cover which had been lying on the table near a neat pile of Chairman Mao's works and office files, and handed it to Liang. "Take it," he said. "Jot down whatever you learn, and also your own ideas. Do it well. I'll check up some day!"

Taking the book, Liang had felt a warm current shooting through him.

Now Liang, seated on the stone slab near the tunnel entrance, was all ears to what the political instructor was saying, as if he'd print every detail on his mind. He remained silent after Wu had finished talking, and sat gazing pensively at the distant rolling mountains.

Wu fished out his pipe, filled it and, clicking a lighter, lit up. He sucked quietly at the pipe for some time, then broke the silence:

"Liang, a penny for your thoughts. . . ."

"I'm going to make an *on-the-spot* investigation," Liang answered, turning round. "One thing you haven't mentioned yet," he added, smiling. "Perhaps you don't find it a pleasure to part with something of yours?"

"Eh?" Wu was at a loss for a second. Then he remembered what the battalion commander had told him over the telephone — a comrade from the Eighth Company was to be chosen to reinforce the scout group. "You're nobody's fool! But don't think we'd stick to departmentalism like that! I discussed the matter with Company Commander Chao after I received the order. We've chosen a fine lad for you!"

"Who?"

"Wang Chen-hua of the Second Squad. What do you say?"

"Wang Chen-hua?" In Liang's mind's eye a round-faced, big-eyed, merry-looking fellow sprang up. "You mean that young fellow from Kiangsi who loves to sing folk songs?"

"Exactly. Now a top-grade marksman. A few days ago he accompanied his squad leader to the enemy's battle front. A keen-witted one!"

"Still loves to sing folk songs?"

"Yes. And composes quick-clapper ballads* into the bargain."

"Political Instructor, I've made a fair copy of this quick-clapper ballad by Wang Chen-hua. Shall I paste it outside?" The company clerk went over with the piece of old newsprint where he had copied the ballad.

Liang took it and read with interest:

*Fine in July
Grand time to snipe at the foe.
Shots fly from you or me,
Nowhere for the enemy to go.
Yankees and the Syngman Rhee puppet troops
In batches from troubled life are free.
The aggressors are shaking, terrified, in hell,
They daren't show up, only shell.
Our Volunteers' positions like steel,
Planes and big guns are of no avail.
Though we deal with them piecemeal,
To wipe 'em all out we'll ne'er fail.*

"Not bad, eh?" Wu asked with unconcealed pride. "He was illiterate when he joined up. He learned to read by following the 'quick method' and now he can write hundreds of characters. And just like you, he speaks perfect Korean. This lad is certainly quick-witted. The only trouble with him is that he's a bit hot-tempered. He'll be a good scout for sure as long as you keep him in hand."

"Where is he?" Liang was pleased.

"Still at his sniping point."

Several gun reports came from some distance outside of the tunnel as they were speaking. Soon after that one of the company's orderlies rushed in.

* A sort of rhymed composition sung at a quick tempo to the accompaniment of bamboo clappers.

"Political Instructor," he reported, "Wang Chen-hua's just got another at Sniping Point Seven — a 'cold rice ball'!"

"Bravo!" Wu stood up, beaming with joy. "A worthy son of the veteran hunter in the Chinggang Mountains! Ask him to come here!"

The orderly answered "Yes," and turned to leave.

Liang got up, saying, "No need to send for him. You can take me to Point Seven."

"Fine. Let's go."

2

A small, protruding ridge ran to the right of the Eighth Company's main position. A tree-clad knoll stood at the southern end of the ridge confronting the projecting part of the enemy position. Seen from afar, the Nameless Height looked like a giant standing four square, with one of his colossal arms stretching out, clenched fist pointing directly at the enemy's nose.

This "fist" was where the company's snipers were most active. Mounds high and low, stone caves big and small — such natural caves are a common sight in the mountainous area of central Korea — were ideal hiding spots for snipers.

Point Seven, where Wang Chen-hua was lying low, was on a slope east of the "fist." There, behind a huge, forked trunk broken up by shelling, were two natural caves nestling against each other. Wang had spent two nights digging through the earth wall between the two caves and made them into a hoof-shaped tunnel which could be entered from the right or left side. Wang positioned himself in the hide-out at the front of the small tunnel every day. Making good use of the huge forked trunk which had put out tender-green leaves, he kept an eye on the enemy front line, looking for sniping targets. In

the space of a week, this top-grade marksman, a lad of just 19, had killed nine soldiers of Syngman Rhee's puppet army. He had just killed a tenth. This one had been speeding down an open slope with a spool of telephone wire. Zigzagging along, he had almost got near an isolated rock. But Wang had long trained his gun at this rock named Target Three. A crack of the rifle had sent the man rolling down to the foot of the rock, behind which he had expected to hide himself to save his life.

Just then, a column of white smoke rose from the enemy position, going up rapidly and expanding. In an instant it became a thick, all-shrouding, misty wall, shutting out the enemy front line. This was a new trick recently resorted to by the enemy: putting up smokescreens.

Wang, pushing his repeating rifle aside, cursed in a fit of anger, "Bastards! If you don't have the guts, better pack yourselves back to where you come from. Damn your dirty tricks!"

As a matter of fact, these "dirty tricks" were forced upon the enemy by Wang and his comrades-in-arms. The snipers — the "fist" stretching out from the company's main position — had harried the enemy commanders to the extreme. The lumpy Colonel Baek Man Su, commander of the Wolf Regiment, had been severely reprimanded three times by his superior, Divisional Commander Choi, who was notorious for his irascibility and cruelty. For the bullets shot out from the "fist" had brought dozens of casualties to the regiment every day. A sentry, numb from squatting in the fox-hole, could barely draw himself up to his full height before his head was shattered by a bullet apparently from nowhere. A soldier sent out from the trench to fetch food would fall dead on the open slope on his way back, rice balls rolling to all sides. A machine-gunner, parched with thirst, would crawl on all fours and succeed in getting to a stream side in front of the position only to meet his end when he had hardly drunk a mouthful of water. . . .

Such mysterious, unexpected shots had created an atmosphere of terror throughout the Wolf Regiment and seriously affected its morale. The patrols sent out also found their activities hampered. On one occasion a patrol sent to the buffer zone

had just approached a copse when a hail of bullets cut through them, killing a man as well as the second lieutenant heading the patrol. Crawling along and rolling over and over, the rest fled to their position, leaving the corpses behind. They hardly expected that the next morning they would find the two corpses wrapped in white cloth, placed side by side in front of their trench. The puppet troops were dumbfounded, panic-stricken. That night, another patrol squatted two hours in a dried-up ditch less than 200 metres away from their position and returned without doing anything else. Baek Man Su was so angry that he ordered the officer and the men of his patrol to have their heads shaved. . . .

Thinking of all this made Baek's skin shrink. What chilled his spine even further was the warning he had been given by his heartless divisional commander when he was being reprimanded for the third time. He had said that if such faint-heartedness was allowed to spread, a loophole would be left for the Chinese to send their scouts in to the front line, and the secret redistribution of the entire front line would be seriously affected. "If that happens," he had warned, "you can look forward to a court-martial."

His face red with rage, Baek had knocked together all the available guns in his regiment to give the "fist" a concentrated shelling lasting up to 20 minutes. Once the shelling was over, he picked up his field-glasses to observe the goings-on in the burning "fist." A bullet had hissed and carried the helmet off his head just as he was lifting the glasses to his eyes. He threw them into the trench and made for headquarters without a glance behind. The regimental chief of staff Han Sung Su, an old wolf with pale, fiendish features, said coldly to his subordinates: "Even if we have to blanket them with smokescreens, we can't stop sending out patrols. If anyone neglects his duties he will be sent to the military police!"

From then on, the enemy frequently put up smokescreens. Before the smoke dispersed, the snipers had no choice but to wait patiently — it was impossible to find any target,